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Then I lose hope

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Abstract

In Malmö 20 percent of pupils do not pass compulsory education. In their final year in Elementary school, they do not pass the subjects Swedish, Maths or English. Hence, they cannot go on to ordinary programs in secondary education. In 2008 we have collected information about life-situations /in- and outside school/ from those who did not pass last year in Malmö. The aim was to contribute with knowledge about how school is involved in the process of producing weak-achievers and dropouts. And to understand needs of the pupils in school, according to them. A web-questionnaire was given to pupils within Individual Programs (n=296) and deep-interviews were held with 62 pupils, parents, teachers. Data was analyzed on structural and individual level.

”...She was a very good teacher. She explained until I understood. If you needed help she stayed with you and did not leave until I said that I understood. It is the worst thing that happens when a teacher says that I cannot explain in a better way, now you’ll have to try yourself. Then you give up and lose hope...” (Cederberg and Eicsson, 2009, p62)

This article is based on the study (Cederberg and Ericsson, 2009), *Ungdomars Upplevelser av Grundskolan i Malmö* (Youth’s Experiences of Elementary School in Malmö) in which pupils in a IV-programme in Malmö answered a web-questionnaire about their experiences of elementary school, about support given in school as well as support needed according to them. The response rate was 76%. In order to complete, deepen and problematise the web-questionnaire, interviews were held with 40 of the pupils, 12 staff members in *IV-program*, (Teachers, Coaches and School nurses and Social workers) and ten parents. *IV-program* (Individual Choice programmes) are formed by the municipalities for pupils who may not apply for secondary education since they did not pass in the subjects Swedish; Swedish as Second Language; English or Maths, in elementary school. In Malmö 20% of the pupils are studying in *IV-program*, the highest rate in Sweden.

The importance of teachers and teachers’ behaviour was shown both in the survey and in interviews. In this article we want to discuss how different kinds of teacher approaches affect school motivation, referring to how pupils in the study described their experiences.

The responses in the survey showed that pupils often felt tired of school. 70% of the pupils answered that they always, almost or often, felt that way. However, to the question: ‘How much did you care about schoolwork during the school year 9’, 39% of the pupils replied, ‘much’, or ‘quite a lot’. 34% of the pupils replied, ‘very little’, or ‘not at all’. But overall, the group did not spend much time on homework: 56% of the pupils indicated that they spent less than one hour per week or no time at all. Only 12% of the pupils spent three hours or more per week. Girls spent significantly more time doing homework than boys. About 14 % of the group often played truant every day in school year nine. In the survey those who were born in Sweden answered that they ‘gave up school when the task was too difficult’ and felt ‘tired in school’ to a greater extent than pupils born in a country other than Sweden. Descriptions like this are also found in several pupil interviews.

Altogether the responses form a complex picture. Half of the group in the study did not spend much time in school, but played truant, did not do their homework and stated that they ‘did not care’ about school. It can be assumed that their school motivation has been adversely affected. In this article we want to discuss how school interacts in this school-motivation process?

School motivation

When pupils say they are tired of school they can be perceived as having little or no school motivation. They do not care. According to Jenner (2004) motivation is not a quality that a pupil either has or has not; instead school motivation is a process that develops in interaction with the school. Pupils’ internal and

external driving forces, their pursuit of goals and the context in which the objectives are included influences the process. In this process teachers play an important role. To stimulate pupil's motivation to learn is a challenge that most teachers find difficult, particularly in the case of pupils who have school difficulties of any kind (Persson, 2008). Teachers' expectations of pupil's capacity and interest are relevant to their attitude towards the pupil and will effect how they act towards the pupil. Pupil's attitude to whether it is worth trying and how much effort they put in, is affected by their experiences, which in this case, IV-pupils is that they tend to fail. Their motivation is influenced by how they interpret the teacher's expectations of them. Jenner (2004) says that a number of research results have shown the importance of so-called expectation effects. Researchers have investigated how expectations are formed and transmitted. Some general principles were identified by Brophy and Good, 1970; Rogers, 1982. Expectations are created from our own values about how things are, and it occurs on the basis of limited information. These impressions are stable and if other information emerges which is contradictory, the information is re-organized so that it fits into the picture already made.

Translated into the school system this could be interpreted that if teachers are not aware of how expectations are formed, they take a risk of letting a "first-hand impression" of a pupil be decisive (Larivee, 2000). If the expectation i.e. the notion of the pupil from school and teachers is that he is lazy, does not care about school, is slow-witted, does not want to go to school but rather wants to work, it has a crucial role in the teacher's approach to and behaviour toward the pupil. Such expectations are also effected by class, gender and ethnicity (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Willis, 1977; Nieto, 2004). The teacher behaves in different ways to different pupils based on the ideas he/she has about the pupils. If the teacher's behaviour is consistently against the pupil it will affect the pupil's self esteem, motivation, ambition, and interaction with the teacher. Based on his/her interpretation of the teacher's actions the pupil makes statements and behaves in a way that interact in the process. This may be one explanation why the pupils describe the line of action in different ways for different teachers and behaves differently to their lessons. It may also be an explanation why pupils like some teachers, but not others.

When talking about classroom interaction, according to Brophy and Good (1970), you can describe two different teacher profiles. One that creates his/her idea of the pupil in a reflective process in contrast to a teacher profile that forms his/her opinion on the pupil early and does not change it according to new impressions. Most teachers act between the two profiles.

Behaviour-focused approach

In a behaviour-focused approach, teacher strategy is to try to shape and change the pupil's behaviour by punishing or ignoring unwanted behaviour. The teacher is trying, by means of exclusion and neglecting, to shape pupils behaviour with the intension that he/she then will change and instead begin to take an interest in schoolwork.

One boy said:

I moved to Sweden when I was very young. I have been to kindergarten in Sweden and spent all my school year in elementary school in Sweden. I managed school well, when I lived in K. When I was about 12 years old, I moved to Malmo and then I stopped taking care of my school and myself. I often became ill and had stomach ache and therefore I was often late for school. When I was late for class the teachers locked the classroom door and I could not come in. In 8th grade I failed in all subjects. I have never got any special needs education or any other extra learning support in school. The mentor, my parents and I had meetings. I suggested that I should go to all classes. My parents made some suggestions too, but I have forgotten what they said. In any case, I really tried to shape up, but I stayed at home when I had a stomach ache and teachers counted that as truancy. There were 2-3 teachers who did not like me. They made me hate the school. I made trouble in their classrooms, yes I did, but it was only on their lessons. When I raised my hand I got no attention from them. I was often expelled from the classroom. I did not pass in their subjects. We were five guys who made trouble. All of us are now in IV-programmes. On meetings with the mentor and my parents I did not talk about those teachers and their feelings towards me and mine towards them, because I felt ashamed. I also had some teachers that I liked and I did not make trouble on their lessons and I did not have any problems with them. In their subjects I did well and passed. (Cederberg and Ericsson, p 36-37)

Statements such as "don't bother about school" could heighten negative expectations towards the pupil as lazy and uninterested. This could lead to negative teacher - pupil interaction and behaviour if the teacher is not aware of and try to reverse this process. It is essential that the pupil interprets the teacher's beliefs and behaviour and the pupil makes it on the basis of his/her expectations and interpretations. In this process the pupils' expectations of school and teachers, interact and influences behaviour. Pupils do create similarly stable perceptions of teachers and school. Statements in the interview quoted above, "some teachers hated me" and "I hated them", can be described as the result of expectation effects.

Pupils said that teachers neglected their attempts to express an interest. One interpretation is that the teacher has had a negative perception of the pupil and did not expect him/her to be interested, or that the teacher had an antagonistic attitude toward the pupil after many confrontations.

A girl said

I had conflicts with teachers and they did not believe in me even when I tried. (Cederberg and Ericsson, p37)

A boy said

A whole lesson I raised my hand but he did not care about it. (Cederberg and Ericsson, p37)

Pupils described in interviews that they were noisy and that teachers tried to get them to be quiet and sit down, by shouting and roaring. When this did not make the pupil to stop he/she was expelled from the classroom. The responses indicated that about 20% of the pupils were expelled from the classroom each week in school year nine:

- 6% of pupils indicated that they were expelled from the classroom every day
- 19% some occasion every week
- 15% some occasion every month

The survey shows that more boys than girls have been expelled from classes, been involved in a fight during school, got into conflict with their teachers and classmates, bullied or harassed pupils and teachers. According to the questionnaire, 7% have been bullied or harassed by one or more of their teachers, sometimes or many times.

The expulsion from classroom is a punishment. In 'theory' expulsion would be expected to make the pupil less messy and to change his/her behaviour, because they would rather be in the classroom than spend time alone in the corridor. However, there are no descriptions in the interviews, which suggest that this effect is created. An alternative interpretation is that teachers want to "get rid of the pupil" in order to create good working atmosphere in the classroom for the other pupils.

Praise good behaviour

Neglecting could be described as a form of punishment. Teachers try to ignore messy behaviour in order to change pupil's behaviour by providing praise when pupils act as desired. Undesired behaviour is likely not to be encouraged, because the teacher ignores the pupils when he/she behaves inappropriately.

An example of neglecting is described by one of the pupils who said that the teacher was talking and continuing her lesson even then the volume of noise in the classroom made it impossible to hear what she was talking about. One interpretation is that the teacher used this strategy hoping that pupils themselves should ask for silence in the class to be able to hear what the teacher said.

Relation focused approach

Some descriptions in the interviews about teacher – pupil interaction seems to be inspired by the relational social psychological theory. According to the pupils, teachers show that he/she cares about them. They talk to them and ask questions about their life circumstances. They explain until they understand using different kinds of explanation. Focus in this theory is in relation and interaction. In a relational inspired teaching style the teacher is trying to create a relationship with the pupil. School careers can be supported by the use of dialogue. The teacher shows that he/she notices and confirms pupils and that he/she cares about and communicates with them.

In the referred study one girl said

I had a good teacher. He tried hard to make us understand everything. He explained until we understood. He did his very best so we could understand everything he said. And

when it was difficult for us to understand, he made a picture on black-board or used himself as an example, he could even lay down on the floor if necessary for us to understand. (Cederberg and Ericsson, p38)

Another girl said

I had a teacher who was really nice. I have never met a teacher like her. She said, you are welcome to my office and tell me what kind of help you need. If you need help before an exam, you can ask me and I will help you. She was great at explaining. In her lessons, it was quiet because we learned a lot even when she read. (Cederberg and Ericsson, p38)

One girl said

One teacher was my favourite. I always disrupted his lessons, destroyed them, but one day he came and asked me “what is your problem?” I explained to him and after that day I started to attend every day. It was social sciences, and he helped me a lot. He wrote to me all the facts, I would pick up from the Internet or in books and which pages I should study. He told me what chapter was the most important. He helped me a lot and was really nice to me. I could have received grades in his subject if I did not become sick. I had VG (AP) on a test. (Cederberg and Ericsson, p38)

According to those girls these were “good teachers”. A good teacher seems to be a teacher who clearly offers help and thereby shows that he/she believes that pupils are capable of learning. This affects school motivation in a positive way.

The importance of teacher style

In this article our intention has been to reflect on pupils’ school motivation and teacher approach, related to examples given by pupils in IV-programmes. When pupils in the referred study were asked what kind of support they needed to improve their achievements in school, they gave answers like:

- Teachers must help all children, explain in different ways until you understand, notice when you try to participate and listen to what pupils have to say
- Teachers must notice and act against bullying
- Teachers must act at once and inform parents when pupil cut class
- More frequent extra support, but not in the end of the day when you are tired
- Teachers must notice when pupils do not feel well and give attention to their problems with a dialogue

Our conclusion is that these statements could be linked to a relation focused teacher approach to a higher extent than a behaviour focused approach. Today, it seems that the governmental policy in Sweden is mostly focusing on punishment and exclusion in order to make education more efficient to achieve better school results. If school motivation is an important factor for school results it should be an important issue to discuss. From the perspective of pupils in this study it seems to matter how teachers act. A teacher style that focus *only* on pupils’ behaviour and to shape them with different kinds of punishment seems to create behaviour with opposite effect/result, according to the pupils in this study. If so – perhaps a behaviour-focused approach does not support a strong/positive school motivation process. In this paper we have made some reflections on this subject. If motivation is a process, like stated by Jenner, teacher style interacts in the development of the process. A further discussion about different theoretical approaches and their consequences regarding various teacher styles/actions in school and how to counteract negative expectation effects is important.

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