Stupid and lazy?
When young people meet the educational system and confusion builds. Who is to blame? Perspectives from a series of experts

David Thore Gravesen

Abstract

This paper is based upon a research project named *Marginalisation and Co-created Education* (MaCE), revolving around young people that experienced dropout and severe challenges in their school life. The basis of the analyses are 13 interviews conducted with a specific interviewing technique called The Indirect Approach, developed by Norwegian researchers Geir H. Moshuus and Ketil Eide. The analysis is formed around four sections, whereas three are heavily driven by empirical findings, respectively focusing on experiences of neglect from schools, families and professional caregivers, experiences of care attention and joy and new ideas for schooling. The fourth is based on theoretical concepts from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, focusing on the persistent nature of inequality in education. The last section poses concluding remarks on ambitions and strategies in the MaCE project.

Key words

Introduction

You have probably read a lot of dissertations, reports and papers about the school system and its struggles to combat drop-out, exclusion and marginalization. You have probably listened to many a renowned expert on education claiming that this feedback system, this new measurement tool or this specific approach to teaching will help schools and teachers to succeed. In this paper, however, you will meet another set of experts; young people, who experienced drop-out, exclusion and marginalization, and are willing to share their stories and shine light upon important issues regarding education, and the deeply rooted factors surrounding their educational paths – contexts such as their domestic lives, relationships and leisuretime-activities. The research question that drives this paper forward is this; *how can narratives from young people with drop-out experiences, contribute with new ideas that can prevent dropout in the schooling system*? For some, the number 13 is a bad luck number, but not in this paper. Because the point of departure in this article is precisely 13 young people, who consented to be informants in this international, Erasmus+ funded, research project, which is motivated by the aspiration to understand more thoroughly, from the perspective of young people, why schools, education and teachers sometimes can be so problematic.

This paper is predominantly driven by empirical findings. The interviews conducted in this research project is based on a specific interviewing technique called "The indirect approach", in which the interviewer strives to put emphasis solely on the narratives of the informant. No specific questions are prepared, no paper and pen is brought along, and no concepts that does not derive from the informants' own vocabulary, is posed into the conversation. In the analytical sections of the paper, the empirical findings are presented around three main categories, that emerged throughout the coding process, respectively; a) experiences of neglect from schools, families and professional caregivers, b) experiences of care, attention and joy, and c) new ideas for schooling. To meet the standards of scholarly work and synthesize narratives and categories theoretically, the paper also introduces a short analysis section, based on the framework of Pierre Bourdieu and his work on educational sociology. Lastly, the paper poses a few concluding remarks on the research project and the ambitions and strategies that go with it.

Citation

MaCE and the methodology

This paper is based upon a research project named *Marginalisation and Co-created Education* (MaCE), revolving around young people that experienced dropout and severe challenges in their school life. The research is a collaboration between students and scholars from three universities, respectively University of Cumbria in the UK, The University College of Southeast Norway and VIA University College in Denmark. The core aim of the research project is to better understand marginalization and reflect on how to build more inclusive schools in our societies. In MaCE, students partake as co-researchers, and scholars and students are all trained to use *The indirect approach*, developed by Norwegian researchers Geir Moshuss and Ketil Eide (2016). This approach is a specific qualitative interviewing technique based on storytelling and dialogue. In the process, the researcher might stumble across, or more intentionally focus on finding, what Moshuss and Eide refer to as 'happenstances'. A happenstance is a term for moments that allow the researcher to momentarily bridge into the meanings of the informant, and often the happenstance can be (considered) a turning point or a defining moment in the interview dialogue. The indirect approach is also aimed at bringing to light the context(s) "behind" the narratives of the informant, without asking direct and beforehand prepared questions.

> "…we want to analyze how these turns of events may permit the author to go beyond the text produced in the interview, to see more of the context of the interview as the informant understands it. Could it be that through happenstance we may manage to get answers to questions we never thought to ask?" (Moshuss & Eide, 2016: 2)

The training of students and scholars fall in two annual cycles, and in the first of these, five Danish students participated, doing each their interview with a young person in education. In cycle one, two Danish scholars each conducted four interviews, which altogether adds up to 13 interviews. We recruited informants from two different school services. One is a so-called *Production School*, for young people who for a shorter (or fairly longer) period is contemplating what to do in relation to their educational path or work situation, or perhaps because they dropped out of, or needed a break from, some formal (youth) education program. The other institution is an *Adult Education Center* (in Danish: *VUC* for *V*oksen *U*ddannelses *C*enter), where people of all ages can attend to pick up on courses and exams they missed, for example in 9th or 10th grade in their lower secondary school years. We did seven interviews in the latter school and six at the *Production School*. The students in the *Production School* were all around 17-18 years old, whereas the students from the *Adult Education Center* was slightly older, most of them in their twenties.

Theoretical framework and relevant research

For the short theoretical analysis carried out in the penultimate section of this paper, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on educational sociology serves as framework. Namely, the concepts of social reproduction, cultural capital and habitus will form the analysis (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006; Bourdieu, 2004, 2007). Hopefully, this framework will enable both author and reader to reflect why structures in education seem so persistent, and why preventing - or even eliminating – dropout in schools is seemingly such a difficult task. In a Danish perspective, a series of scholars conducted qualitative research on educational programs through the lens of Bourdieu's work. They all demonstrate that students with privileged, middleclass backgrounds are the ones that benefit the most in educational settings, because they know (and/or are more easily adapt to) the social, cultural and linguistic codes of behavior in kindergartens (Palludan, 2005), primary schools (Gilliam, 2009), upper secondary schools (Murning, 2009) and universities (Thomsen, 2008). Also quantitative research reveals that privileges are passed on from one generation to the next (Hansen, 1995; Jæger, Munk & Ploug, 2003; Ploug, 2005), not least through the structures of the educational system. In the next section of the paper, we will look into our empirical data, and focus on the informants' experiences of neglect from schools, families and professional caregivers.

Experiences of neglect from schools, families and professional caregivers

Many informants talk about neglect, problematic family relationships and lack of support in school. This is specifically the case for informants from the *Adult Education Center*, who share very detailed stories about staying at residential institutions, living in foster families and experiencing discontinuous school careers consisting of numerous breaks in the form of school- and housing changes. For the fairly younger informants from the *Production School*, however, the situation is somewhat different, but in many respect quite similar. Though many informants from the *Production School* experienced emotional support from their parents, they nevertheless experienced difficulties in school, often facing struggles with teachers and classmates.

Across the two informant groups, many express that every so often the blame for things not working out in school was put on them. Often people around them considered them stupid or lazy, questioning their intentions and attitudes. In some cases, parents and/or foster parents expressed such views, whereas in other cases, it was teachers and educators, who would use such labels when describing the young people and their efforts in school and educational programs.

In the interview with Milena from the *Production School*, she reveals that bullying was a central aspect of her school life, and the blame was on her:

> Milena: "…I lost my father. I've also been bullied with that… that it was my fault… it really affected my schooling. Until I moved in 8th grade, I really had a hard time coping with school. I was told I would never make it… That I might as well just give up, right away… It was like they we're handing me a form so I could apply for welfare services and stuff... They said: "you will never succeed; you will be left on cash benefits"…"

> Interviewer: "Who are "they"?"

> Milena: "It was the teachers and the inspector. My mother was often at school, because I had my earring pulled out. I got my school bag destroyed and they threw rotten milk in my bag and emptied trash bins over me. They called me "fat". They were very hateful. Once, they broke my nose. So my mother ... and my father, when he was still alive ... they went to the school to talk to them about what to do about it. It wasn't fair I was being bullied. I couldn't change school, because they had told other schools that I was a problem child and that everything was my fault. Therefore, I couldn't change school..."

As mentioned, some of the informants from the *Adult Education Center*, even felt neglected by their closest caregivers, be it their own parents or foster parents. Kamilla experienced harsh challenges growing up with an alcoholic and drug-addicted mother. When Kamilla was 5 years old, her mother gave birth to twin boys that Kamilla had to take care of.

> "…I won't claim that I remember many good experiences… I don't... it was all about beating, alcohol and drugs… I watched my mother preparing for her fix with one little brother on her arm, while I held the other…"

Kamilla explains that her father had to work long hours to feed the family and financially support her mother's abuse. Consequently, he was often away, leaving a lot of responsibility on Kamilla's shoulders. After the birth of the twin brothers, all three children were moved to residential institutions and foster homes. Through her primary and lower secondary school years, Kamilla struggled quite a bit, namely in math. Teachers often labeled her lazy, and even her foster father expressed that same impression. In 8th grade, Kamilla experienced a difficult loss, when her foster mother died from long-term illness. Consequently, Kamilla had to move to a

new foster family and change school, which didn't make things easier. Now it was not only math, but all subjects in school, that caused trouble. Kamilla felt depressed, and listening to people telling her that she was lazy, when she actually tried her best, had a strong impact on her:

> "…you don't have an honest chance, and you just sit there and you fight and you really try… and the only thing they tell you is: "you're just lazy!" … No, I am not! … In the end, you won't even bother trying, and it turns into laziness … it's been frustrating and depressing, and it made me sad, and for many, many years, I thought: "Well, I must be stupid … really stupid"…"

Also Carl, from the *Adult Education Center*, was considered lazy, when struggling with subjects in primary school:

> "… from the beginning, I was considered lazy, as if I didn't bother to do anything… eventually it meant that there was things I really didn't care for… homework and such…"

Carl explains that he lacked support when growing up. With parents outside the labor market, he always felt he was steps behind his classmates, because his parents did not teach him how to move on in life and make the right decisions. The lack of support followed Carl throughout his educational trajectory, and at the time of the interview, now in his twenties, he is still struggling to figure things out. With quite a few disrupted educational programs behind him, he is anxious as to when he will find his way in life.
Sofie, from the *Production School*, chose to drop out of high school after one year of struggling:

> "…I couldn't keep up (…) …and I just fell behind. I thought: "Fuck, I'm stupid", because I could see all my friends… they just figured it out! But me… I understood nothing. Then I really felt bad, and started to think like this: "Okay, I'm just really stupid"… so last year, I didn't feel well ... If you know me, then you know a happy girl, but last year I was feeling bad. It stressed me a lot. So in that sense, it was a good decision to skip it… Yes…"

Now, Sofie is busy doing theater at the *Production School*, and she is happy that her mother supported her, and helped her find a school that actually meets her needs and matches her interests. With that uplifting narrative, we will move on to the next section of the paper, and learn much more about experiences of care, attention and joy.

Experiences of care, attention and joy
Although the 13 informants share many stories that revolve around neglect, hopelessness, loneliness and lack of success in school, narratives that focus on care, attention and joy also characterize the life stories. Some sought and found support and guidance from specific adults in their daily lives, be it grandparents, a particular teacher, or someone in alternative communities such as the Scout Movement. Others enjoyed literature, creative activities or sports.

Kamilla explains that her foster parents gave her the opportunity to spend a week every summer at a scout camp for children and young people that grew up with alcoholic or drug-addicted parents. Returning every summer formed important relationships to peers that experienced similar challenges:

> "I have been so happy about it, and it has helped me through, really, a lot of difficult things. In many respects, I thank the camp for not having ended up killing myself… it has a lot to do with the relationships you experience, because you don't have to be embarrassed about who you are, you don't hide your disorders, you don't hide your background, you can be exactly the person you are. And that is actually OK in that environment…"

Amin, also from the *Adult Education Center,* spent 6 years composing and producing his own music. When he was 16 years old, he went to a Production School with great music facilities. At the time of the interview, Amin is 23 years old, and looking back, he reflects on the role music played earlier in his life:

> "I felt that I had never been able to confide in anyone or talk about my feelings with a teacher or a contact person or my mother or anyone, so the music was a form of self-therapy for me… being able to open up and write all sorts of things. I think it was great, that I could find myself in it. But then, every time I fell back into abuse, I was mean to myself, because it resulted in writer's block, and it really ruined it for me…"

As the quote reveals, music gave Amin an opportunity to express feelings and be open about his life conditions. Amin explains that he felt neglected by his mother and other people too, including several professional caregivers, e.g. pedagogues working in some of the residential institutions that he resided in during his teenage years. Amin experienced some success and had songs played on the radio. Today he quit music, and now he is focusing on school. As accentuated also by Kamilla, the opportunity to speak your mind and be honest is very important, and for Amin, music was that opportunity. Also Sofie, that we met in the previous section of the paper, finds great joy in playing music and composing her own songs.

> "I have my ukulele, my guitar, my bass and my keyboard. I'm mostly into the ukulele (…). Even though I only got it last Christmas (…). I love a lot of music, I hear it all the time and I love it! I really just need to play music and make my own music (…). It's so nice... when I write songs... it's like... like others writing their diaries. I don't really do that. I tend to forget. But then, I can write my songs instead... it really makes me happy!"

Another of the informants form the *Adult Education Center*, Anni, always loved to read. At bedtime, her foster father used to read aloud fantasy novels, and today in her mid-twenties, Anni is still a heavy reader. She also writes a lot. Currently, she is engaged in text-based role-play on the internet, which means that she creates characters in online literary communities. Earlier, she has written numerous full fantasy manuscripts of up to 400 pages

> "Of that length, I've probably written 7 or 8 manuscripts. And some that would be around 100 or 200 pages. For the shorter ones, there would be at least as many pages with notes… things I should keep in mind with characters, and at some point this or that should happen… Or things I said about the character that I needed to remember…"

When asked, if she ever sent the manuscripts to publishers, Anni says no and clarifies that she deleted them all without ever really sharing them with others. She explains that she is very self-critical; *"I end up being unhappy with the ending, and then I delete it all!"*

For many of the informants, it is also evident, that the type of school that they are currently enrolled in, for some the *Adult Education Center*, for others the *Production School*, is associated with feelings of care, attention and joy. Many express that new and alternative ways of conducting school and teaching result in students experiencing that their perspectives, needs and capabilities are taken into account. Several informants talk about the teachers' ability to teach, communicate and explain a given content in different ways - and not just in *their own way* or in *one particular way*. Many narratives revolve around the importance of teachers having patience, and several informants report that when they finally met attentive teachers that understood how to show things in different ways, they could easily learn a lot of the academic content they missed in elementary school.

With all these enriching narratives in mind, now it is time to move on to the next section of the paper. In that one, we will discuss to what extend narratives from the informants in our study can be transformed into good ideas for future pedagogy and schooling.

New ideas for schooling? Statements from experienced experts

> "…I don't know... everything about it! You don't have to sit on your ass and listen to the teacher for hours, you know. Things are happening. I am doing something with my body and hands. I'm not supposed to just sit and concentrate… it makes it so much easier to focus… and we're having great relationships. After a few days, I felt at home. It's a place, where you dare to be yourself. It's funny, because we often talk about exactly that during our theater classes. It's great, that we can be ourselves, like 100% and not only like 50%... we step in with everything we've got! "This is me, and this is who I am!". We all respect that, it's really nice…"

The above quotation is Sofie's statement, when the interviewer asks her to explain, why she likes to be at the *Production School*. And as an answer to that exact question, the words are powerful in their own right. But lifted into a more general reflection on schooling and teaching, the reply is equally persuasive and inspiring. And a good representative also, of the many reflections and statements that characterize our material. Across all those narratives, there are numerous ideas for future schools, if we want them to be more inclusive. And as we have seen in the two previous analysis sections, more attention, new and different teaching methods, a stronger focus on bodily activities and creative subjects would be reasonable ways to start. For all students to be respected and ultimately included in our pedagogical environments, to prevent bullying and drop-out, perhaps we need to pay more attention to the experts that experienced such challenging scenarios. Had teachers been more attentive to Amin, perhaps in his school life he would have taken the chance and expressed how he felt, like he did when he composed music? And what if the educational environment in Amin's earlier school years, had been based a little more on creative activities like music – would that have made a difference? And what about Anni and all the manuscripts she deleted? What would have happened if a teacher had noticed all those pages of creative output? Several informants also express that their struggles in school are related to various kinds of challenges such as dyslexia, dyscalculia or psychiatric diagnoses like ADHD, ADD, depression or anxiety disorder. Obviously, it requires strength to deal with such issues, and the informants focused on various aspects of just that, when revealing their life stories. But more importantly, many express that it is quite late in their school life, that professionals help them through the processes that lead to an understanding of the conditions, and for some a diagnosis.

Like illustrated earlier, Kamila spent many years thinking she was stupid, which made her very sad. But later in life, various tests and inquiries proved that impression to be wrong:

> "…it has been proven now, that I am not [stupid]… and not only in relation to my exams (…). I did an IQ-test and I am quite normal… so now it has been proven that (…) I am not as stupid, as I always thought I was. But when you're told, over and over, throughout your life, that you are stupid, that's what you are going to believe…"

It is true for all 13 Danish informants that they struggled throughout their school years, and many in their private lives too. But it is equally true, that they all found moments of great joy and satisfaction through activities they loved. And with people they valued and trusted. Perhaps, if teachers and professional caregivers focused a little more on the things (vulnerable) children and youth are good at, instead of what causes them problems, we would see a more supportive and drop-out-preventing school system? Line from the *Production School* loves to play football, and she has been doing it for many years. Her enthusiasm is evident, when she and the interviewer talk about differences between school and the ball game.

Line: "Football was very different for me, because I was very good at it, and I played with a lot of people. I just shined a lot on a football field, much more than I did in primary school."

Interviewer: "So perhaps it was like a free space for you?"

Line: "Yes, indeed!"

Interviewer: "Also in terms of recognition, that you were praised?"

Line: "Yes exactly, that I was good enough. Unlike in class…"

Interviewer: "What's so great about football?"

Line: "Football can make you happy… hmm… I am not sure… there is just something about it. You get more confident (…)... and, um, I like to be in motion on a soccer field, much rather than sitting, just sitting still. That was always very tough on me. I can't concentrate at all… when I have to sit there for an hour or two, it's football, I'm constantly thinking about…"

Interviewer: "Football is a great sport! When did you start playing?"

Line: "Back home, since I was seven, I used to play street football. I live in a ghetto, and I played with the boys, played with them a lot. Then I started in an after-school leisure center, where I also played with some of the boys, and there was a coach, who discovered me. He said: "you have to play on a team, you can take it far!" I have been doing it ever since, I already played in three different clubs."

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Mooshus and Eide, *the Indirect Approach* inventors, refer to the term 'happenstance' as a defining moment in the interview dialogue, that allow the researcher to bridge into the meanings of the informant (Mooshus & Eide, 2016). Perhaps the exchange of words in the above quotations is an example of such a defining moment. Noticeably, when Line talks about football, it is very meaningful to her, and the liveliness she signals, when articulating that on the football field, she was good enough, seems strikingly important. Just like Kamila, Sofie, Amin and all the other informants, which we have met throughout this paper, Line is looking for support and acknowledgement, when she copes with life in all its respects.

Social reproduction. The persistence of things, not least educational inequality
While the concept of social mobility is about generational social changes and movements, the concept of *social reproduction* is about social stagnation or repetition. In their book *Reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006) Bourdieu and his colleague Jean-Claude Passeron developed a theory of education in France, describing how children from well-educated and privileged homes thrive and do better in the educational system, and ultimately also achieve the best grades and learning results. The basis for this process is *cultural capital*, which is a term that describes the cultural resources that privileged children are equipped with from home, because their parents are well educated and thus (often unconsciously) know how to behave appropriately in cultural environments, such as the school and other pedagogical arenas. Accordingly, such parents (also often unconsciously) know how to support their children in relation to academic challenges and homework. On the contrary, children from lesser-privileged homes tend to find it harder to engage in the formal school culture and decipher the learning activities. For such children it is more challenging to live up to the expectations from the teachers, which means that they rarely achieve the same level of social recognition and high academic achievement as their privileged classmates. According to Bourdieu, the family is the most central place for capital being transferred and accordingly, the family upbringing is crucial to the

individual's *habitus*, which is another important concept in Bourdieu's sociology. The term describes that the accumulation of experiences that individuals gain throughout their lifetime, become their impetus for new choices in life. Bourdieu's basic understanding is that habitus works below or behind our consciousness, and therefore beyond what one can examine and control by will. Ultimately, this means that choices related to schooling, educational path, lifestyle and career are not results of conscious choices. To stress his point, Bourdieu often uses quotation marks when he uses the word choice (Bourdieu, 2007). As mentioned earlier, several Danish researchers used Bourdieu's terminology in their analyses of inequality in the Danish school system. One of those, Laura Gilliam, found that children with different backgrounds experience school very differently and although the teachers do not intend to, they tend to devalue the cultural and social norms of the lesser-privileged children. In her important book, *The Disruptive Children and the Appropriate Human Being* [my translation], Gilliam accentuates that educators and teachers must carefully reflect their own role in the social dynamics of the school and the class structures in society (Gilliam, 2009). According to Gilliam, teachers need to look for ways to *broaden* the school's student norms and standard understandings of competences, for the category "the appropriate human being" not only to be ascribed to privileged children from the middle class.

Such insights are fruitful, when juxtaposed with the narratives of our 13 informants. As we have seen in earlier sections of this paper, they all had their challenges in school, struggling with labels and teacher's lack of (optimistic) attention. If you are neglected in your family, bullied in school or told you are stupid, it makes impact on your future life. According to Bourdieu, your habitus will take form of such experiences, and you will most likely approach your next steps with a lack of confidence and a memory record telling you, that it is not really worth it anyway. Inequalities, not least in our educational systems, are persistent, because we all embody and reproduce them through our daily activities. It is always easier to keep doing what you are familiar with, and keep thinking the thoughts you always did. Bourdieu notes that habitus always try to protect itself from crises and critical problems by securing an environment, which is relatively constant (Bourdieu, 2007). In other words: habitus doesn't like change. If you are a teacher, it will take some effort to broaden the category of "the appropriate human being". To invite more (or even all) students into the circle of recognition, we all have to reject the (often unconsciously based) notion that middle class children (and their privileged parents) deserve more appreciation and success than other lesser-privileged groups. What we are facing, when we say that we really want inclusive schools, really want to prevent drop-out and really want to build more sustainable and fair educational systems, is that we are up against *social reproduction* and it's (individual and structural) persistency. A major challenge, which demands of us, that *we* don't act stupid or lazy, meaning that, if we want these things to happen, we need to realize that it will take a lot of wit and a great load of effort.

Concluding remarks
The intention with the paper was never to pursue any fixed methods or concrete ideas on how we are going to make our educational systems more inclusive. Neither was it the intention to generalize or bring proof to any table. The work behind this paper is based on qualitative data, and interpretation and reflection led the analyses. As mentioned in the introduction, the paper is predominantly driven by empirical findings, which is not coincidental. Rather, it is a strategy based on the core idea and epistemological foundation of the MaCE project; The young people are the experts, and we are here to learn! Scholars and students work collaboratively to study marginalization and reflect on structures in our educational systems. In order to collaborate, we literally strive to decrease the gap between scholars and students by swapping heavy lectures with more dialogue-based teaching, and by giving students responsibility in their role as co-researchers. Therefore, they conduct interviews individually, do their own data analysis and write articles on their own. With tutor and peer support, of course, throughout the processes. *The indirect approach*, which students and scholars use, when doing the research interviews, derive from a similar ambition; to drastically downplay the

researcher control and base the research process on dialogue and the young people's narratives. By doing so, in both respects, we hope to not only *preach* inclusion, but also actually *do* it!

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