

# SCHOOL SUCCESS STORIES OF YOUNG MEN AT RISK<sup>1</sup>

DIEGO MARTÍN ALONSO  
UNIVERSIDAD DE MÁLAGA

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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS, OBJECTIVES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper arises from the concern about school inequality. **This is a topic that uses to concern European organizations.** Education is one of the five key goals of the “European Strategy 2020” to achieve economic growth, to combat social inequality and build a socially and economically strong Europe. **This concern is also shared by international organisations such as the OECD, the World Bank and the UNESCO** which, together with the European Union have become political agents that exercise their influence on national policies.

The school system deals with all students in the same way, regardless of the fact that everyone has different needs or come from different environments. This makes social mobility difficult for children at risk: it is more difficult for them to obtain a high qualification and, thus, it is unlikely to have a job with a better salary and a better social status (Perrenoud, 1990).

In this context, what does school success mean? This concept is complex and it is used in many different ways in scientific literature. For example, the European Council (2006) argues that school success can be understood in terms of reduction of school dropout and continuity in higher education. In this paper I take school success as a training process in which students establish a positive relationship with the school and, at the same time, achieve what is expected from them (mainly qualifications and attitudes).

On the other hand, the concept *children at risk* is also used in many different ways. According to Perrenoud (1990), Abajo (2004) and Fernández-Enguita (2012) the concept is related with the possibilities that students have to access to culture, knowledge and school success. In other words, in a risky situation there isn't any economic support and the cultural level is low (parents' expectations about education are poor, there aren't books or computer at home, parents have low job category, etc.)

Most of these international organizations argue that children and adolescents at risk don't use to success at school. Nevertheless, there are some few situations in what they achieve school success, in spite of the difficulties. My intention is to identify which conditions favour these stories, keeping in mind that this will allow a more equal education. In other words, I attempt to know what teenagers at risk need to success at school. From this point

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of view arise the proposal and the main research question of the paper: **What are the pedagogic factors that favour school success of students at risk.** From this proposal derive the three focal points of the research:

- **Student's relationship with knowledge:** How is the relationship of successful students at risk with school knowledge? How does this link help to students to get on well out of school?

- **Student-Teacher relationship:** How are student-teacher relationships that have allowed for stories of school success? How are teachers that students recognise as relevant in their successful stories?

- **Student's relationship with the peer group:** How are successful students' relationships with their colleagues? Can teachers influence these relationships? How important is the environment created at school?

On the other hand, it is important to highlight gender differences in life stories. It is even more important in successful school stories because family and school have different expectations and relationships with men and women (Sierra, 2013). Some papers, such as Blanco (2012) and European Council (2006), point out that young men have higher levels of school dropout. For this reason I have focused the research on male stories.

In short, I attempt to go deep in successful school stories of students at risk. This knowledge expects helping to orientate teacher performance as well as educative national and international policies (such as the mentioned earlier: "European Strategy 2020"). The main limitation of the research is temporal, thus the aspiration is (besides provide knowledge about equality at school) to create new questions for new future researches.

#### METHODOLOGY

Although educative policies condition how school works, teachers determine ultimately the educative relationship and the consequences that it has for students (Molina, Blanco y García, 2013). In this paper I get away from general and global models about inequality and school success, considering that people experiences and their interpretations construct such models.

Thus, I try to go deep in successful school stories, what implies that students must narrate their story from their own experience. For this reason I outline the paper from a phenomenological (Van Manen, 2003) and narrative (Clandinin, 2013) point of view: the paper searches for the meaning of the experience of teenagers at risk with school success.

As a researcher, I don't try to look for the truth of global theories or models, but my concern is on understand how students live their lives in a particular cultural framework, how they make sense of it and, in the end, how they experience it.

Interviewees have been selected using selection criteria which were of interest to the research. In particular, I was searching for young men at risk with school success (such

as it was pointed out in the previous section). Selected boys were studying in a High School in Málaga city (Spain).

Specifically, I have interviewed two young men and the main data collection procedure has been the interview. All interviews were in April and May 2014, and they took place at High School because students felt more comfortable in this space. As Van Manen (2003) suggests I haven't orientated the interviews to create a biography, but to get close to boys' experience and construct their story just as they felt it.

On the other hand, data analysis was done following Sierra's procedure (Sierra, 2013), where three moments can be differentiated:

- Theme selection: identification of topics and organization of biographic information.
- Making the stories of experience: selected topics allowed me to make the stories of experience and discover new meanings from them.
- Findings and theorization: new stories of experiences were conceptualized, what led to new ideas and theories.

#### RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

What are the pedagogic factors that favour school success? To answer the research question I use the two young men's stories (linked with scientific literature). Three factors must be pointed out:

- **Positive self-concept:** It is important to develop a responsible attitude with a positive self-concept. Both stories show how boys feel themselves responsible and with high school abilities. That is, the desire to know and grow up arises from the experiences that construct our self-concept.
- **Student-Knowledge relationship:** It is decisive to make sense to knowledge and school work. Having a vital project make easier this relationship with knowledge and encourage commitment and other necessary attitudes for school success. What knowledge and curriculum policies are necessary? From the stories of the paper it is fathom that the needed curriculum must allow students to link knowledge with their own experience.
- **Positive relationships with teachers and peer group:** what young men describe as essential for school success is to personalise educative relationships and give more importance to the relationships than to the subject.

In conclusion, these two young men's stories give some clues about which factors favour school success: commitment, responsibility, positive self-concept, personal teacher-student relationship and making sense of the school work and knowledge. Just as it was suggested, the research also brings several questions and topics for new studies: How can teachers favour a positive self-concept? How can teachers personalise educative relationship with all obstacles and problems they have at school? What is the role of

teachers in peer group relationships? How can be improved student-knowledge relationship?

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