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Attitudes towards risk factors and the means of avoiding dropping out of school amongst female students in special schools

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to investigate special school students' interpretations of dropping out of school and ways of avoiding dropping out. A qualitative content analysis was applied in analysing the 21 semi-structured individual interviews. Participants of this study were juvenile delinquents from one of the correctional institutions for girls and all interviewed students had experienced dropping out of school. The study was based on the ecological systems theory and thus, in addition to the risk factors that are related with students themselves, three more categories of risk factors – school, home and peers – were analysed. The results indicate that in relation to school, students assessed risk factors of their dropping out of school as interactions in this system – their negative relationships with classmates and teachers. In relation to home, both negative interactions in the system and parental influence on the student influenced dropping out. In relation to peers, one-way influence from them on dropping out of school appeared and it was related with influence of peers' antisocial behaviour. In relation to themselves, students did not admit their own part in the relationships within the systems as a risk factor of their dropping out. According to the students' opinions there were many interactional opportunities for dropout preventions: (1) from the school's point of view, both direct interventions, as well as general preventative methods, were seen as ways to help avoid dropping out of school; (2) in relation to home, mainly parents' ways to avoid dropping out of their daughters appeared; (3) students' own activities in avoiding dropping out were divided into two categories – positive school-related and peer-related activities.

Keywords: *systems theory, students' interpretations, dropping out of school, female offenders*

1. Background

It seems like students have two options – to be successful at school or not. According to Goodman and Dutton (2000) these two paths are very different. More and more attention and resources will be given to successful students and their success grows. Those students who do not achieve academic success will experience negative attention or ignorance from teachers and their probability for dropping out of school is higher compared to their peers.

Why it is important to decrease the number of dropped out students? The answer to this question may be based both on humane and on economic considerations. Every child has the right to education, despite of his/her peculiarities.

In addition to the difficulties which are related with drop-outs on the individual level, the level of society must be taken into the consideration too. The prevention of dropping out of school helps to avoid several problems. People without basic education tend to have lower incomes and they may have difficulties in finding a job (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Kõrge, 2007). Furthermore, studies have shown that people without basic education are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour (Kõiv, 2001, 2004; Kõrge, 2007). Students who drop-out may, therefore, require additional resources from society.

Dropping out of school is a process which is influenced by risk factors that are related with different contexts (Kõiv, 2007). The theoretical frame of the current study was Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, in addition to the students themselves, three microsystems – school, home and peers - that affect the students' dropping out of school, were analysed.

The list of risk factors influencing dropping out of school is extensive and there is no consensus on which group of risk factors has the greatest effect on dropping out of school. Studies have shown that intervention and prevention programs are efficient if they consider the combined effect of risk factors as well as students' attitudes towards factors and ways of preventing dropping out of school (Strait, 2008).

The aim of the current study is to investigate special school female students' interpretations of dropping out of school and ways of avoiding dropping out.

Research questions:

- 1) How do juvenile delinquents (female students) from special schools interpret their drop-out experience?
- 2) What are female juvenile delinquents' (from special school) opinions about ways to prevent dropping out?

2. Research methodology

2.1 Sample

All female juvenile delinquents at special school (the only correctional institution for juvenile female adolescents) in Estonia were the participants of the study. All interviewed students (N=21) had experienced dropping out of school between the ages of 12-15 years and they were 11-17 years old (M=14.8).

2.2 Procedure

21 semi-structured individual interviews were carried out in Estonia with girls who had experienced dropping out of school. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The confidentiality of the interviewees was ensured.

Interview questions:

- 1) Has dropping out of school affected your life? How?
- 2) What are the circumstances related to school which have affected dropping out of school in your case?
- 3) What are the circumstances related to home which have affected dropping out of school in your case?
- 4) What are the circumstances related to friends and peers that have affected dropping out of school in your case?
- 5) What are the circumstances related to yourself that have affected dropping out of school in your case?
- 6) What do you think – how can avoid dropping out of school?

2.3 Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse:

- 1) the first part of the interviews (students' interpretations of the drop-out experience in relation with risk factors)
- 2) the second part of the interviews (students' opinions about ways to prevent dropping out).

3. Results

The results of the study indicated that students' experiences about their dropping out of school was seen as a process affected by several risk factors, which, in turn, were related with different systems - microsystems (school, home, friends, and peers) and their connections – interactions in the systems and between the systems influencing the child.

According to the students' own opinions, dropping out of school had influenced their lives. Changes in their relationships with parents and peers as well as in their behaviour appeared. Students admitted that their relationships with parents and peers improved (became closer).

Results are illustrated with quotes from interviews. Quotes are Italicised and separated with // marks. For example: *//... if it would be possible I would do everything differently... //*

3.1 Circumstances related to school that influenced the dropping out of school

In relation to school, students asserted that mainly interactions in the school system – students' negative relationships with classmates and teachers – influenced their dropping out experiences. *//... the teacher tells that I do not want to hear you today ... //* Teachers' negative attitudes towards students was mentioned. Interviewed students' resistance to classmates and the exclusion of other students appeared in relation to classmates. *//... it is difficult to participate in the lesson when someone behind you*

annoys you. // // Classmates were against me... // In addition to that – their low academic motivation; academic difficulties in certain subjects; problems related with distance in cooperation with between school and home; and difficulties in adapting within a new school – were mentioned. *//...I had problems with history, science and... well with math and... // //... because I was new there... //*

3.1.1 *Ways to prevent dropping out of school*

From the school's point of view, direct interventions as well as general preventative methods and interventions were seen as ways to help avoid their dropping out of school:

- 1) Conversations and counselling with a school specialist (psychologists and social pedagogues was mentioned) – according to interviewed students it was important to start with those conversations at the beginning of absence from school and those conversations must be done consistently. *//... someone from school could talk to me... //* Students admitted that they also need help and support in relating with their peers (but they didn't mention who could help them in this way).
- 2) Stricter rules at school - determination of rules must be done in collaboration with students.
- 3) An effective mesosystem which includes cooperation between school and home – according to interviewed students the initiative must be come from school. (For example: school must inform parents about the absences.)
- 4) Involvement in extracurricular activities - *// ... for example our class could go to somewhere on every Friday... //*

The opinions of students about their teachers' ways of intervening appeared distinctively and were divided into two categories:

- 1) Academically-related measures – teachers' academic support, mentoring. Again - the key word was consistency. *// ... to help more and more, so that I could understand it... //* that kind of academic support will reduce the sense of students divergence from their peers.
- 2) Informal measures.
 - 2.1) Early detection of problems, teachers' positive attitude towards their students - *// Teachers could keep their eyes more open and they might ask whether everything is still ok... //*
 - 2.2) Preventing problems with relationships with classmates – preventing isolation and rejection. *// ... teachers must speak about differences... that people are different... //*

3.2 *Circumstances related to home that influenced the dropping out of school*

In relation to home, students asserted that their dropping out of school was influenced by interactions in the family system (students' negative relationships with parents). Parental influence appeared in lack of parental rules and control (in some cases parents were

aware that their child is not at school). // *I was home all the time, and my mother knew that... //*; alcohol abuse of parents; physical aggression of biological father or stepfather. // *The fact that mom and dad are drinking... //* // *The fact that mom and dad do not care. //* // *The fact that mom and dad do not care where are you, who are you with, and what are you doing. //* Some of the interviewed students (or their siblings) had taken parental responsibility and this was the reason why they did not attend to the school. According to interviewed students: negative interactions in the family system led to running away from home, this in turn led to increasing involvement with another deviant microsystem – antisocial peers and that was associated with dropping out of school.

3.2.1 *Ways to prevent dropping out of school*

In relation to home, it was mainly the parents' ways of helping the student to avoid dropping out that appeared. Parent-related ways to prevent their daughters dropping out of school were things that students themselves missed during the drop-out time:

- 1) Parental warmth and care.
- 2) Parental interest and attention - // *Parents should be interested in how and what their children are doing... this is like the most important thing... //*
- 3) Positive relationships with parents - positive relationships allow students to turn towards parents with their problems. But according to students was one-way influence that depends on parents.
- 4) Long-term living together with parents – otherwise, involvement with peers who are related with antisocial behaviour, increases.

3.3 *Circumstances relating to friends and peers that influenced the dropping out of school*

In relation to peers, one-way influence from them on dropping out of school appeared and it was related with peers' antisocial behaviour. School- and classmates were associated with absence from school. Non-school friends and peers were associated with negative influence – stealing and drug use. // *... with them I had a good time ... //* // *Because of them I started drinking... //* // *We weren't classmates anymore, but we wanted to be together... //*

3.3.1 *Ways to prevent dropping out of school*

Interviewed students didn't mention any friends or peer related ways to prevent dropping out of school.

3.4 *Circumstances related to students themselves that influenced the dropping out of school*

In relation to themselves, students listed many factors contributing to their dropping out. For example: they perceived academic difference (low academic success) between themselves and other students. // *I was like... different from others...*// Some of them described that they were influenced by deviant peers // *I was too easily influenced...* // // *I just wanted to have fun all the time...* // or that they preferred antisocial behaviour. Self-accusations and regrets appeared from interviews but students were not aware about their personal influence to their own part in the relationships within the systems.

3.4.1 Ways to prevent dropping out of school

Ways to prevent dropping out of school were mainly associated with students' own activities. These activities were divided into two categories:

- 1) School-related activities – school attendance with active participation and focusing on positive academic results and on appropriate behaviour. // *I should have been at school...* // Students asserted that appropriate behaviour helps to avoid or decrease the influence of one risk factor – teachers negative attitudes towards students.
- 2) Antisocial peer-related activities - these activities could be divided into two subcategories: avoiding contact with antisocial peers and increasing positive contacts with classmates. // *Like at school I communicate with those who are decent...* //

4. Discussion

Juvenile female delinquents from the correctional institution shared their dropping out experiences in interviews. All interviewed students spoke about their experiences in an open and direct manner.

In the opinion of interviewed students the negative intra-system interactions with two subsystems – teachers and classmates appeared as school related risk factors which influenced dropping out of school. In relation to classmates - resistance to other students, and the exclusion of classmates appeared as risk factors of dropping out. Studies have shown that students who experience the exclusion of other students may be more likely to be in the risk of dropping out of school (French & Conrad, 2001; Zhang & Hasto Law, 2005).

In relation to teachers, students asserted that teachers' negative attitudes had influenced the process of dropping out of school. Teachers' negative attitude towards students was considered both as one-way influence and as an interaction, because it was partially related with students own behaviour. According to King (2010) teachers' attitudes are related to classmates' attitudes.

Several studies focus on the relation between drop-outs and students' low academic motivation (French & Conrad, 2001; Strait, 2008). Interviewed students' opinions

showed that low academic motivation accentuated the influence of other risk factors and was not the only factor in any case.

More one-way influence compared to school-related risk factors was emphasised in relation to home as risk factors of students dropping out from school. Lack of rules and control may indicate to parents' indifferent (or even apathetic) attitude and this has been associated with drop-outs in earlier studies as well (Körge, 2007; Šahverdov–Žarkovski, 2007).

If with one of the school's subsystems (with students' classmates) interactional influence to dropping out of school appeared, then with non-school antisocially behaving friends mainly their one-way influence to students dropping out of school appeared. Previous studies indicate that dropping out of school is related with non-school friends and with peers' antisocial behaviour (Hammond & Linton, 2007; Kõiv, 2004).

Strait (2008) refers to studies which shows that the majority of students blame themselves for dropping out of school. The current study confirms that, because accusations and regrets appeared in circumstances related to students themselves that influenced the dropping out of school. Risk factors related to students themselves were associated with two microsystems – with school and with friends and peers.

During the process of dropping out of school students missed safe, secure and supportive environment. According to the students' opinions there were many effective opportunities for drop-out preventions. Prevention and intervention should focus on several circumstances, considering the combined effect of different risk factors and contexts.

Interactions between home and school (mesosystem) were mentioned as one possible way to avoid dropping out of school. Interviewed students stressed that the initiative must come from school. Examples from the literature indicate that efficient intervention must involve cooperation of different systems. The recommended cooperation includes more than two systems (Kikas, 2006; Klefbeck & Oqden, 2001; Våljataga, 2002).

Stricter rules at school were mentioned as a school-related way to prevent students dropping out of school. The need to enhance cooperation between subsystems of school revealed (students must be involved in setting the rules). Such principle of inclusion is important and must be extended to school drop-outs prevention programs because studies have shown that efficient programs consider students' opinions (Kortering & Braziel, 1999).

Studies indicate that experiencing academic success helps students to avoid dropping out of school (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). Therefore academic support from teachers is important in prevention of school drop-out. In addition to that, students suggest that teachers can contribute to changing classmates' attitudes (Kortering & Braziel, 1999).

Interviewed students pointed out teachers' positive attitudes toward students as a way to avoid their dropping out of school. Several previous studies have also shown that teachers' positive attitude is important in prevention work in the area of dropping out

(Knesting, 2008; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Kõiv, 2007; Šahverdov–Žarkovski, 2007; Väljataga, 2002). If teachers do not show respect for students and if teachers use their position for punishment then students may become alienated from school and their behavioural problems may become more difficult (LeRiche, 1996). In addition to that, teachers' positive attitudes toward students will contribute to the academic support and consequently students' experience of success (Knesting, 2008).

According to interviewed students dropping out of school was influenced by parental lack of rules and control at home. Problems with interactions between different microsystems (home-school and home-students' friends) appeared from the analysis of the interviews as risk factors of female students dropping out.

Previous studies suggest several approaches for designing effective dropout intervention strategies (Knesting, 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). The current study showed that prevention and intervention of dropping out of school must focus on several circumstances, considering the combined effect of different contexts and risk factors. The keywords in prevention are: positive relations both in the systems and between the systems. Interviewed students said that adults can notice their problems and adults (especially teachers) can prevent their dropping out of school.

People are equal and everyone has the right to education. If students who are at the risk of dropping out of school experience success and support, their identity will become more positive. Students learn together, accepting that people are different but equal, despite their special educational needs. This will ensure equal opportunities for all members of society. Preventing drop-outs is one way to prevent the formation of separate and marginalised groups in society.

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