SCHOOL CAREERS IN THE SELF-PRESENTATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING OUTSIDE THEIR FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

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This paper examines some of the findings reached in a Social Pedagogical Diagnosis study based on qualitative analysis of the semi-structured self-presentations given in interviews by 60 young people aged 15 to 19 residing in various forms of institutional care. It describes the findings concerning the most pressing school-related issues highlighted by the young people themselves. The study confirms the interconnectedness of developmental burdens and a range of stressful life circumstances which young people in institutional care (housing groups, young people's homes, institutes) had been exposed to. The results help to give us an insight into the life circumstances of young people with problems in the process of schooling. The emphasis is on the significance of self-presentation as an important element in individualised educational work.

Key words: *child/young person with difficulties in social integration, schooling, self-presentation*

Introduction

For many young people in institutional care school is a place they feel unable to cope with because of their unstable family situation and lack of support. They struggle to meet the expectations of the school and this puts them under additional pressure, increases stigmatisation and affects their educational and vocational expectations, which as a result are significantly lower than those of their peers. Empirical data provided by Slovenian research carried out among primary and secondary school children confirms the vital importance of school success for young people and their parents. Study results show that school success or failure is an important element of family relations. The worse the school results, the greater the proportion of children who feel they lack parental trust, feel under too much pressure from their parents and do not feel comfortable at home, and the lower the proportion of these whose parents trust their intellectual capacities (Ule et al, 2000). Data on family relations gathered by a slightly older study (Škoflek, 1989)

which covered young people in institutional care for other reasons, including problems in school, showed that 50.9% of these children felt they were not emotionally accepted by their parents, 55.5% said that their parents neglected their education and 21.9% of them had a stressful childhood. Numerous studies confirm that school results expressed in terms of grades affect the individual's desires, plans, self-assertiveness and position within his or her social environment. In her 1992 study of the motivational strategies of young people living outside the family environment, Kobolt found that failure at school is a syndrome of inter-related factors which externally is reflected in the following characteristics: unsuccessful children are less able to postpone gratification of their needs, they find it more difficult to control themselves and their behaviour and this leads to poorer social adjustment, weak social promotion and poor social acceptability. An analysis of the individual stories about the circumstances which led a young person to perform worse in school and subsequently to abandon education before completing school reveals a

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background made up of a long history of stressful situations experienced by the young person in various spheres of life. In this respect teachers play a very important role; often expulsion from school is the last act in a long succession of deteriorating relations between the pupil and teachers, especially when teachers look upon the student's behaviour and knowledge as being of paramount importance and consider school to be a system that young people must simply adapt to (see Rapuš Pavel, 1999a). For many pupils truancy is a way of responding and a consequence of severe distress. Cullingford and Morrison (1996) explain that a young person's first reaction to repeated failure is to avoid situations where they expect to fail, and the frustrations which this causes can lead to destructive behaviour and end in a total rejection of the system, manifested as a rejection of their own position within the system. A Slovenian study conducted among primary and secondary schoolchildren (Mencin-Čeplak, 2000) and a study conducted among young people living outside their family environment (Rapuš Pavel, 1999a) highlight the complexity of the truancy phenomenon, and point to the strong connection between a child's experience of school, relationships in the classroom and truancy. This paper builds on the premise that young people are good providers of information about their own life situation, and presents the findings of a qualitative study of self-experience and self-presentation by children and young people with difficulties in social integration (Kobolt, 1999; Rapuš Pavel, 1999a). It deals with the area of education and presents young people's own views of the evolution of their problems and on their circumstances in school.

Method

Qualitative methodology was used in this study. The main elements of this approach are direct recording of conversations and hermeneutic and qualitative analysis of the material. This method was chosen in order to obtain first hand accounts of young people's experiences and understanding of their own world and, on this basis, to identify common characteristics of their self-presentation. The method enables a deeper insight into young people's understanding of school and education-related issues.

Sample

The research sample comprised young people in various forms of non-institutional care (housing groups, youth homes, correctional centres). After making a presentation of the purpose of the study we invited individuals to participate on a voluntary basis. Non-random sampling and self-selection methods were used. A final sample was formed of 60 individuals – 28 boys and 32 girls. The average age was 17. Of the total sample, 17 individuals (12 girls and five boys) had repeated a grade at least once. In 25 cases the individual was living with one parent only. Most were from working class families in which 70.8% of parents had completed only primary or vocational education and 29.2% had completed secondary education.

Instrument

The data was gathered through semi-structured personal interviews which were recorded with the permission of the young person concerned. A questionnaire covering various aspects of the life of young people, and modelled on similar studies carried out abroad (Mollehauer, Uhlendorff, 1992; Damon, Hart, 1988) was developed (me in the past and me now – a self-assessment, me and the family, me and school, me and my peers, leisure time/interests, orientations and plans for the future, the institution). The area of education, which is the subject of this paper, covered the following aspects: the importance of school, how they feel at school, school pressures, experience with peers, experience with teachers, learning assistance. The questionnaire comprised open-ended questions which allowed for individual comments, individual self-presentations and descriptions of one's own social position. In any qualitative study the researcher also acts in some

way as a research instrument. The researcher's sensibilities and emotional and mental responses cannot be divorced from the events being examined. The researcher will thus have an effect on those events (Mesec, 1998).

Data-gathering procedure

The data was gathered in institutions by the author of this paper (by training I am a social pedagogue working for the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana) and three external assistants (also social pedagogues working for the institutions where the young people were interviewed). Before the interviews were carried out we underwent group training in interview methods. We carried out four trial interviews, following which a number of highly detailed questions were removed from the questionnaire because it was felt that too often they interrupted the flow of the story as related by the young person. All the remaining interviews were carried with the instruction to pay more attention to the relevance of the subjects highlighted by the interviewees. On average the interviews took between 90 minutes and two hours and the transcript of an average interview was about 12 pages or 6,300 words long.

Qualitative data processing

The method of qualitative analysis allowed us to understand the world of the young people and their individual interpretations based on their own experiences, emotions and feelings. During such research the researcher is constantly confronted with issues of consistency, deconstruction and interpretation of the data (Mesec, 1998). In this qualitative analysis we tried to ensure care and consistency by using two appropriately qualified assessors to classify the codes into appropriate categories, while the titles of the codes were agreed on by the research group taking part in the data gathering and processing. The coding process used in the qualitative analysis was as follows (see Dekleva, 1999):

- Multiple reading and examination of all writ ten interviews.
- Classification of statements made during the interview by individual areas of life.
- Key statements from among those classified within the area of education were selected (the same was done for all other areas) and coded at the primary level (first level codes).
- In the subsequent reduction and abstraction these first level codes were assigned superior terms to form second level codes.
- In the next stage the main categories for the area of education were formed spontaneously and intuitively on the basis of second level codes and by re-reading and re-examining the interviews; second level codes were classi fied into these categories.

Results

The results set out the important topics which young people living in various forms of institutional care highlighted in connection with school. From the final sample we subsequently eliminated three interviews in which the interviewees provided too little in the way of substantive or clear and meaningful statements concerning their education. In these cases the researcher mostly recorded monosyllabic responses, interjections or nonverbal communication. In the results we first define the individual categories then set out tables showing the second level codes by frequency in descending order of importance. At the end of each category there are sample statements by young people to illustrate a particular aspect. Under the heading Discussion are comments regarding the interpretation of the results.

I. Worsening school results is a second level code category which contains descriptions of the reasons for worsening school results. This includes statements in which the young people describe the progress of their schooling, family circumstances, difficult times at school, their own behaviour at school, disciplinary measures imposed for inappropriate behaviour and truancy,

and evaluate the influence of the company they kept on their worsening school results. Ten second level codes were classified into this category. Table 1 lists them by frequency.

Worsening school results
1. Problems in the family (alcohol, divorce)
2. Difficulties in concentrating on study
3. Truancy
4. Influence of poor company
5. Repeated failure at school
6. Inability to control own behaviour
7. Lack of interests in learning
8. Conflict with teachers
9. Conflict with other children in the class
10. Disciplinary measures taken by school

Table 1: Second level codes in the category **Worsening school results** (in descending order of importance)

In this category the results were classified into 10 groups. The most important of the problems highlighted by the young interviewees was family and personal circumstances, and in fourth place was the influence of the company they keep, while conflicts with classmates and disciplinary measures were least frequently given as factors contributing to the worsening of their school results.

Examples of statements: **Reasons for worsening school results attributed to the influence of bad company.**

P22/24) ... I was always in bad company, never good. I didn't care for school or anything else, I dropped everything and just didn't go, just like them. I didn't go to school for two, three months.
(P9/4) I was okay until the sixth grade, I did learn until then but in the seventh and eighth grades I completely let it go. I started to hang around with the wrong types. They smoked, they broke into houses, and this had an effect on my school results.

(P3/5) I totally let things go at school. Before that my results were excellent. I was a good pupil. But in the seventh grade I failed twice. I really fell into the wrong sort of company.

II. Circumstances that particularly contributed to difficulties connected with schooling belong to the category of second level codes and include more extensive descriptions of the context of the school-related circumstances that were given most emphasis by young people in their stories. It contains descriptions of various successful or failed forms of learning assistance provided by parents, educators and teachers, the way they feel in the class and descriptions of their school behaviour. Five second level codes were classified into this category. Table 2 lists them by frequency.

Circumstances that particularly contributed to difficulties connected with schooling
1. Inability of parents to help with study
2. The role of assistance from teachers and educators
3. Circumstances of their own school behaviour
4. Inability to request learning assistance
5. Experience of rejection and stigmatisation in the classroom

Table 2: Second level codes in the category **Circumstances that particularly contributed to difficulties connected with schooling (in descending order of importance)**

In this category the main connecting factor is the circumstance of learning assistance. The role of parental assistance in learning is described as being particularly important. The interviewees also emphasise learning assistance provided by experts, which is an important preventive factor in tackling learning difficulties and changing a young person's attitude towards school. In connection with circumstances given special emphasis they highlight the role of social skills in connection with the evaluation of their own inappropriate behaviour in various school circumstances

and their inability to seek learning assistance from others when needed. They also report stigmatisation and social exclusion by their peers.

Examples of statements:
Disturbing school behaviour

(P4/27) I used to talk a lot in school, and I often fought with the boys as well. I always had to be the one who was right, only me and no one else and if it wasn't the way I wanted I just started a fight. I simply didn't know any other way.
(P28/19) Even if I was in school I was often half drugged. I didn't listen to the lessons at all. Often I just laughed for no reason. I found everything funny. I remember once during an English class the teacher asked me something in English. I just started laughing and said in Slovene "What did you say?" She sent me out of the classroom and she noticed that something wasn't right with me.

III. School now and plans for the future is the category of second level codes which describes satisfaction with school now, the interviewees' thoughts on continuing education, changing schools, plans in connection with schooling and their future profession, and insecurities and fear of the future. This category includes five second level codes. Table 3 lists them by frequency.

Table 3: Second level codes in the category School now and plans for the future by frequency (in descending order of importance)

School now and plans for the future
1. Positive attitude towards school and learning
2. Lack of study choices
3. Uncertainty over continuation of schooling because of housing problems
4. Unclear vocational goals and fear of the future
5. Lack of interest in the profession they are training for

The results in this category show that the interviewees highlight positive changes in schooling (school success, importance of school, etc.) in comparison with previous experiences. Other aspects of this category reflect the subjective and objective natures of the risk factors described by young people as obstacles to their schooling and future career paths.

Examples of statements:
Unclear plans for the future

(P12/62) I'll probably finish this school, but basically I don't know what I'd enjoy doing. I don't know what I'll do with the rest of my life. I really don't want to be just a cook. I'm worried about what sort of job I'll do because I have no idea what I'd like. I'm really afraid of spending my entire life doing something that I don't like.
(P19/8) I have nowhere to go when I finish school. That's my biggest problem right now. If I manage to complete the third grade with excellent marks then perhaps I'll continue my studies directly and move into the housing group in Brod, which will mean I'll have somewhere to stay if I continue my education.

Discussion

When we discuss school results one of the first problems that needs resolving is how to set criteria to determine failure. We can use parental expectations that the child fails to meet, a low level of acquired knowledge, marks that mean a child will not be able to take a desired course of study, retaking exams and repeating classes, or we can limit the issue of failure to those who drop out of school early. (Mencin-Čeplak, 2002). For young people living in institutions school failure most often results in dropping out. The sample results show that 28% (17 young people) repeated a class at least once. When they describe their school careers young people do not use terms such as "failure or success at school" but "slack-

ening" for most gets worse each year. They do not talk about success or failure but instead put the emphasis on the process, the circumstances and the social context. The most frequent reason given for worsening school results was the family. Children growing up in dysfunctional families are drained of power, will and the ability to concentrate on schoolwork by stress and emotional distress. In her study, Kobolt (1992) established that short attention span and impulsive behavioural responses are typical characteristics of most children from disorderly families with school problems. These characteristics also usually lead to conflicts between the individual and the school. The young people taking part in our study used similar terms to describe themselves. In second place they put characteristics such as *absent-mindedness, irritableness, an inability to understand the subject and an inability to control their own behaviour* as the key reasons for worsening school results. Tomori (2002) points out that regardless of whether we agree with a results-oriented school and social environment we must be aware that a child or young person who does not meet the general criteria of success sees himself or herself as incapable, marginalised, inferior or even wholly bad. Such self-perception contributes to low self-esteem, and such pupils often have lower expectations of themselves and their work and usually achieve poorer school results, which our study confirmed as well. In the last year of primary school and in secondary school the reasons for worsening school results switch from family to the influence of the company the young people are keeping. Among various bad influences the young people included *alcohol, drug abuse and crime.* Among the reasons for deteriorating school results they also included the bad influence of the company they kept. They gave as the most common reasons for keeping such company the desire to forget reality and the feeling of importance they get in such company. During the transition to secondary school they cite as reasons for worsening school results a lack of understanding and conflicts with

teachers and classmates, which resulted in truancy and eventually in dropping out or expulsion from school. Borut's opinion of his relationship with teachers was as follows: "It seems to me that teachers are a bit too full of themselves. Instead of talking to you they prefer to put up obstacles for you to fall over. They're strange. If you forget something or didn't learn something they don't accept an apology. They don't take respect you at all. They prefer to see that you don't manage. He gives you a bad mark and he's really happy about it." The next phenomenon associated with worsening school results is repeated failure leading to avoiding situations in which failure may occur. When young people talk about their attitude to school they often say that *they weren't interested in school, they didn't take school seriously, or that school meant nothing to them.* Researchers believe this also could be a fear of success resulting from one's attitudes towards oneself and accepting one's own social role. Answers of this type can be interpreted in connection with the young person's attempts to preserve a positive self-image. By using a strategy of disparaging others or themselves young people minimise the importance of school in order to be better able to tolerate their own shortcomings.

School-related circumstances that were explicitly emphasised were given particular emphasis in the study because of the young people's belief that they had a special effect on their schooling career. Various studies have established that the level of education attained by the parents affects the school results of their children, although in a very subtle manner that is difficult to assess with empirical studies. A British study (Cullingford and Morrison, 1996) shows that parents who had attained higher levels of education are more interested in the school results of their children and thus influence the attitude of teachers towards the child's school results. The fact that the parents of children with poor school results (often less well educated parents) rarely come to school is interpreted by teachers as neglect. Researchers, on the other hand, claim that in

fact less well educated parents visit school and see teachers less often not because they do not care but because they feel intimidated. Some young people in our study told us that their parents were not interested in what they were doing in school or their problems with learning because they were often away on business or otherwise occupied. In critical learning periods those children who were able to obtain help from classmates or friends or those whose parents organised learning assistance fared better. Those who were unable to deal with the situation themselves and had no external support reported worsening school results. Some children not only had no support from their parents when they were struggling with learning difficulties and were not able to satisfactorily resolve school-related situations themselves, but were also physically or psychologically punished. Parents beat them, insulted them or destroyed their school implements because of bad marks, because they were slow learners or made mistakes in their schoolwork. The school-related circumstances emphasised by young people included a very positive experience from the support and assistance they received from teachers and school counsellors. They stressed various forms of professional assistance: *working with parents, continuous monitoring of school results, organising instruction where difficulties arose.* Their descriptions of school careers also contain their thoughts about the role of their own behaviour, which gradually led to expulsion or dropping out of school. They stress that "during that period" they were unable to control their own behaviour. Peček (1999) believes more effort should be put into dealing with children who exhibit behavioural problems. Many of the problems with social integration experienced by young people are a result of over-sensitivity to circumstances which in general we consider to be undesirable (disrespect, excessive authoritarianism, teachers being unfair, etc). If we listen to these pupils we could learn about the effects that a bad and unsuccessful school has on all its pupils and come up with ideas for changing the life and

work in schools so that they could benefit all children. Based on their discussions with young people, Cullingford and Morrison (1996) conclude that stigmatisation and treating a child as different play a key role in the origins of exclusion within a school class. A comparison of information obtained from interviews and documentary sources carried out on a partial study sample shows that the importance of stigmatisation is highlighted in interviews while documentary sources rarely refer to it, which is why in this respect self-presentations provide an important complement to so-called objective types of information (Rapuš Pavel, 1999a). Young people emphasise stigmatisation and the experience of social isolation, especially by their peers, in cases of alcohol abuse in the family. A slightly older but still relevant study by Cork (see Vuletić, 1988), who interviewed children and young people whose parents were alcoholics, showed that in their perception of fundamental family problems caused by excessive drinking the children and young people put the unpredictable and unstable behaviour and functioning of both parents in first place, followed by anxiety of the parents, rejection and pity from others and a feeling of being different.

Our study shows that young people who have spent part of their life in another of the former Yugoslav republics or whose parents come from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia also experience stigmatisation and social isolation. These young people are second-generation immigrants to Slovenia. They are often torn between two cultures, and all the more so in cases where the parents themselves have not adapted to life in the new environment. Lesar (1998) found that the second generation often finds it difficult to deal with the situation, cannot hide its origin (lower social and financial status, poor language ability, poor school results) and is constantly exposed to various forms of covert or open discrimination. Our study also found that the living conditions within the institutions helped young people to establish a continuity of study, support and learn-

ing assistance, which was reflected in a more positive attitude towards school. It is well known that educators in institutions favour results-oriented schooling because completion of formal schooling is often the principal measure of success for courts, social work centres and parents. The pressure on the institutions affects their educational work, as greater emphasis is placed on education than on socialisation in other areas. In our sample the advantages of such policy are manifested in the group of young people who achieve improvements in their school results after their arrival in the institution with the help and support of educators and teachers working at the institution. Most young people from this group knew the criteria they had to meet if they wanted to continue their study. The second group of young people were not happy with school, mainly for the following reasons: they had no choice of school, they were studying for a profession they had no interest in, and they believed they would not enjoy it or have an aptitude for it. In this regard Mencin-Čeplak (2002) asks why young people enrol in schools where the drop-out rate is the highest. She believes that the drop-out rate in these schools is a result of pressure, a lack of options and a choice of profession that was not genuinely independent. So the perceived failure at school is not necessarily a reflection of inability on the part of the young people concerned. Some of the young people in our study still had a lot of unanswered questions and concerns about their objectives and future profession. Some young people who stress problematic relationships with the family in particular are striving to fulfil education and job-related objectives in order to prove to their parents that they are capable of achieving something. The second most commonly expressed fear of an uncertain future is connected with the housing issue after leaving the institution, which is why some young people prefer to adapt their school and professional objectives to the housing opportunities. Less common were young people's statements that they felt confused about school and their objec-

tives for the future, which was reflected in their stories revealing diffused expectations and a fragmented perception of time; they feel no particular love for school, and the thought that they will work in the profession they are training for now for their entire lives already frightens them. Some institutions place all of their young people into school immediately upon arrival, regardless of the fact that some might not be ready yet. Researchers have found that young people with serious problems in social integration are able to attend school and vocational training successfully and regularly only after their personal and social life have settled down. Premature inclusion in what is perhaps an unsuitable education programme can further consolidate their negative attitude towards knowledge and learning. This makes an individual approach that much more important – for each young person in care, opportunities need to be sought for them to join a programme they are interested in and which they can see themselves performing as a future profession.

Conclusion

Taking self-presentations into account not only enhances our understanding of an individual's life circumstances but can also deepen and expand the responsibility of young people for their own lives. Without this, any educational work remains superficial and cannot be individualised. In this regard we are aware that every life story and history of school-related experiences demands special attention and an individual approach. From the research findings we can draw the following conclusions:

- The results show that young people in institutional care are capable of presenting a clear and realistic picture of their learning and educational process, of reflecting on their position in society, examining the reasons for it and seeking solutions for the future.
- In their self-presentations young people talk about a lack of encouragement, guidance, support and recognition during the school

process. Related to this is their future orienta
tion and further motivation for making some
thing of themselves, both in education as well
as in other spheres of life in various social
environments.

- The study confirms the cyclical processes of
influence between the individual, the family,

the school and other social environments,
which indicates that it is not enough to direct
intervention solely towards the child, and that
more work must be carried out with all the
other individuals in this person's environment
(parents, teachers, educators, etc.).

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