School Careers and Delinquent Involvement: A retrospective investigation into the schooling experiences of habitual offenders

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the schooling experiences of young people who pursued a criminal career and consequently became habitual offenders. The data presented are part of a larger grounded theory project on criminal career development among Maltese male youth. The narrative approach adopted in the study allows one to explore offenders' school careers from their perspective and adopts an inductive design. While the direction of the link between schooling and juvenile delinquency remains complex and contested, exploring the role of the school in delinquent development has important implications for intervention. This paper shows how school experiences have important implications for the development of delinquent careers and are an important contingency in relation to early onset of delinquency. Participant's negative school experiences and adjustment, engagement in truancy and labelling within the school context are some of the key themes which emerged from the students' narratives. Although not conclusive, the data from this study implies that dissatisfaction with the educational experience combined with other contingencies, may set the stage for more serious delinquency in and out of school.*

Keywords: youth, offending, educational careers

Introduction

Until relatively recently, schooling was considered to be less influential than the family or individual characteristics on youth misbehaviour. In the 70's, Bernstein concluded that 'schools cannot compensate for society' (1970:344). However, following Rutter's work (Rutter et al, 1979), interest emerged in the impact of schooling careers on young people's lives and on delinquent involvement. The direction of the link between school and juvenile delinquency remains complex and contested. While the qualitative methodology adopted for the empirical work herewith documented does not allow any inferences about the *direct* impact of educational experiences on delinquency, the narrative approach allows one to explore offenders' school careers from *their* perspective. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate the schooling experiences of young people who pursued a criminal career and consequently became habitual offenders. The data presented here are part of a larger grounded theory project on criminal career development among Maltese male youth. In discussing their lives the participants consistently made reference to their schooling. The role of schooling within the process of delinquent development is inductively explored. Since it is within schools that profound change can occur, exploring their role in delinquent development has important implications for intervention.

Education in Malta

The educational system in Malta has undergone considerable reform. At the time of the interviewees' school careers, state secondary education in Malta was "deeply embedded in a framework of selectivity" (Spiteri et al., 2005), consisting of a tripartite system where students were selected to attend either a secondary grammar school (Junior Lyceum), a secondary school for lower achieving students (Area Secondary) or a secondary special school for non-achieving students (Opportunity Centres). Junior Lyceums were more highly valued than the other schools whose students may have

> *".......become second class, inferior citizens in school, destined to become inferior and second class citizens in classist Maltese society later on" (Zammit Mangion, 1988: 23).*

In a study on students identified as having social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD) in Malta, Cefai, Cooper and Camilleri (2009) found that students in lower streams exhibited the highest levels of SEBD. High rates of behaviour problems were found in Area Secondary schools, suggesting that streaming practices combine and heighten learning and behavioural difficulties or may also be a consequence of such practices. This receives long standing support from Hargreaves (1967), whose seminal study of selection at 11+ in England found that secondary school students' attitudes and educational performance were negatively influenced by streaming. The quality of teaching and learning support might explain, at least in part, why students with learning difficulties appear to develop behaviour problems. Teachers may lower academic and behavioural expectations for lower stream students (Hargreaves, Hester and Mellor, 1975, Baker, 2005). In a culture where educators are measured according to students' examination success, teachers may become reluctant to invest effort and resources in such classes. Recent education reforms have abolished the selective secondary system and replaced it with an inclusive college system, but 'setting' still operates and 'learning zones' have been created for students experiencing SEBD and other difficulties. While 'learning zones' aim to reintegrate students within the mainstream, the process of social typing and stigmatisation that may take place in the informal setting of the classroom may have implications for the development of a negative identity. This is particularly set to occur if 'learning zones' are allowed to become 'sin bins' for 'difficult' students rather than centres of support to facilitate their inclusion. A recent study on the views of professionals working at two 'learning zones' in Malta reported lack of role clarity, guidelines and team collaboration (Attard Trevisan, 2011).

Teacher expectations influence academic outcomes (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968). Although it is difficult to ascertain the direction of the phenomenon, low academic achievement is, in turn, linked to behaviour problems and delinquent involvement (Farrell, Critchley and Mills 2000; Groom and Rose 2004). Cefai et al (2009) found that attainment was the strongest predictor of SEBD in Maltese schools, underlining the inextricable link between learning and behaviour difficulties. Youth who experience schooling as unpleasant may opt to spend their time elsewhere. Cefai and Cooper (2010) found that negative school experiences were one of the reasons students opted out. Some

students have difficulty engaging in traditional, teacher-centred methods of teaching and curricula, which they deem irrelevant to their life and which may conflict with their own culture (cf. Farrell, Critchley, and Mills 2000; Groom and Rose 2004). Students feel victimized by not receiving the support they need from a system that labels them as deviant, putting them even more at risk for social exclusion as young adults (cf. Cooper 1993; Baker 2005). They may be blamed unfairly for disturbances in class (Magri 2009). The label they earn may contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which students adopt the assigned role. This process is set to lead to disengagement and absenteeism as students detach themselves from a system that impacts negatively on their self. Disengagement becomes a self-protective mechanism from a dehumanising system (Chircop 1997) and constitutes a risk factor for delinquency (Colman et al, 2009).

Setting the agenda right: school processes and delinquent involvement

Critically examining school processes that contribute to delinquency disturbs researchers' assumptions that schooling is always good. The choice of where to seek for evidence for the causes of school difficulties - whether to examine the child and his background, or whether to examine schooling itself - is prompted by considerations other than academic curiosity (Reynolds et. al., 2009). However, the literature contends that behaviour problems in children and young people are complex and multi-faceted, resulting from various influences (Cefai et al 2009; Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). A bio-psychosocial perspective (Cooper, Bilton and Kakos, 2011) to understanding, explaining and responding to behaviour difficulties in school underlines the dynamic relationship between the individual and the systems in his or her life, the interconnected and interdependent relationships between the various situational, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors impacting on students' behaviour.

While schools do not operate in a vacuum, they play a critical role in the lives of youth (cf. Hawkins et al, 2009, Woolf, 2008). Patterson et al (1992) found common patterns in the life histories of career anti-social adults that revealed the cumulative effect of social deprivation and negative family influences exacerbated by school related factors. The social deprivation and coercive parenting experienced in early childhood were followed by teachers' failure to employ positive behaviour management strategies.

Social rejection by teachers and peers led the children to seek affiliation with similar peers. The outcome of this process was the career antisocial adult, who, by his late teens, had a well-developed set of coercive strategies to meet his needs. The outcomes were erratic occupational histories, criminality, mental health problems and chaotic relationships. Clark's criminal career development model (Clark 1999; 2006; 2011) also hypothesizes similar processes. Schools contribute to the social construction of deviant student identities through processes of labelling (Clark, 1999), and the failure to actively promote engagement in schooling leaves vulnerable students with low self worth (Cefai et al, 2009; Cefai and Camilleri, 2011).

Culture mismatch

Cloward and Ohlin (1961) regarded delinquency as caused by "blocked opportunity" within school. They discussed how middle class bias in schools denigrates the ambitions of working class children. This results in disaffection with schooling and its goals. Cicourel and Kituse (1963) examined how the structure of relationships between teachers and pupils erodes the self-esteem of working class pupils producing feelings of inferiority. Carlen et al (1992: 159) wrote that there is "much pain, hurt and suffering around current educational arrangements" that derive from the preoccupations with social control and "normalisation". The marginalisation of some children by the educational system draws them into delinquency as a "mode of resistance" (Carlen et al, 1992). In an ethnographic study of 15 absentees in a girls' trade school, Chircop (1997) reported that students became disengaged from school to protect themselves from an insensitive, system where they were made to see themselves as failures. Students may refuse the values projected by the school by behaving and dressing in ways that conflict with the school culture (Chircop 1997; Clark et al. 2005; Magri 2009; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). Modifying the uniform may be described as a form of symbolic resistance to authority, part of the anti-school culture (cf. Patterson et al. 1992).

Academic achievement

Research has examined the complex relationship between school performance and delinquency (Farrington et al, 1986; Simons et al, 1991; Maguin and Loeber, 1996; Huisinga and Jakob-Chien 1998), with conclusive evidence that poor performance is

associated with delinquency (eg Ouston, 1984; Hawkins et al, 2000; Hawkins and Catalano, 2007; Dahberg and Potter, 2001;) The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (Farrington, 1992) and the Pittsburgh Youth Study (Huizinga et al, 2000) both conclude that poor school performance predates later delinquent involvement. Offenders often have learning difficulties (see Rumberger and Lim, 2008; Goldshmidt and Wang, 1999). Low educational aspirations and negative attitudes towards school are significantly related to delinquency (Hawkins et al, 2003; Jimerson et al, 2000). School failure may undermine a student's interest in school subjects and consequently affect commitment to school and its goals (Daniels et al, 1999). Cefai et al (2009) found that poor academic achievement is the strongest predictor of SEBD amongst both primary and secondary school students. Children who consistently do badly in school may feel isolated and then come together in their rejection of academic achievement (Patterson's et al, 1992). The relationship between offending and school performance cannot however be oversimplified. Not all school failures manifest delinquent behaviour and not all offenders have poor academic careers. Maguin and Loeber (1996) suggest that we examine the impact of poor educational attainment on delinquency over time and consider school careers as trajectories with multiple transition points.

Peer group influence

Schools might foster delinquent group associations by default. Young people who are failing may be purposefully brought together in interventions that aim to address the problem, such as the case of specialist provision. Dishion et al (1999) found that delinquent groups are organised around rule breaking conversations and this serves as 'deviancy training'. Patterson et al (1992) similarly found that social rejection by teachers and peers led students to seek affiliation with similarly rejected, anti-social peers in a deviant sub-culture. Placing young people who are experiencing difficulties together and isolating them from the mainstream may accelerate deviant careers. Studies point to the potential harm of grouping high risk youth together, removing positive role models (e.g. Hawkins et al, 2003). Involvement with antisocial peers is a clear risk factor for delinquency providing youth with opportunities for learning techniques and motives.

Labelling

Delinquents often have negative reputations in school before they start to break the law, which are then perpetuated when the youth gets in trouble. Teachers discuss students and perpetuate reputations. While educators, school administrators and educational policy makers are well aware of the negative repercussions of labelling children and youth, and while a complex paradigm shift towards inclusion has been well underway in the past decades, subtle forms of labelling remain in schools. Discriminatory practices impact on young people's identities facilitating further engagement in deviance. Experts may attempt to intervene to halt or reverse the 'problem', inadvertently setting into motion a process of labelling encouraging further deviation. (Clark, 2012). Labelling individuals also serves to steer the attention away from systemic problems. If an adolescent may be described as disaffected, this lays the blame squarely on his shoulder allowing the educational institution to get along with its daily business without needing to question how the system is contributing. A victim blaming approach is favoured, whereby the source of the problem is seen to be the young person and hence solutions are geared towards 'normalising' him or her rather than addressing inadequacies in schooling (Te Reile, 2009). This approach ignores that schools may be making a significant contribution to the difficulties some youth encounter.

Relationships with teachers

Uncaring and autocratic relationships have been repeatedly found to lead to student defiance, disengagement and disaffection (Janhnukainen 2001; Baker 2005; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). Olsen and Cooper (2001) describe the use of coercive power in the classroom as a quick fix that becomes self-defeating. Such relationships are more likely to lead to disengagement from the school, instilling a sense of failure and disempowerment in the students' quest for competence. (Cooper 1993; Daniels et al. 2003; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). If young people care what their teachers think about them then they are less likely to jeopardize their good standing by engaging in deviant behaviour (Hirshi, 1969). Relationships foster resiliency and realign students' development towards more positive pathways (Pianta and Stuhlman, 2004; Daniels et al., 2003).

Methodology

The data presented were collected as part of the main author's doctoral dissertation exploring criminal career development among incarcerated Maltese male repeat offenders. The study adopted a grounded theory approach where research questions emerged from initial interview data. Interviewees were initially asked to *'tell me the story of your life'.* This was followed by probing on the issues emergent from the narrative while towards the end of the interview theoretically driven issues, not spontaneously discussed by the interviewees, were introduced. The criminal career was explored by identifying contingencies that made movement in the career more or less possible. The study explored how the young men started to engage in delinquency, how that behaviour escalated to more sustained criminal activity and the development of commitment to crime. Through the use of narrative, the careers of 41 male inmates were mapped, focusing on career contingencies the inmates deemed important. The offenders' school careers were an emergent conceptual category in most of the interviews. For the purposes of this paper only the conceptual categories dealing with the interviewees' experiences of schooling are explored.

The sample comprised 41 young men under the age of 30 who were at the time of the research imprisoned in Malta's only correctional facility. The average age of the sample was 24. Interviews were conducted in Maltese, tape-recorded, transcribed in the original language and then translated into English. The goal was the development of a grounded theory of the development of criminality in young people. Participation was voluntary. A sample of 41 inmates was considered sufficient in light of the qualitative, in depth nature of the research. The transcribed material was subjected to rigorous open and axial coding following Strauss and Corbin (1990). Open coding is the part of the analysis concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing and describing phenomena found in the text, while axial coding is the process of relating codes (categories and properties) to each other.

Data Analysis

When asked to narrate their life stories, the young men spontaneously made reference to their school careers. This analysis examines how the young men in the sample have experienced schooling and what role this may have played in the development of their delinquent careers. Those features of the school organisation and the processes occurring in the school that might have encouraged the delinquent response and the emergence of a delinquent identity are discussed in the following sections.

No stake in conformity

The interviewees recalled negative school experiences that left them with little stake in conformity. Relationships with school personnel were reported to be poor. In Hirschi's social control theory (1969) 'attachment' refers to one's interest in others; attachment to teachers acts as a primary deterrent to engagement in delinquency. A young person who cares what his teachers think of him is unlikely to engage in behaviour that might jeopardise his good standing (Pianta, 1999). Lack of attachment leaves him free to deviate. While examining the interviewees' bond with school, it may be argued that an inability to do well in school was linked with their eventual delinquency, through a series of circular events. Academic difficulties and poor school performance lead to a dislike of school. This encourages a rejection of teachers and school authority and consequent truancy which predisposes students to acts of delinquency.

> I really got fed up at school because I felt that I was going there for nothing.
> Just to sit on the bench and hassle the other kids and get into trouble. I was
> not getting anything out of it and so I stopped going *DM* [i]

The more negative interactions with teachers become, the more the child may come to dislike school. If he does not care for their opinion, as seems to have been the case with many of the interviewees, then this leaves him free to deviate.

> I never bothered about anyone - about teachers or friends.

> Interviewer: Do I understand you right? You never considered the teachers
> at all?

For me it was as if they were not even there. *RM*

I would say hello in the morning and then goodbye in the evening and then that was about it. I did not like to argue with them. In the end I would just sit at the back of the class and imagine that I was somewhere else and then I stopped going *MS*

Conventional investments insulate from deviance (Hirschi, 1969). As children, the youth in this study had made little investment in relation to school, especially curricula which they saw as mostly irrelevant. School work was looked upon as a useless, boring activity that should be avoided if possible. It seems like little at school captured these young men's interest:

I hated having to sit down for so long and to write........ if they made me do something I would turn the tables over and break whatever happened to be in front of me. *IG*

It's not like I was going to get a job in an office so what's the point. *AD*

The fact that school activities were unappealing could have contributed to disruptive behaviour (cf. Cefai and Cooper, 2010). School was a frustrating experience, so much so that many of them simply opted out in favour of roaming the streets. For example, an interviewee claimed that he engaged in bad behaviour in order to be expelled from school:

I used to pick on the other children on purpose so that maybe the teacher would expel me and then I would not have to go to school any more. I hated school. *PP*

It could be these young men, through their disruptive behaviour, were attempting to mask strong feelings of discomfort at being in a situation over which they had no control and in which they were performing inadequately.

I never felt part of them. On the contrary, maybe because I was jealous because I was not part of them, and therefore I would humiliate them I would play the bully. And those kids who did things as they were supposed to be done, maybe because I was jealous, I would bully. *MS*

I was always in trouble, always fighting with the other kids. Sometimes they would be playing football and they would not let me play with them then I would take the ball and not give it back to them. Then I would burst it for them so they would not be able to play. *IG*

The young people felt that school personnel did little to engage them in the academic experiences at school:

And the teachers never bothered with me. They would tell me 'Shut up and be quiet if you don't want to learn' and I would sit in class and do nothing. They did not like me very much because I was always getting into trouble and they would tell me that I would amount to nothing. *RU*

Research needs to examine systemic factors occurring within educational institutions that contribute to lack of attachment and commitment and increased risk of deviance (cf Cooper,2006; te Riele, 2006). One interviewee reflects:

I don't know how to evaluate the situation today – whether I used to hate school cause I didn't want to do anything or whether I didn't want to do anything because of the way school was. *MS*

The same respondent discusses how if teachers pay proper attention to students like him they too can excel.

There was this one teacher, Maths and because he showed interest, because he understood me, he would stay with me in the breaks, with me and my cousins and that year I recall I had gotten 92 in Maths.*MS*

Lack of commitment to school is facilitated by school systemic factors such as irrelevant curriculum and lack of engagement by school personnel (cf.; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). These combined with factors idiosyncratic to individual students, left these adolescents with little stake in conformity. The culture of blame whereby the difficulties the student is experiencing, and possibly creating for others, are considered the responsibility of the student or the student's parents, results in further marginalisation (Patterson et al, 1992). The school becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution. If schools are to make a positive contribution to the development of all students, they need to acknowledge and act on their responsibilities for promoting students' positive engagement with schooling.

Aggressive behaviour

A number of the respondents stated that they had difficulty getting along with other pupils,   often engaged in fights with other children and bullied their peers. One inmate, for example, found it virtually impossible to adapt to the discipline of the school and said 'I was always fighting with the other children and in the end they expelled me'. Another inmate described a rather serious incident:

(W)hen I was at St. Julian's there was this kid and he really used to hassle
me and then I got fed up and stabbed him with a flick knife. I was 14. *KT*

Abusive behaviour was also extended to school personnel:

The teacher was afraid of me and the headmaster especially because I had a
fight with him .... I was twelve at the time……I was always in trouble,
always fighting with the other kids. *IG*

One inmate recalled how an incident at school earned him a year's probation:

And then one time at school there was this kid and I took his tie and wrung
it around his neck. *PC*

Aggressive behaviour can damage a school's climate, adversely affect students'
academic learning and emotional development, and precipitate extreme incidents of
violent behaviour (Hoover, Oliver, and Hazler, 1992). The data suggest, in line with
general strain theory (Agnew, 1992), that individuals who encounter negative social
relations and goal blockage and are deprived of positively valued stimuli like
reinforcement, will experience negative affect like anger resulting in aggression and
consequent delinquent behaviour in and out of the school premises. Anger has a
substantial effect on aggression (Agnew 1992). According to Brezina et al (1996) anger
typically occurs when individuals have attributed blameworthiness to others.

And then in secondary school I fought physically and hit a teacher because
he tried to ridicule me…………..."You don't feel like working! You are
good for nothing'. That's how most of the other teachers I met were. *PC*

Truancy and dropping out

While engaging in deviant activity on the school premises might be used as a
coping mechanism to insulate one from the negative effects of having to be part of a
system in which one is failing, truancy is another way to combat the strain emanating
from the school setting. The streets may be considered to be far more exciting, offering a
better learning experience than school. The links between truancy and delinquency are
well established (see May, 1975; Smith and McVie, 2003). Truancy was very common

among the young men when they were children. Most of the interviewees said that they absconded from school because they thought it was a frustrating, waste of time and there was more fun to be had elsewhere.

I often used to skive off school. ...I was never interested in school, I do not like reading and writing, in fact I do not really know how to read….. All of my friends had motorbikes and we would stay running around with them. I preferred that to school. I never did any homework or stuff like that. School was a complete waste of time. *JV*

My friends and I, we would go and play near the cemetery and stay smoking cigarettes. We used to stay fighting with other boys and stealing pomegranates from the fields, and the farmers used to stay chasing us. It was a lot of fun. It was better than being at school because I never got anything out of school. *RU*

While in most cases the boys tried to hide from their parents the fact that they were not at school, some claimed that their parents were aware of their truancy or encouraged their children to stay behind so that they could give a helping hand.

I never really went to school. I was more interested in working and earning a living. We had no father and so it was important for me to go out to work. …I got a job and went to work and my mother was happy to see me working. *DM*

This alerts one to the importance of considering the complex interrelationships between humans and their social environments. Bronfenbrenner for example envisioned his model of human ecology as a "nested arrangement of concentric structures, each

contained within the next" (1979, p. 22). Each of the concentric structures represents a level of context in which development occurs. There are reciprocal interactions between the levels such as between the child and the microsystems which he inhabits and between the elements inherent in the microsystems itself, such as, between the family and the school. Parents' commitment to school and attitudes towards education are related to their children's behaviour, including both conduct in school and delinquent involvement (Smith, 2006).

The data indicate that truancy might influence the process of becoming delinquent in a variety of ways. Once out on the streets the young men needed to fill their time - delinquent activity provided the much needed excitement.

> I remember playing card games and poker and the older people used to think I was sweet and let me play for them, let me roll the dice when gambling for example. When I was younger and I was skiving school I used to stay gambling on the machines, running around in bars, that's how I spent my day. I used to be with older people and they would tell me 'roll the dice for luck', they would be gambling about 4,000 Maltese lira (about 12,000 US dollars). Then if I rolled a good number and they won they would give me some money. *MS*

Having time on one's hands also creates the need to obtain money in order to have fun. Involvement in conventional activities leaves young people with little time to engage in deviant ones (Hirshi, 1969)

In Malta a young person must by law attend school until the age of 16, unless special permission is given to him by the education authority. Fifteen of the young men in the study mentioned that apart from truanting regularly, they stopped going to school completely much before the age of 16, around the time when they should have been in Form 2 or 3 which means when they were about 13 years of age. Some of these did so with parental knowledge and in order to work.

How old were you when you stopped going to school?

I was 13. When I first stopped going to school my father did not know. I would wait at the post office for the letters from the school to arrive and then I would tear them up and throw them away. *RS*

I started working when I was about 12 or younger. I did not use to go to school. ….. I always used to go and help my father out in the bakery even when I was younger. *OC*

The end result of school related problems for many students is dropping out. Dropouts are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour throughout early adulthood (Thornberry and Krohn, 2003). Young people embark on journeys into adulthood which journeys involve a wide variety of routes, many of which appear to have uncertain outcomes. Youth transitions are becoming increasingly prolonged due to restructuring of the labour market and need for specialised workers, increasing the time when youth are dependent (Bradford and Clark, 2011). Lack of educational attainment means that some young people experience fractured transitions that do not allow them to obtain reliable work in the formal labour market (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). Unemployment has also been identified as a risk factor for criminality (Furlong et al, 2003).

Labelling and the School

The school has been viewed as contributing to a variety of adolescent careers, such as 'academic', 'clinical' or 'delinquent' or 'criminal' (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Patterson et al, 1992). Through processes of interaction some adolescents come to be defined by the school as social types, namely deviants, problem children or potential delinquents.

Five of the young men in the present study were seen to have engaged in behaviour that was regarded as problematic to the extent that they were placed in Special Schools[ii]. Placement in such a school may have significant effects on identity and contribute to escalation of delinquent activity. Thus the following inmate, at the age of 14, came to define himself as a problem child:

> I used to go to zeta Primary but then they sent me to beta and then to delta and then to alpha; I was always changing school because I used to get expelled. They finally sent me to the Special School….. I was 14. In this school at beta[iii], the kids were all like me. Kids that used to give trouble and so the teachers could not handle them. But there were some kids that were worse then me….kids who had been in trouble with the police and who used to steal and things. *KT*

Attaching a deviant or stigmatic label to a child stimulates attempts to treat or control a supposed deviant condition of the child, which, in turn, can have the paradoxical and pejorative effect of worsening or creating this very condition. While Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1967) found the self-fulfilling prophecy to operate in a positive direction, it alerted educators to the realization that the prophecy-effect could work in an opposite or negative way (cf Hargreaves, 1967). It is argued that societal reaction has the unanticipated consequence of prompting actors to engage in deviant careers. It matters little whether the label criminalizes or medicalizes or whether it is well intentioned or otherwise. Forces are set into place to normalize the young person.

> ....first of all I was never in a proper school, I was always in a special school, a school for naughty children and I never had any decent friends from the start...... they sent me to St.XXX, that school for naughty children. And there I became even worse. *OA*

While only a small minority were sent to special schools, many reported experiencing labelling within the regular school setting concurring with the findings of Cefai and Cooper (2010). One inmate felt that at a young age he was given the message that he was hopeless: 'They realised that I was hopeless - they turned their backs on me'.

Another recurring theme was that the young men were made to feel that they were a problem in the classroom.

 And the teachers never bothered with me. They would tell me 'Shut up and be quiet if you don't want to learn' and I would sit in class and do nothing. They did not like me very much because I was always getting into trouble and they would tell me that I would amount to nothing. *RU*

I was a problem for them and I am sure they were happy when I no longer went to school. *STC*

The interviewees reported being singled out for special attention which further enhanced the dislike that they already had for a school system that was not meeting their needs. An emergent theme in the data was that disenchantment with the school resulted in further disruptive behaviour and a vicious circle was set in motion. The teachers, basing their opinions on past contact with the student may conclude that he is not interested in schoolwork. The message that the young men received seems to have been that they were more trouble than they were worth. At the time, this may have affected the way they felt about themselves.   Self imputations of deviancy have their sources in typically recurring situations. If teachers, along with other significant others, define the young person as a problem, this may come to be included in their self definitions which in turn affect behaviour. Labelling theory emphasizes identity transformation, or, as Berger and Luckman (1966; cf. Travisano, 1970) have termed it, "alternation." Labelling an actor as deviant (e. g., 'emotionally disturbed" or "conduct disordered") imputes a deviant social identity colouring all of the actor's actions.

No, they (the teachers) never bothered with me. They always sent me out of class. They felt it was better that I wasn't there and it was cool for me because I preferred to be out of class. I was a real troublemaker at school and the teachers couldn't handle me. *AC*

The imputation of delinquent status by teachers to pupils in the school may be critically influenced by information brought to bear by the court, the police, social workers or local residents.

.... but then they found out when I was taken to court because the welfare officer was informed and then they used to call me 'the possessed one' (l-imxajtan)......... *MS*

Information from the student's previous schools or other agencies, such as social work agencies, may contribute to early categorising of students and to the lowering of teachers' expectations. The potential labelling problem in schools therefore deserves special attention.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper shows how school careers have important implications for the development of delinquency and are an important contingency in relation to early onset of delinquency. Other contingencies such as the role of the criminal justice system, social cognition and lifestyles also impact on the career (Clark 2006, 2011a, 2011b). Most of the participants reported negative school experiences and adjustment, engaged in truancy and experienced labelling within the school context. Although not conclusive, the data from this study imply that dissatisfaction with the educational experience may set the stage for more serious delinquency in and out of school. The perception of their education as irrelevant to their future lives contributes to alienation from the educational experience. The process of social typing and stigmatisation taking place in the informal setting of the classroom may have had important implications for the development of the identity. Combined with other contingencies, the school may provide the impetus for starting a delinquent career (cf Patterson et al, 1992, Hawkins et al, 2003).

This paper underscores the value of addressing problematic behaviour in schools by questioning not only how students' idiosyncratic individual characteristics and backgrounds contribute to such behaviour but also considering what school practices exacerbate young people's difficulties in adjustment. This serves not only to create a better learning environment—but also to prevent later delinquency (Smith 2006). We need to look at the processes by which those who are at risk of becoming delinquent actually do become so by emphasizing the important moments that are significant to their developing self. This paper has shed some light on the question of which school processes contribute to delinquency and how they operate.

Policy and service development

Educational and school policies and practices need to be developed with such knowledge in mind and should address specific priority areas, namely improving attendance and retention rates, improving academic performance, and ensuring a healthy, inclusive school climate that is not stigmatizing to some students. Any interventions aimed at improving school attendance should address the various variables found to be associated with low attendance and should strive for a balance between casework with individual pupils and their families and working on improving school processes. In order to assist those who are experiencing low performance, study-support could be introduced within the school time-table and one-to-one support by specialized school personnel and possibly older, responsible students who act as mentors. Planned reintegration should follow a significant period of absence. The ultimate aim of programmes addressing the specific difficulties of students who are performing badly should always be the re-integration of these students within the mainstream. Policy should attempt to improve the school ethos through fostering democratic leadership in schools. The value of various vocational life paths should be encouraged in order to affirm a range of student aspirations as opposed to the purely academic. Educational institutions in Malta need to continue fostering a learning culture that recognises that children learn differently. The curriculum needs to be appropriate to the needs and interests of all students and emphasis on technical or vocational curriculum should run alongside the academically focused national curriculum. Schools should provide opportunities for success in order to develop self efficacy. Braithwaite (1975, p.110) captured this idea when he said: "if the school is

the mouse race that prepares us for the rat race, then a solution to the social pathology of the rat race may lie within the school". Building positive relationships between staff and students should become a key priority for schools. School personnel may benefit from continuing professional development on adolescent development and positive behaviour management techniques as well as with dealing with aggressive behaviours.

It is not simply a matter of theoretical equity of access, but practical opportunities to participate in all the school has to offer, including the provision of support to do so when necessary. Reducing the risk of educational failure for students and indirectly reducing the risks for delinquency, requires that educators at all levels must become proactive in rooting out subtle forms of differential treatment that contribute to the delinquency phenomenon.

Further research

The conclusions emerging from this study need to be considered in the light of the study's limitations. The qualitative nature of the research project does not allow one to make any conclusive statements about the direct impact of schooling on delinquent involvement. Perhaps the greatest limitation of the study is that two decades at least have passed since the young men participating in the research had been at school and much has changed in educational processes in Malta since that time. More up to date research on this topic is needed. The narrative methodology adopted only presents the perspective of the young men concerned and neglects the perspectives of school personnel. Further research, might attempt to understand the perspectives of teachers and other school personnel in dealing with challenging young people within educational institutions. Researchers need to investigate structural and programmatic barriers to effective educational experiences, such as inflexible school structures and schedules and narrowness of curriculum and teaching practices that allow many students to become disconnected from the basic instructional activities of the school. A more transdisciplinary research agenda including academics from different disciplines most notably developmental psychologists, sociologists of education and education specialists would contribute to exchanging ideas on how to improve the wellbeing of children in the mainstream as well as those who are experiencing marginalisation. More research is

required to understand the impact of interventions for those who are having difficulties while recognizing the complexity of understanding how attachment to and performance in school are related to delinquency. In recognizing that some intervention programs have harmful effects, the authors emphasise the importance of examining the preconceptions underlying intervention strategies.

Final Note

Open acceptance that a change is in order is a necessary prerequisite for initiating the other changes that will be necessary to establish a more broadly successful environment for *all* students.

Endnotes

[i] Fictitious names
[ii] These are still in existence today although they may have changes their structure
[iii] Fictitious names

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