Students' Alienation from Learning Activity: Some Insights from High-School Seniors' Study in Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim of this research is to define the causes of student alienation from learning in the high-school seniors (aged 18-19) population (n=227) of three randomly chosen Lithuanian high schools.

Methods. In this analysis, we use a mixed-method approach. In the first research phase, we used the quantitative school alienation measurement instrument proposed by Julia Morinaj et al. (2019), which helped to locate the extreme cases of alienation and non-alienation in research schools. In the second phase, both research groups (7 alienated and 7 non-alienated) were interviewed individually using qualitative semi-structured interviews. Data gathered from interviews was processed using the thematic analysis method, proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2012).

Results. The results confirmed earlier theoretical presumptions that defined school alienation as a multifaceted and case-sensitive phenomenon. The qualitative approach has revealed its' multi-dimensional nature illustrated by students' experiences.

Conclusion. Alienation from learning could be interpreted as a level of learning actualisation that is perceived by the student, which could be influenced by individual and/or structural factors, such as individual attitude towards learning, learning styles, parental influence, teacher and classmates support, future career/academic plans and expectations.

Cognitive value. According to our literature analysis made prior to the research, it is the first attempt to analyse school alienation using a mixed-method approach, which combines verified quantitative and qualitative instruments. It is hoped that this research

will be of benefit for the further conceptualisation of the school alienation phenomenon and could be a practical guide in everyday pedagogical practice.

Introduction and a Research Rationale

School alienation is a relatively new construct in scientific discourse that aims to describe and offer an analytical approach to a more general phenomenon of non-involvement, distancing oneself, and meaninglessness in relation to school that is evident in Western societies. School alienation is based on the disputed concept of alienation (in German: *Verfremdung*) which has deep traditions in the fields of philosophy, sociology, and psychology, all the way from Hegel and Marx to Seeman (1959), Richard Schacht (1994), and Rahel Jaeggi (2014) works. In this context, school alienation could be seen as an interesting scientific attempt to operationalise and adapt the concept to more sound educational research. It is worth mentioning Andreas Hadjar, Tina Hascher, Gerda Hagenauer, and Julia Morinaj as the most prominent scientific voices, that made significant work in systematising the alienation discourse and formulating a school alienation concept, which would be suitable for empirical research.

According to Hadjar and Hascher (2018) conceptualisation, school alienation is defined as "a specific set of negative attitudes towards social and academic domains of schooling comprising cognitive and affective elements. While the cognitive dimension relates to student appraisals of the school environment, the affective dimension relates to their feelings. These negative attitudes develop and change over time in terms of a state and can solidify into a disposition" (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). In other words, school alienation according to Hascher and Hadjar proposed theoretical framework is seen as a triple-structure phenomenon.

Current empirical findings do not provide a unanimous answer about the causes of school alienation and what consequences this phenomenon carries. According to Hascher and Hadjar, school alienation can affect early school drop-out, deviant behaviour, and/or students' future career/learning trajectories (2018), so it is seen rather as a negative phenomenon.

School alienation can be influenced by various factors and their combination, both from an individual and from a structural level, and social actors that in various ways are related to schooling. This makes school alienation a very individual, or case-sensitive, phenomenon (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). The above-mentioned case sensitivity of school alienation on the other hand enables us to analyse the phenomenon in a qualitative manner. This approach towards school alienation will generate a more in-depth understanding and provide us with a "thicker" description of this phenomenon.

Accordingly, in this article, we present our research that used a qualitative approach and was oriented toward the search for the core reasons for alienation from learning activity. We present some of the main empirical findings from research, that has been made in 3 Lithuanian high schools during the period of the 2022-23 school year. The purpose of this research was to define the factors that cause school alienation in our research cases and to voice both alienated and non-alienated students' experiences.

Methodology

School alienation, according to the Hadjar and Hascher (2018) concept has a triple relational structure that covers (or manifests in) students' relation with a) classmates, b) teachers, and c) learning activity and can manifest itself in one, two, or all three domains. In this article, we specifically focus on the student-learning activity domain, asking what is school alienation in this domain and what causes this type of alienation in the school setting. It is done by emphasising the experiential aspect of our research participants. According to Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000), alienation from learning could be seen as a lack of students' enjoyment, and interest in learning and also the feeling of boredom experienced during learning. Learning has little or no meaning at all to students, and it could be assumed that this type of alienation is associated with a lack of intrinsic motivation.

Our empirical analysis was based on a mixed methodological approach outlined by John W. Creswell (1999), which consisted of (a) a quantitative-diagnostical survey based on the Morinaj et al. (2019) validated instrument. It consisted of 24 item statements, 8 of which were specifically designed for the measurement of student-learning activity relation. And (b) a qualitative semi-structured interview with extreme alienation and non-alienation cases.

In the first research phase, 227 high-school students in the twelfth grade were voluntarily surveyed using Morinaj et al. (2019) diagnostical tool. In the Lithuanian educational system, twelfth grade is the last secondary education grade where students' ages vary from 17 to 19 years old. After finishing the twelfth-grade students have final exams which determine their enrollment to tertiary education (university, college, or vocational training) scores. Diagnostical instrument allowed us to trace the alienated and non-alienated cases in schools that were analysed. From this pooled population, in the second phase of our research, we chose 14 research participants, of which 7 showed high and 7 — low scores of school alienation. It was supposed, that this extreme case selection and eventual comparison of both trends would benefit overall understanding of the school alienation phenomenon both from positive and negative experiential perspectives. The above mentioned 14 research participants were invited to an individual semi-structured interview, in which the researcher was able to discuss the quantitative instruments' questions, how the participants interpreted them, and

what practical experiences participants had in accordance with the questionnaire items. Qualitative data was processed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012) which helped to generate the main themes of alienation from learning activity phenomenon. The study complied with ethical requirements for academic research and was affirmed by the Vilnius University Commission on Research Ethics.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of extreme alienation and non-alienation from learning activity cases revealed that this form of alienation could be defined as a degree of actualisation of the learning activity, that is perceived by the student in the school.

Students who showed high scores of alienation from learning tend to see learning in the *school as an irrelevant activity*. In our research cases, this irrelevance had a different reasoning. Some of the research participants, with high levels of alienation from learning, saw learning in the school as purely formal activity *pro forma* or categorical-negative attitude towards formal schooling. As one of the research participants summarised: "I just want to get the (graduation) diploma and that's it." Or in the case of another research participant: "Most of the things we learn in real life, not in the classroom because studying in the school is mostly theoretical, not practical". It is worth mentioning that few of the highly alienated students were new to their classes—and had weak or no relation with classmates and teachers in their new school. It is likely that this newbie experience was associated with participants' attitudes towards learning. These research participants had a concrete future career trajectory, which, compared with others was untypical. For example, one participant had decided to choose vocational training after graduation, while the other—the career of an actor, i.e. artistic direction. For both, formal education in their schools did not meet their future career needs, which in turn influenced them to alienate themselves from learning activity by seeing it as irrelevant in relation to their future careers. Another example of an interpretation of learning in school as an irrelevant activity was demonstrated by a research participant. This student was highly motivated not with the formal school curricula, but with extra-curricular activities such as mathematics and IT Olympics (an extra-curricular activity of academic competition both national and international, which was not associated with school). The research participant had demonstrated high or very high academic achievements in these extra-curricular activities, but these achievements were activities that were not included in the formal education curriculum. The student noted that standard school curriculum activities caused him a sense of boredom and disinterest, and was highly related to his classes' micro-climate of noisiness and distrust. In this case, alienation from learning was influenced by students' different learning approaches which did not match the formal education setting and the issues in his class micro-climate.

Interview data shows that irrelevance was on the one hand — a personally driven choice/decision towards learning which in some cases was driven by a categorical position that the learning in school in general is meaningless. On the other hand, students' stories revealed that formal school was not able to meet those particular students' needs associated with their atypical planned future careers/studies. This allows us to state, that school alienation, and its form of alienation from learning activity could be seen as a subjective position influenced by individual-level choices, decisions, and perceptions, but on the other hand — it could be seen as an effect of structural factors, such as inflexible school curriculum, that does not meet student needs.

The second finding that could define alienation from learning activity could be called *partial relevance of learning*. This would be defined as a state when a student sees a partial relevance of learning activity with his future career/plans. Partial relevance was associated with exams and study subjects that were necessary for one's future university studies/subjects. In other words, this partial alienation revealed itself as selective learning, where the student consciously chooses to learn and motivate themselves only on those school subjects that were necessary (in their opinion and considering formal admission requirements introduced by tertiary education). For example, if one foresees a career in medicine, he will choose biosciences, avoiding humanities and social science subjects. Thus, the learning activity becomes selective and narrowed. These students saw the value of learning their subject only in the context of their future studies/careers and expressed a more moderate position towards the meaning, purpose, and value of learning in the school than those who showed higher alienation scores. It is worth mentioning, that this average or selective alienation from learning was demonstrated by those students who chose more typical future career paths for example — lawyer, doctor, business management, engineering, etc. These findings also suggest that alienation from learning is strongly affected by curricula and formal/typical education setting.

The third finding that emerged from the interview data was the group that saw the *actual relevance of the learning activity*. Those research participants who demonstrated low alienation scores on the Morinaj et al. (2019) instrument pointed out their positive attitude towards learning in school, where almost all study subjects were interpreted as relevant, interesting, and important. These participants noted the relevance of various study subjects, even of those not related to their future studies and/or careers. These students showed a strong intrinsic motivation for learning. It appears that this motivation was somehow "inherited" from or influenced by the participants' families. Participants have mentioned the family influence on the way they personally saw the relevance of learning and education. They expressed the importance of learning as an activity that is vital for a whole personality in any job or life situation. According to one research participant, "My parents encouraged me and promoted learning of all subjects, saying, like, it will be useful for my life in one way or another". In another passage "Learning always was a value in our family". The scope of our research

could not answer the question of how this outlook towards learning activity influenced low-alienated participants' attitude towards learning, but according to interview data, this attitude was positively engaged by participants' teachers, who saw their intrinsic motivation and in turn made an extra effort educating these low-alienated students. This extra effort according to participants was pedagogical attentiveness, provision of additional study material, and more interpersonal-caring relations. In other words, a positive attitude towards learning and education, in turn, enforced a more positive student-teacher relation. This positive attitude towards learning was also associated with classroom support, where peers tended to see learning in the school as a valuable and meaningful activity. The interconnection between participants' positive attitude towards learning and the positive support from their classmates needs some further research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we could state that alienation from learning activity could be seen as a degree of relevance of learning in the school setting seen from the student's perspective, in which high alienation means that students do not value learning activity and low alienation, where the student sees the overall value of learning in the school. The relevance perceived by the research participants was influenced by different individual and/or structural factors.

The comparison between relevant and irrelevant attitudes towards learning activity shows that it is a matter of personal decision, or in other words, actualisation of learning activity. Our research shows that students with low alienation from learning had some inner resources that helped them see the meaning of learning in school. We could partially affirm that these resources were inherited and/or strongly supported by the students' families, where education and learning was emphasised as a generally positive activity. Also, a positive attitude towards learning was associated with strong teacher support and a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom, where classmates as was reported, tended to see learning as a positive activity. It is a matter of further research on what is the relation between students' inner motivation to learn and actualise study subjects and teachers positive support. In conclusion, low alienation with learning activity was associated with individual inner motivation to learn, despite the future career paths, and structural influence from teachers and classmates.

Addressing high alienation scores, it is worth mentioning, that students with high alienation from learning had also indicated some individual-level aspects that affected their attitude towards learning such as a categorical negative attitude towards learning in school, which was associated with their untypical future career choices. This emphasises more structural level issues in relation to learning in school, that had distanced them from learning, such as the inflexible curriculum of the formal education which did not meet their expectations.

Widening our discussion, it is worthwhile asking what inspired these personal decisions and to see the learning in the school as positive or negative. Interview analysis reveals a deeper layer of sociocultural influences/experiences that students were subject to. Further research is required to understand the connection between an attitude towards learning in the school and cultural norms from their social environments, for example, family, friends, other social circles, and surely the cultural milieu shaped by mass/social media. Both alienated and non-alienated from learning activity revealed individual and structural level factors that had affected their attitude towards learning in school. These findings affirm earlier theoretical presumptions made by Hascher and Hadjar (2018) that school alienation is a highly individual and multifaced phenomenon that needs to be explored further.

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