

“WHEN YOU FEEL THAT YOUR TEACHER CARES, YOU CUSS LESS AT HER” YOUNG PRISONERS THINKING BACK AT THEIR TEACHERS

Äärelä, Tanja, Määttä, Kaarina, and Uusiautti, Satu
Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland
PO Box 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland

Abstract

This study focused on a special group of young people related to exclusion: ones whose behavior has been repeatedly or strongly criminal and led to imprisonment. The especial objective was to study how young prisoners describe their school years and their teachers. This study employed the narrative research approach. Narratives were acquired with free-form interviews from twenty-nine young prisoners, aged 17-21, from two prisons in northern Finland. The narratives were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. The most significant categories representing the teachers' influence over attending school and the teachers' behavior were formed and are represented as the results. The processes of dropping out from school and exclusion are discussed from the light of teachers' role and school development as described by the young prisoners.

Keywords: *narrative research, young prisoner, dropout, exclusion, teacher memories, comprehensive education.*

Introduction

A sentence to imprisonment represents the most extreme form of exclusion to young people. At worst, imprisonment is proven to boost the process of exclusion and to socialize the adolescent into the prison and criminal life style [1] [2].

Finland represents countries of moderate criminal policy, and the direction to decrease the number of prisoners started in the 1970s [3]. In relation to the population, the number of prisoners in Finland is among the lowest of western countries being about 80 prisoners per 100,000 habitants [3] [4]. The proportion of young prisoners has decreased considerably during the last decade; in 2002, the proportion was 17 % while in 2012 it was only 9 % [3]. In Finnish prisons, the daily number of under-21-year-old prisoners is approximately 80 [3]. Under 18-year-old youths are sentenced to prison only if it cannot be avoided. Thus, the general principle of Finnish criminal policy has been to sentence youth to milder sentences because their criminal behavior is seen to result from lack of understanding or thoughtlessness [5].

When it comes to prisoners' education, factors related to it have been studied mostly quantitatively in Finland [6] [7]. Qualitative research on prisoners' experiences exist only little [8] [9], and those focusing specifically on school experiences are scarce [2] [10]. Previous studies show that prisoners have mostly experienced school negatively and that they have had plenty of learning problems [7] [10] [11] [12] [13] [14] [15] [16]. Moreover, offenders have more often quitted compulsory education than other pupils [17] [18]. Learning problems, poor school achievement, and school adjustment problems are connected with criminal behavior in later life [19] [20] [21] [22] [23].

In Finland, the nine-year-long comprehensive education is a statutory part of the children's and youngsters' everyday lives. Comprehensive education is created to cover the societal basic task of being responsible for educating pupils according to the official goals stated in the written curriculum. The societal tasks of education have been traditionally divided into three core areas:

- (1) Qualification: producing of knowledge, skills, and graduates,
- (2) Selection: placements to societal positions, and
- (3) Integration: adapting the culture and consequential maintenance of societal coherence [24] [25] [26] [27].

Pupils have been shown to experience school in considerably different ways compared to the objectives of the official curriculum or teacher [28] [29]. The hidden curriculum as the phenomenon that regulates teaching events came to public knowledge after curriculum discourse harking back to the 1960's United States. The concept of hidden curriculum was launched by Philip W. Jackson [30] in his book "Life in Classrooms" describing life in classrooms as it appears to schoolchildren. Instead of official goals, the phenomena of social interaction and the unwritten rules of the school reality are highlighted. Another pioneer of research on hidden curriculum is Norman V. Overly [31], who noticed the hidden curriculum when studying the impact of the unstudied curriculum [32] [33].

The Finnish comprehensive education, the school for all, has succeeded well in the international comparisons of intellectual performing at school [34] [35] [36] [37]. However, Finnish pupils do not seem to enjoy going to school and they do not thrive at school [38] [39]. On the one hand, comprehensive education provides children and youth with plentiful opportunities, but, on the other hand, risks too. Education is supposed to integrate children in society, but schooling can also strengthen or cause exclusion from society. Equal education opportunities do not necessarily guarantee equal treatment to all at school [40] [41] [42] [43]. When successful, school helps pupils to adjust, find place, and succeed in society. Yet, worry over children who stay away or quit school has increased during the past decades [44]. An unsuccessful school path can lead to skewed development, exclusion, and at its most extreme form, to a spiral of crimes [45].

As many studies show, teachers play a big role in the construct of pupils' well-being at school [46] [47] [48], especially among those pupils who find going to school overwhelming or very difficult [49] [50] [51] [52] [53]. Likewise, the teacher-pupil relationship has been shown to be especially crucial to boys' schoolgoing [41] [54] [55]. How significant can this relationship be from the point of view of exclusion? How do young prisoners describe their school years and their teachers? These questions started to interest us after Dr. Äärelä had finished her doctoral thesis on young prisoners' experiences. She also works as a special education teacher at a psychiatric unit of hospital school, and thus has to think about the skewed school paths and prevention of them every day at work.

Method

The exclusion process and factors explaining it have been targets of numerous studies conducted among experts and professionals. Clearly less subjective, experience-based information has been obtained from those who really are in danger of exclusion. This study focused on two special groups related to exclusion: young people whose behavior has been repeatedly or strongly criminal and led to imprisonment. They are the experts addressed in this study. The purpose of the research is to describe how young prisoners remember their school years and especially how they perceived their teachers' action. One research question was set for this study: What and how do young prisoners describe their teacher experiences during their comprehensive education?

The results include descriptions of the narratives of their school time from twenty-eight young prisoners, aged 17-21, from two prisons in northern Finland. The participants were selected according to the criterion for a young prisoner (age of 21 years and younger). Most of the prisoners are men but also a few women participated in the study. Majority of the participants did not have earlier criminal background but, for example, one of the prisoners was sentenced already six times despite the young age. The third of the prisoners had been sentenced due to several crimes which is typical of juvenile delinquency. The participants' backgrounds, in other words their living environments, seemed to be mostly fragile and unstable but some of them also came from socio-economically high status families.

This study employed the narrative research approach. Narratives have become a central method of qualitative research, and this trend has been even referred to as a narrative turn [58]. Narrative research is based on social constructionism [56] [57]. The fundamental idea is that people construct their knowledge

and identities in social interaction through language and narratives. In this study, young prisoners' narratives about their school years formed the research data. Narratives were acquired with free-form interviews that resembled the narrative interview method [59] [60] [61] [62] [63] [64]. The youngsters could decide what they would talk about and thus focus on issues they found important and significant. In other words, the researcher did not present specified questions. Narrative research made is possible to reach the research participants' authentic voices [65] [66]. The narratives were analyzed through qualitative content analysis and the narrative research approach applying Polkinghorne's [67] and Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's [68] analyzing models. In the analysis of narratives, the most significant categories representing the teachers' influence over attending school and the teachers' behavior were formed and are here represented as the results.

When reporting the results, excerpts from interviews are added in the results section. They are kept totally anonymous, and even the gender of the participant is withdrawn. However, the quotations are important as they give voice to the prisoners and show the reader how the researcher has interpreted the narratives. When translating the interview quotations, we have tried to be as literal as possible to the language the young prisoners used. However, it was not possible to include the dialects the prisoners used—still, the excerpts include profanities and other expressions typical of their language.

Results: Teacher memories

Teachers from the young prisoners' school years during compulsory education awoke many memories and experiences to tell. Someone could remember the teacher with warm feelings but most of the participants talked about the clear disgust, downright hatred, they felt toward their teachers. According to the narratives, the time the teacher spends with his or her pupils has a special, even crucial positive or negative meaning for a pupil's well-being at school—including the opposite of well-being, malaise at school. Many of the young prisoners found it challenging to verbalize their experiences, and their vocabulary to describe their feelings and experiences were not very wide, especially at the beginning of the interview situation. Still, as the interview conversations went on, the teacher descriptions started to become more versatile and the interviews became to mold into narratives, although not necessarily in chronological order.

The teacher as a negative and distant person

The teacher personality appeared often as lukewarm, disobliging, and uninterested. The participants expected more positive attitudes and care from their teachers. The words the young prisoners used for describing a teacher could be divided into two groups: The teacher's first and family names were used as nick names. Those teachers who had been perceived negatively could be referred to with the most descriptive words of abuse. Those descriptions that were located at the secondary level (similar to middle school) included the most nicknames that were related to the teachers' outward appearance and behavioral styles.

The prisoners' narratives imply that the teacher personality had a salient role not only in the school experiences but also in the participants' identity construction [57]. The holistic picture of oneself could have had a negative emphasis that was based on teachers' reactions and feedback. Thus, the picture did not concern only the prisoner as a learner and pupil but more holistically as a human being. One of the prisoners described the teacher's significance for a pupil through the changing, distancing position in the teacher-pupil relationship during school years:

I remember my first-grade's teacher, but I can't remember the name [recalled it later in the interview]. But I remember the teacher's looks and everything, very well. And we had the same teacher also in the second grade. And I remember my third-grade's teacher, and the rector... At the secondary education, they were just teachers, I remember nothing particular, at least nothing good, stuck in my mind about them because I didn't get to know them

nor did they know me... It started to be more like fighting with them, more negative then... The teacher had a big role in this, whether one starts to feel inferior.

The prisoners had numerous memories of negative, bored teachers who had not appreciated their teaching and subject or their pupils and their learning:

It means quite a lot what kind of look a teacher has when he or she teaches. So, if the teacher looks weary, it affects everyone. But if the teacher has a joyful personality, the class will live him or her, at least it influences me....

Basically this was the crucial point, whether it started to piss me off or not.

Lack of caring encounters

The most central element of teacher narratives was the everyday encounters and positive, encouraging interaction between the teacher and the pupil. The young prisoners had found it important to feel that they personally came along with their teacher. Especially during their first school years, they had been seeking the teacher's approval strongly. The prisoners talked about the "nice" and "shitty" teachers: none of the teachers described in the narratives resembled any intermediate form of these two extremes.

Many of the prisoners remembered teachers as the leaders of classroom, distributing information without making any personal contact with children, encouraging them to problem solving or critical thinking. Use of various teaching methods and thus noticing various learners became a significant definition of a teacher's pedagogical skills. The prisoners could not criticize teaching methods or styles per se but mostly they brought up the boredom of school work and routine-like, mind-numbing lessons. The teacher's skill to teach each and every one—in other words to notice all pupils—was emphasized in the interviews:

You have to know how to teach all pupils, not just the good ones. It sure is easy to teach them, they know it anyway. The teacher should also focus on those pupils who are not interested in studying. Try to get them participate... To speak well of and like them too. We are, however, nice dudes even if we don't like schoolwork... There is something good in us too.

It is important that the teacher constructs and maintains positive interaction with his or her pupils. Indeed, positive interaction was the most underlined factor in the young prisoners' narratives. Even the negative issues could be solved better with the teacher if their interaction relationship was fundamentally positive [69]. The young prisoners had not intentionally disturbed those teachers' lessons who had been able to create understanding interaction. Mostly the chemistry did not work and became "poisonous" chemistry, and the consequences of negative interaction were unfavorable. The young prisoners often referred to an old proverb saying "what comes around goes around".

It is difficult to say, but you notice whether the teacher cares or whether the teacher esteems the pupil. I think it is important that the teacher shows that the child is important. [long silence] I have not until now as an adult started to notice that I sort of reflect the others, how to say, if the other starts to get at you, I will say back at once. But if the other is pretty kind, no-nonsense to me, I will be too. It just happens automatically... I knew how I should behave there, I just didn't feel like doing so. Or it was not intended, I guess I just didn't know how or had the energy, there was no reason why. Expect for those teachers who were nice. I didn't want to get at them because I felt that they liked me; we had some sort of good chemistry.

When a young person feels that the school has not provided sufficient care and nurture but only negative attention, he or she starts to alienate from school and drops out of the reach of positively-toned but insufficient relationship with the adults at school. When concluding that the teacher does not pay attention or understand, the pupil starts to show active and passive resistance to the teacher. During secondary education, this could happen quite quickly—all participants talked about at least some conflicts with teachers during the seventh grade. Teachers turned from various personalities at elementary education into distant office-holder teachers of secondary education.

Something disappeared from it. Those teachers became robots, and in my opinion, they expected us pupils to be similar robots. They were those subject teachers, or whatever, teachers who could only talk about their own subject and they were not interested in what the pupils did. I was pissed because they expected the same from everyone and didn't even know all pupils' names. Just looked at their papers and then call you.

The relationship between the teacher and the pupil is also important for the teacher's well-being and coping at work [70] [71], and for example, Hargreaves [72] leans on 60 teachers' interviews and states that a positive teacher-pupil relationship is the most important source of work satisfaction and motivation in teachers. According to Davis [73], teachers find those pupils important to them who resemble the teachers themselves. Instead, the young prisoners interviewed in this study reported that they were annoyed by teachers who did not seem to understand the youth—either the youth in general or the youth in question. Perhaps, the teachers did not recognize their own features in these youngsters. Perhaps, their cultures differed too much from each other.

Appreciating the rules

The young prisoners would have wanted to go by the book. Somehow, the situations were often contradictory with the adults at school. The participants had not been able to adjust to the limitations involved in school work. The same concerned the limits set at their homes too. When the situation had come to a head, the young had not any means stopping and preventing an open quarrel. The young prisoners' social skills had been weak, but it is notable that the teachers did not always show high-level social skills either. A few young prisoners marveled how the teacher acted like an angry adolescent and not as a role model for children.

I remember it clearly when I had decided that I won't do this or that, or that I start behaving so that I won't harm or bother anyone. What a hell, already the first setback or some problem there and guess who is yelling there like crazy with the teacher! [long silence] Yeah, that was me. Actually, there were only those two teachers who always got on my nerves. They must have seen themselves as really super-good human beings, you know those real chickenshit teachers, disgusting creatures, say what you like. I can't stand them, and they can't stand me either.

The young prisoners emphasized that they did not want that the teacher would try to be their friends. The teacher was expected to be the adult who sets clear limits and controls them equally and justly. Therefore, it seems that while the young prisoners strongly questioned and tested the rules and limits, they had perceived them positively and safety-providing. Especially now when they were young adults, many of them even told that they appreciated those teachers who had tried and bothered to set the limits for them day after day.

Those young prisoners whose own behavior had not bothered others at school paid more attention to how the teachers had managed to take care of the peace in classroom. The teacher's gender did not seem to matter. Instead, respected, good teachers were those who encountered pupils positively but yet setting limits and sticking to the rules.

In many interviews, the young prisoners started to contemplate how they or their teachers should have had to act in various situations. Respectively, some of the youngsters stated without further analyzing that nothing in school would have made them follow the rules: "*It just is a shitty place*". Those young prisoners who had experienced that their behavior could have been molded into suitable for school environment called for interaction: talking instead of yelling.

Teachers' negative attack and insulting behavior hurt

Especially the secondary education teachers had perpetrated to holistic and very personally-insulting negative attack. In addition to the pupils who had called their teachers names, the teachers had used

derogatory names of their pupils. Narratives included adjectives and names that singular teachers had used: bully, pain in the ass, lazy-bones, fink, brat, dickhead, truant, and fucker.

The narratives showed that it was not rare that also teachers bullied pupils who behaved badly. Separate insulting events were numerous but teachers who acted systematically and repeatedly offending the youngsters and even blaming them without evidence (the so-called scapegoat phenomenon) were also mentioned. Sometimes, the young prisoner described a situation in which he or she had behaved violently toward the teacher. In some narratives, teachers had been yelling and physically attacked a pupil after the pupil had disturbed the lesson.

Experienced unfairness and inflexible school

The young prisoners described various experiences of unfair treatment and unnecessary blaming. When something forbidden had happened at school, the forthcoming young prisoners were blamed for it without trying the figure out the actual tide. Likewise, many young prisoners expressed their feeling of inferiority compared to their class mates. It was not rare that the teacher would rank pupils by various criteria—most often by parents' socio-economic status. Justice and fair treatment were repeatedly brought up as features against with the teachers were evaluated.

The young prisoners strongly criticized too detailed teaching. Many of them expressed a wish that it would be necessary to focus more on the basics and their adaptation without hurrying with more and more information:

It is like forced twisting, this school. They kill the interest. The world has so much information that I'm not interested in learning it all, I won't, I can't, I'm just not interested. Hello, you can't understand. I would have been fine with the basic tasks, I mean, math and reading, and something basics, I don't know. For example some biology, geography, and such... In my school, you would be drowned by information, less would be better, and you could then even remember it.

The prisoners would not have wanted to have any special position or treatment at school despite their problems, especially not pity that one of the prisoners called diseased. Instead, many of the participants thought that it would have helped if teachers had been able to bend in something. Teachers could pay attention to the pupils' overall life situation, but this necessitates that the teachers would know their pupils better.

Even one good memory sticks to mind

Like school narratives in general, also teacher memories turned more negative as the school years went on. Typically, the young prisoners' teacher descriptions included usually not more than one positively reminisced teacher relationship, but not always even this one.

The positively most significant teacher memories were almost without exception located to elementary school and classroom teacher system where one adult had the main responsibility for his or her pupils' school work and well-being. In secondary school, when the school days include lessons from various subject teachers and the focus is on substance knowledge, the young prisoners' problem behavior increased exponentially. One positive teacher relationship did not support them any longer in secondary education. The positive relationship had been significant but not significant enough to prevent dropout or exclusion. The value of positive attention given by the teacher seem to be overly important when compared to the passing moments and effort they require of teachers. Children and adolescents are sensitive to the adult's authenticity and presence [47] [74]. Acceptance is transmitted through action and can be complemented with words, but not performed just by words, as the following expert statement shows:

Well, yeah, they say like this, that okay, everyone is oneself. I don't think it shows in action but they try to fit you in this same fucking template. If you do this or that, you are bad or you are different than those who do. And then you

just feel it from the way you are treated that you are inferior, or that the others are good, and when you are not one of them, what are you then?

Understanding the teacher's behavior, afterward

Understanding toward the school and adults in school had increased in the young prisoners who had turned into young adults. Some prisoners' feelings had calmed down and they had perhaps learned to express them more considerately. The young prisoners told how they had felt downright hate toward certain teachers but could nowadays understand some of these hated teachers better. The teacher memories included phrases such as "*now that you think about it...*" The name "epiphany" has been given to such experiences that are given meanings afterward and that are re-evaluated as lived, narrated, and experienced events. When thinking back, teachers had been right and trying to do the right thing in some cases after all:

Well, they did, now that I recall it, they were right in many things. I should have listened to them and believe what they told me then. That you have to take care of your businesses, school and such, and do those homework too. You just couldn't take it, you just felt like they were complaining for nothing. It's not their business what I do. You shouldn't think like that but I realize it now and it pisses me off too.

Failures in school work could be explained in many ways. The teacher and school as such were not the only factors leading to the exclusion process. The young prisoners had multiple trouble in many areas of life. The problems just activated and strengthened in the goal-oriented school environment.

Conclusions

The key words of school development in the young prisoners' narratives were care, acceptance, and holistic attention. Noddings [75] considers that need for care and attention more important in schools than ever before. The young prisoners would develop school in a more educative and nurturing direction. They call for humanity, maturity, consistent rules and limits, and the sense of caring, nurturing, and solidarity (cf., nurturing classroom) [76] [77] [78] [79] [80] [81] [83].

A small child needs to constantly hear from his or her mother and father how much they love the child. The essence of the phenomenon does not change when the child goes to school. The child has to feel accepted and important also—or especially—at school that is a new and unfamiliar environment. Research has shown that a positive teacher-pupil relationship is the most significant factor increasing pupils' psychosocial well-being in upper secondary education as well [32]. Care and nurturing influence considerably on well-being, thriving and motivation at school in pupils [80] [81] [83] [84]. School can also offer counterbalance to the deficits in pupils' growing environment [85] [86] [87]. "Suitable" teachers to children in danger of exclusion are, according to the young prisoners' narratives, caring and safe adults that the children can "ram" into without making the adult stagger. This concerns both homes and schools [88]. Children who can test limits safely at home do not necessarily test them much at school [82].

The young prisoners' narratives highlight the value and indisputable significance of a teacher's work. Even the problem stories the "fault" is not in teachers, parents, or pupils—the "fault" is not easy to find in school system or society either. Malaise in school children is a pupil-specific narrative located in the middle ground of all these levels. The young prisoners' stories direct attention to teacher-pupil relationships and factors through which interaction can be constructed positively [84] [89]. There is not just one good and functional way of interacting but the key words are, at least, situational sensitivity, pupil acquaintance, respect for others, and acknowledgement of all pupils. The everyday life at school involves manifold interaction. Teachers have a great opportunity of influencing pupils' well-being by having a positive and accepting attitude to themselves and others: this can be the route to accepting other people and dissimilarity [69].

Discussion

Why did the young people who participated in this study become dropouts or excluded from society? It is not possible to name single reasons for dropping out school. Young dropouts have similar features with those who never become dropouts [44]. Nevertheless, it is possible to analyze possible risk factors at individual and community level. Yet, they cannot reliably predict the dropouts [90] [91]. At the individual level, dropouts usually share multiple problems while at the community level, the living environment appear significant in many ways [92]. Poor school success can also predict dropping out [93]. Likewise, children with behavioral problems seem to drop out more likely than others [19] [90] [94] [95] [96]. For the continuity of school going, it seems that the first school years can important for the smoothness of studies. This is the time for establishing an open and positive interaction relationship between school and home. If co-operation is started early and in a constructive, positively-oriented spirit, the favorable continuity of co-operation is more likely. In fact, home-school co-operation has been regarded as the core factor in the prevention of exclusion and criminal behavior already for a long time [97] [98] [99]. Suitable help and support that help children cope with school work must be looked for together. When it comes to children and youth in danger of exclusion, professional educationalists have to consider families' social status and interaction skills in order to make successful co-operation possible [100] [101] [102] [103]. Dropping out from the comprehensive education, as described by the young prisoners, seemed a process during which various difficulties increase and accumulate as the school years go by. Some young prisoners had had trouble already during elementary education but most of them started to have difficulties at the end of elementary and at the beginning of secondary level education [104]. In Finland, the developmental pressures in basic education have been targeted already for long at the creation of common basic education system. Based on the young prisoners' narratives, this endeavor appear appropriate. Dropping out and exclusion do not seem a determinedly-proceeding process but a causal one: negative events start to breed more and more difficulties. Positive interventions can change the tide.

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