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FUTURE ORIENTATION OF DROPOUT YOUTH IN THE CONTEXT OF FUTURE STUDIES AND EDUCATION

Neta ARKIN¹, Stefan COJOCARU²

Abstract

This article presents findings that emerged from a study that asked how adolescents who dropped out of schools perceived their future and whether they had an orientation toward their own future. Although numerous studies on adolescents' future orientation have been carried out in Israel, none of them focused on dropout youth. The research was conducted within the setting of the Youth Advancement Units, official bodies, part of the ministry of Education that care for youth at risk, aged 14–18 who dropped out of school or are on the verge of doing so. To conduct the study, qualitative research using grounded-theory methodology was chosen. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with sixteen youths at risk who dropped out of school were employed.

Keywords: future orientation, school dropouts, youth advancement units, qualitative research, grounded theory.

Introduction

Professionals who work with dropout youth claim that such adolescents are typified by low self-image and weak self-efficacy, scanty ability to think about the future, and difficulty in generating dreams and aspirations about the future. To determine whether these allegations are justified, particularly in view of the changes in the characteristics of dropout youth in recent years, there was a need for research in which these youth would be asked, directly, how they perceive their future within the context of different areas of life. This study focuses on the future orientation of dropout youth who receive educational-therapeutic services from the Youth Advancement Units.

The Youth Advancement Units (YAU) take care of youth aged 14–18 who dropped out of school or are on the verge of doing so. In Israel, there are 170 such

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units that serve all types of populations and sectors, dealing with approximately 15,000 youths, of whom about 6,000 are dropouts. The clients of the units receive a basket of services that includes personal or group therapy and consultation, high-school equivalency, occupational skills, programs to prevent at-risk behavior, and preparation for military service (that is mandatory in Israel), and the employment world (Ministry of Education, 2019). Main part of the activities at the YAU are focuses on the future of those youngsters. Youth dropouts, having experienced academic failures that led to their dropping out from school, have difficulty conceiving and envisioning their futures as well as to select occupational aspiration. Future orientation is a part of the development of personality and personal identity and an important component of adolescence (Seginer, 2009). The inability to generate such an orientation, coupled with failure to complete formal education, positions dropout youth as a population that lacks the capabilities that are needed for a good integration into different spheres of life.

Literature Review

Future Orientation

The idea of envisioning the future has been defined in various terms in the literature, including “future vision”, “future imagery”, and “future orientation”, though the usage of these terms remains ambiguous (Pasig, 2003). Future orientation is a map that a person creates for himself and that helps him or her to make plans, examine future options, and make decisions regarding the future. The developmental value of future orientation is not in predicting the future but in engaging with it, in constructing a life course (Seginer, 2001). Future orientation includes plans, aspirations, hopes, expectations and fears (Cinnamon & Rich, 2014; Seginer & Halabi, 1991) and focuses on several areas including studies, occupation, family, army service, and society in the broad sense (Seginer, 1995), and it is affected by various factors including the environment, family, culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and personal identity (Seginer, 2001). In this view, future orientation is the sum of images that people create regarding their future lives, similar to an autobiography. Additionally, these images tell the life story of people according to what is subjectively important to them. It creates a picture of the future and model of the life expected from people; it establishes the foundation for determining goals and objectives, for identifying and discovering options, for constructing plans and acting to realize them, for creating a commitment to the planned life course. Thinking about the future creates a process of change in the present, regardless of whether such thinking is personal or social, realistic, idealistic or fantastical (Seginer, 2003) and based on the human ability to think about the future, envision it, and imbue it with personal and operative significance. It is related to the cognitive ability of abstract thinking, expressed in imagining the future dream and encompasses two components of future life: (1) a motivational component that includes measuring the value of the future life sphere, creating relevant goals for this life sphere, expectations for

realizing these goals while evaluating the subjective probability of their realization, and positive emotional reference to this life sphere and its goals; (2) a cognitive component that refers to the association accompanying the future sphere of interest and the knowledge on which these expectations are founded. In order to define realistic expectations and goals, these expectations must be compared to current knowledge of the future (Nurmi, 1991). Future orientation can be divided into two main categories: (1) the prospective life, which is the possible future life course describing definitive things such as studies, work, family, leisure; and (2) existence which refers to the conception of self, spiritual welfare, self-realization, and undefined emotions and areas, manifested in the form of “I will be happy when...” (Seginer, 2003).

Future Orientation in Adolescence

Erikson (1968) pointed out that future orientation is deeply rooted in man’s psychological thinking and is the motivational force in the construction of images of the future and their development throughout the years. The tendency to future orientation is inborn and expressed from childhood. But its form, content, and role change with age. Seginer (2009) states that in adolescence, future orientation is manifested more clearly and directly and assumes greater importance as it is a developmental mechanism in this age of transition to adulthood. Adolescents cope with the normative developmental tasks of their age, defined by their parents, teachers or peer group. Most of these tasks are directed to future outcomes, and thus there is an emphasis on creating a future orientation among adolescents, which is an important part of their still-forming personal identity (Nurmi, 1991).

Future orientation and youth at risk

Youths from distressed families who experience violence, neglect, delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual or emotional abuse, or youths who were forced by circumstances to fulfill parental roles, due to various reasons such as parental illness or immigrant parents that have lost their authority-such youths lack faith in themselves, lack the ability to conceive the future and orient themselves toward it. When life is constantly unstable, youths limit their thoughts of the future. The lack of control over their family situation and lives creates uncertainty and a lack of faith in the future, accompanied by anxiety and pessimism. The future is not viewed as a safe place from a psychological-developmental point of view, and the conception of time is focused on daily survival. This might lead to impulsive, risky behaviors that heighten the lack of confidence in the future and lower awareness of the implications of these behaviors, creating a vicious circle (Hatala *et al.*, 2017).

In adolescence, there is a natural process of distancing from the parents and the family cell, alongside getting closer to the peer group. This often entails peer pressure to engage in risky behavior, such as drug and alcohol abuse, joining criminal gangs, or risky sexual behavior. Part of the ability to withstand peer pressure is the ability to delay gratification and develop thinking about the future that identifies the effect of risky behavior in the present on one’s future life. When the future is viewed as threatening, unsafe and uncertain, the value of negative

behavior in the present will be higher and provide a higher level of satisfaction and monetary pleasure (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013). Thus, future orientation acts as a protective and preventive factor for risk behaviors, especially in an environment that encourages such behaviors. A positive future orientation among at-risk youths is evidence of their resilience in coping with risk situations and stress, of an internal locus of control, and emotional-social adaptive ability (McCabe & Barnett, 2000). Positive thoughts about the future enable at-risk youths to focus on planning the future, finding meaning in such plans, and directing their activities to achieving them, thereby creating order out of the chaos in their lives (Raffaelli & Koller, 2005). Hence the significance of this study.

Future Orientation and School

Future orientation is developed in various institutional and cultural contexts and in socialization processes that determine society's normative expectations regarding aspirations and plans for the future. One of these socialization institutions is the school. Children and adolescents spend numerous hours a day in school which has great influence on their intellectual, personal, and social development. School climate has a large effect on the sense of security and welfare of the students. When the school creates an inclusive and nurturing learning environment, personal relationships between teachers and students, and a sense of belonging to the school, then the climate is a solid foundation for high achievements and future orientation. A school climate that encourages students to look at the future and aspire to greatness can inspire high achievements. Contrastively, large public schools located in weak communities, lacking man power and support for the teaching staff, with a high level of alienation between teachers and students usually lead to limited investment and nurturing of students, a low level of support for weak students, a limited range of opportunities, experiences and enrichment programs, and numerous behavior problems. In such schools, students will have a low level of academic achievement and future orientation (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013). Students who fail in school assignments and who have low academic achievement might experience repeated failure and cannot see themselves overcoming academic difficulties, also have difficulty seeing themselves finishing high school and acquiring a higher education, which affects their decision to dropout (Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Youth At-Risk and Dropping Out

Some argue that all adolescents are on a continuum of risk. The dramatic changes occurring in this era, along with the complex task of forming a self-identity and social pressures, often create among adolescents a sense that they lack control of their situation, which arouses anxiety, depression, helplessness, and distress. These situations can arouse a desire for a mental escape through abusive substances, such as alcohol and drugs, which may cause violent, aggressive behaviors, externalized sexual behavior, eating disorders, or self-harm (Kaim & Romi, 2014). Nonetheless, one must distinguish between risks that are faced by all youths and youths at risk. The term "youths at risk" refers to the population of youths that is at a physical, psychological, or spiritual risk (Lahav, 2000).

Dropout does not occur in a single day and is a long-drawn process and thus can be evaluated using the terms “push” or “pull”. Student “pushed out” from school when negative situations occur in the school environment that eventually lead to dropping out. These include disciplinary problems, behavior problems, violation of boundaries and school rules, lack of mutual trust. Student “pulls out” from school when there are external reasons such as worries about supporting the family, illness of one of the parents or of the student himself, early marriage or pregnancy (Doll *et al.*, 2013).

Methodology

Thus, this research addressed the following aim: To identify dropout youths’ individual perceptions of their future in the context of future studies and education.

Research questions

How do adolescents who dropped out of school perceive their future? Do adolescents who dropped out of school have an orientation toward their own future in the context of future studies and education?

Qualitative research

Due to the unique context of the research population and the frame of the study, i.e., dropout youth treated by Youth Advancement Units, the case-study (Yin, 2011) approach was chosen as the basis of the research, and the research practice chosen was grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2008).

Procedure

The participants were selected out of the basis of specific criteria that the researcher provided, in accordance with progress in the research and the need for theoretical sampling of various kinds. Before the interviews, the participants’ parents were asked to sign their consent. Interviews were conducted with sixteen adolescents, ten boys and six girls, the average interview time was 40 minutes. The interview was conducted in a separate, closed room in order to maintain absolute privacy and were recorded and transcribed. At the beginning of each interview, provided a detailed explanation of the sequence and objectives of the study were provided, and an explanation of the obligation of confidentiality with regard to the respondents’ identifying details. Consent to record the interviews was obtained. Each interview began with a short, get acquainted conversation intended to “break the ice” and allow more ease and security in the interview.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using grounded theory principles. Hence, the data were subjected to a coding process. Initially, the first cluster of interviews (N=2) was analyzed. After the text was read several times, initial categories that formed the basis for the next cluster of interviews (N=2) were identified and coded. Analysis of the two additional interviews yielded further categories. Accordingly, an additional coding of the interviews from the first cluster and from the second cluster took place, and so on for all the clusters.

Findings

This article focuses on the themes and categories that emerged from the interviews, relating mainly to the subjective experiences of youth during their time at school and after dropping out of it and to the relationship between past learning experiences and future orientation.

Category 1: Reasons for dropping out as perceived by the youth themselves

Youth at risk have various reasons for dropping out. The respondents' own voices and the subjective experiences of their dropping out yielded a somewhat different understanding.

Reasons focusing on learning difficulties. A number of respondents described the reasons for dropping out of school due to their low academic ability. One female age 17, described her frustration and said: "I don't understand a thing. I repeat to myself what [the teacher] tells me and afterwards I don't remember". Another male interviewee, age 16, described his difficulty in attending a class that has many students: "I didn't get along in class, when I study with lots of students it's harder, and when there's personal attention, I do better".

Reasons focusing on behavioral problems. Respondents described their various behavioral problems that affected their dropping out of school. One male interviewee, age 17, noted:

"In grade school I wasn't the easiest kid around. I'd stir up lots of trouble and in high school, when I came to get enrolled, they didn't enroll me " Another female, age 18 said: "Again, I the rude type. If I'm the rude type, they write me off. I'm not smart. I can't learn. I can't do a thing".

And other one, age 17 described his behavior at school:

"I got into fights They told me 'You don't fit in here', We'd throw toilet paper at the teachers ".

Reasons related to social problems. Respondents painfully describe the social problems that they had. One teenager, age 17 noted:

“I had a problem ... first of all, of violence, I’d fight with almost everyone and I couldn’t sit still in class, copy from the board, do the homework. I’d bother the teachers and they’d kick me out and I pretty much didn’t learn a thing”. Other, age 17, said: “At first, it was a social thing that I didn’t fit in well They picked on me so much that finally I couldn’t take it anymore and I dropped out “.

Reasons related to personal, psychological, or health problems. According to the data analysis, varieties of personal components have an impact on youth dropout. An example of this can be seen in the words of one male interviewee, age 14:

“Mostly, because I didn’t go to school ... Then they defined me as a “youth at risk.” I couldn’t get up in the morning, I didn’t sleep well, I had no reason to get up ... I didn’t feel well, at school “.

Reasons related to family problems. The family as a primary source of the adolescent’s safety and stability. When there is an appeal in the family’s condition, this directly affects learning inquiries and is one of the key factors of dropout. One interviewee, age 17, who came from divorced family linked his family situation to the reasons why he dropped out:

“My learning issues were more emotional than mental. Up to fourth grade I was a really good student, but after my parents got divorced, emotional problems began a little and it got in the way of my studies”.

Category 2: Relationship with school

The respondents’ reasons for dropping out tie into their relationship with the school and its effects on their scholastic experience. One female respondent, age 18, explains with special vehemence that she had not dropped out at her own initiative; instead, the school expelled her: *“I didn’t leave; they threw me out!!! “* Another male respondent, age 17, mentions the poor treatment he received from the teachers:

“They’re not respectful. They yell at you all the time. You’re not doing anything special, and they just always shout at you. I couldn’t take it.”

The respondents have hard feelings about their relations with school: anger, frustration, being misunderstood, and being treated with contempt.

Category 3: Scholastic self-perception and occupational aspirations

Negative experiences at school and subjective reasons for dropping out, as exemplified in the previous categories, may give the respondents a self-perception about their future academic abilities. Negative self-perception creates a reduction in their aspirations. We can see an example of this through the dialogue with one of the respondents, a 16 year old male adolescent:

Q. So let's talk a little about the future. Okay? Imagine yourself for a moment five years or ten years from now, it doesn't matter which. What would you like to be doing then?

A. What would I like to do or what would I do? There's a difference.

Q. Why?

A. Because, you know, you have to invest, you have to pass all the matriculation exams, and then you have to invest in studies afterward, at the university.

Q. And you don't see yourself there?

A. No, it's not that I don't see myself there. It's that you have to work to get to those places.

Q. Do you think that you're having dropped out of school stands in your way, or that your studying here holds you back from attaining this aspiration?

A. Of course. What do you mean? Why wouldn't it hold me back?

Q. I don't know; explain it.

A. Sure, yeah, it holds me back. Did you ever see a student at Youth Advancement who went into cyber? Or who went, I don't know, something like that, whatever, at a top level?

Category 4: Post-secondary studies as part of the future orientation

Continuing education, academic study, or vocational training after high school and military service is a highly meaningful stage of future thinking among adolescents and young adults in Israel. For youth who have dropped out of the formal education system and are currently having difficulty completing their high school, thoughts about future studies can be complex and incomprehensible, as respondents state. Some of them see vocational training in their future. Interviewee female, age 16, wants to learn to be a makeup artist:

"It's what I told you. I'm also almost done with my studies and I want to do matriculation, twelve years of school, and go right on to study cosmetics, but I won't be able to do it while I'm in the army",

or interviewee male, age 17, sees himself studying music and sound:

"So, after I learn the guitar I want to learn the bass and after that ... the violin, stuff like that....It's not a degree or anything. There are no requirements".

Some respondents see themselves going to university. Interviewee female, age 17, for example, spoke firmly and vehemently about her wish to take higher studies that relate to her occupational aspiration:

"In principle, the reason that I'm taking lots of [matriculation] subjects, and lots of units in each subject, is because I want to go to medical school. It has to do with my personal history after undergoing several head surgery that forced me to drop out of school".

Another interviewee male, age 17, drew a connection between studies and obtaining certifications as a key to life:

“In this world, you need certificates. It doesn't matter if you're really smart. Let's say you need matriculation, you need a matriculation certificate, it doesn't matter whether you're smart, you can do matriculation. You need a diploma. So, like, I'll have it, it's like, let's say, a set of keys that I'll have that will open some doors”.

And interviewee male, age 16, did not envisage himself taking any form of vocational or academic training; his future learning would be autodidactic, the product of experience:

“Studies? I don't see any reason to continue for so long, I think I build up knowledge not necessarily by studying.... But, let's say, I work as an auto mechanic so then I work at home. So, we have a tractor and a jeep and at the end of the week I replaced a transmission.... My father teaches me, so the knowledge that I build up is what I know will help me in the future. Because I've already been working at the garage for a while. So, I know for sure that it'll help me in the future”.

Most respondents attributed much importance to continuing studies and referred to them extensively. Some saw themselves going on to higher education studies, others envisaged vocational training, and yet others saw no formal study in their future.

Discussion

The analysis of the data shows that all the respondents, with one exception, have a future orientation. This finding is consonant with theories that attribute much importance to future orientation in adolescence and claim that thinking about the future becomes more focused, concrete, and meaningful at this age because it is a developmental mechanism for the adolescent in her or his transition into adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Seginer, 2009). Special emphasis was given by respondents to the significance of future studies when most respondents treated this theme with great importance and gave it extensive attention. The respondents did not see themselves going on to academic studies but did imagine themselves as learning a profession in some other way-through formal vocational training, autodidactic study via online courses, or learning from experience by actually practicing the occupation. The respondents did not see higher education studies in their future because the learning experiences of dropout youth are traumatic to begin with and are accompanied by a grim sense of failure and negative self-perception as to their academic capabilities. These adverse experiences, expressed vehemently in the interviews, attest to the frustration and pain that the dropout experience inflicts on those who undergo it. In addition, many respondents reported having learning difficulties and/or attention and concentration deficit issues that render them unable to study in a regular class. All these circumstances lead to distrust in their ability to advance to higher academic studies. Therefore, if they choose to

study, the respondents revise their preference in favor of short-term courses that are focused and tailored to their occupational preferences.

This finding is consonant with theories that speak about adolescents who have been evaluated with learning disorders, learning difficulties, and poor achievement. Young people who drop out of school cannot imagine surmounting their academic hardships and acquiring higher education (Worrell & Hale, 2001). Additionally, they tend to choose less-prestigious occupations that do not entail high-level learning skills, such as technical or practical professions (Rojewski, 1999; Kortering et al., 2010). The wish to learn in some other way, e.g., by means of intensive or online courses, corresponds to the theory that education programs for dropout youth should be tailored to their particular needs and should stress, among other things, experiential, experimental, and non-frontal study (Himi, 2014). It also accords with theories that relate to the new twenty-first-century form of teaching known as “future-oriented pedagogy.” This model assumes that the world of education is influenced by the dramatic changes that are taking place in this century and, by implication, needs to change and adapt to these changes and respond to the foreseen challenges. Accordingly, future-oriented pedagogy bases itself on optimal use of ICT, learning from every source and at all times, accessing diverse sources of validated information, combining new media with experimental and creative learning, developing thinking skills and abilities, and embracing flexibility in teaching methods (Ministry of Education, 2019). Despite all their academic hardships, the respondents realized that study is an important sphere that may influence their future. This finding is important because it reveals the respondents’ motivation to learn, a motivation that they often lack and that results in frequent absences from the program of studies at the Youth Advancement Unit, failure to persevere, and inability to qualify for meaningful formal diplomas. Contrastingly, the respondents who did want to go on to higher studies had strong academic abilities and dropped out for reasons other than learning disorders. Accordingly, their sense of efficacy as students was higher and more strongly oriented toward advanced studies in the future.

To appreciate the connection between school and the future orientation of dropout youth, one must first understand the respondents’ experiences of dropping out and how they interrelated with their schools before doing so. In this study, the respondents were well able to explain the emotional ramifications of dropping out of school from their subjective perspective. Their explanations included severe learning problems and disorders, inability to adapt to the setting, behavioral problems including violence and class disruption, social rejection, lack of belonging to the peer group, and problems associated with home and family. These precipitants correspond to studies that sort dropping out into four main categories: problems related to the youngster’s personality, behavior, and academic abilities and those associated with residential environment and neighborhood (Lahav, 2013; Vininger, 2014). Formal explanations aside, however, the analysis of our data shows that the respondents found these dropout experiences difficult, traumatic, agonizing, frustrating, and onerous. They were also constitutive events in their lives. Rather clearly, one may understand why the respondents mentioned these emotions as having “accompanied” them when they quit school. Their act symbolizes their enormous sense of failure and of falling short of society’s conditions. If school is a

socialization agent that symbolizes normality, dropping out is its antithesis. Dropout youth are perceived as aberrant and marginal carriers of academic, emotional, social, and functional problems. The theoretical definitions of dropout youth, as set down by professionals and academics, describe youngsters who fail to navigate the education system, who typically have learning disorders, and who engage in risky behaviors such as drug use and trafficking or consumption of alcohol, and indulge in violent or criminal conduct (Romi, 2007; Lahav, 2000; Kaim & Romi, 2014). For them, the pain expresses the realization and internalization that at the moment of their dropping out, society has labeled them and doomed them to life on its margins. Studies show how professionals and policymakers cause pejorative stereotypes about dropout youth (mainly concerning delinquency and joblessness) to become entrenched (De Witte et al., 2013). By the same token, one may see how the respondents themselves have internalized these definitions and noted their problematic behavior in school. In contrast, however, they expressed resentment of the definitions and even noted that from the moment the definitions clung to them, they reconciled their behavior with that expected of at-risk dropout youth. In view of the foregoing, we can understand that, for the respondents, the attitude of their erstwhile school as well as the experience of dropping out-their transformation from being educated to being dropouts-has broader dimensions of personal, affective, and social influence. This effect ties into future orientation. The data show how the young people ascribed a future effect to their having dropped out. They expressed this by revealing the fear that they will never “amount to anything,” showing intensive concern about life going forward, or expressing lack of control over the present and, in turn, the future as well. They articulated this by contemplating their future nebulously or through highly structured and stringent plans for life. One may explain this by understanding the process the young people undergo when they drop out. Dropping out, as a constitutive event in their lives, affects their self-confidence and self-image above all. In the resulting situation, they oscillate between two extremes. The first is a stinging experience of failure, loss of self-confidence, formation of negative opinions of self, and depreciation of their abilities, self-efficacy, and aspirations. The second is a sense of omnipotence, the ability to do “anything,” live without restrictions, and attain anything. They see the act of quitting school as something that is good for them, through which they can attain other goals in life such as making money, having a good time, and living without obligations, even if it is not all certain that these feelings correspond to their actual abilities.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of dropping out of school, prevents dropout youth the possibility of undergoing a deep and sincere process of developing a future orientation and constructing occupational aspirations. The inability to develop a future orientation defeats the adolescent’s main task, forming personal identity. The absence of a future orientation impairs the identity-formation task, possibly dooming the adolescent to unsound development that may even lead to personality disorders and criminal or antisocial behavior. Additionally, dropping out of school

and prior conflicts with teaching faculty may create feelings of suspicion and mistrust of the adult world in adolescents, resulting in lack of counseling, guidance, support, sense of confidence, and so on. Schools have an inescapable role to play in developing and promoting a positive view of the future for their students in regard to various fields of life, foremost preparation for the world of work, career development, and choice of occupational aspiration. Dropout youth may find themselves excluded from the labor market, trapped in unrewarding and jobs that offer no benefits and limited possibilities of development and advancement, limited in their structure of occupational opportunities, or liable to unemployment and the need to receive government welfare.

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