A Qualitative Case Study: The Lived Educational Experiences of Former Juvenile Delinquents

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Abstract

The impact of juvenile delinquency on society is an issue of great concern. The impact of delinquent behaviors goes beyond the victim to include the offender, the offender's family and society as a whole. A review of the existing literature reveals multiple studies, which examine delinquency from a causal perspective. Despite the efforts of researchers a definitive causal link is not readily determined. Ethical concerns centering around a quantitative study on delinquency precludes the discovery of such a causal link. Utilizing a qualitative study approach we may not be able to identify causal relationships; however, this approach provides clear insight into the lived experiences of the individuals being studied and in turn offers us the possibility of understanding what these experiences were and how they possibly impacted the individual. It is through this understanding of the lived experiences that we gain insight. This insight will, hopefully, facilitate the prediction of and the mediation of anti-social juvenile behavior.

Keywords

Juvenile Delinquency, Adjudication, Lived Experiences, Education, and Qualitative Case Study

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Merrian, (1998) described a form of qualitative research that is focused on the discovery and understanding of a single phenomenon. Merrian labeled this design as a "generic qualitative method" (p. 11). The design of the current generic qualitative case focused on the development of a rich description that presents the collective lived educational experiences of adults, who as juveniles, were adjudicated delinquent and put into placement. Starting with a theoretical perspective that is centered in educational psychology it can be theorized that the lived educational experiences of juveniles may have significant impact on whether the individual succeeds or fails in the academic setting. In the late seventies Albert Bandura (1977b), proposed learning occurs through observational experiences. Assuming Bandura was correct; one would conclude that anti-social or delinquent behavior is acquired through the observation of other individuals engaged in these behaviors.

Using a generic qualitative approach it was possible to examine the experiences of adults who, as former adjudicated delinquents, in terms of their lived educational experiences. In addition the experiences of these individuals in an educational setting in terms of social relationships between the juvenile and the various social groups they were exposed to in their day-to-day lives. Social learning theory, (Bandura, 1977b), suggests this study should reveal the existence of negative peer relationships along with negative peers, and negative student-teacher relationships. It is these experiences that Bandura would suggest ultimately led to learned delinquent behavior.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

Historical Background

The study of the theoretical root causes of juvenile delinquency has been an ongoing research topic for decades. Gault (1914) studied the connection between mentally defective individuals and their adolescent delinquent behavior. Gault's research suggested delinquency

was the result of individuals with low IQ's or mental acuity. Powers and Witmer (1951) took a close look at Cabot's 1935 work with the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study. Cabot was interested in the impact of an early intervention approach on the development of juvenile delinquent behaviors as the child matured. It was theorized academic tutoring combined with counseling while the individual was still young and pre-delinquent would result in a lower occurrence of anti-social behaviors later on.

Early Childhood Experiences and Juvenile Delinquency

Family structure may lay play a significant role in the development of juvenile delinquency. One aspect of family structure, namely the lack of active communication between parents and children, may be a "significant causal factor" (Yablonski, 2000, p. 301). Yablonski argued the family may be the single most significant influence on personality development. The lack of adequate family structure and the absence of proper socialization of the young child may facilitate development issues and subsequent delinquency (Erikson, 1963). Individuals placed in foster care were, according to Alltucker, Bullis, Close, and Yovanoof (2006) were four times more likely to engage in early onset delinquency. In addition, having a member of the family who were convicted of a felony increased the likelihood of early onset delinquent behaviors by a factor of two. Cicchetti, (1993) argued early onset delinquency is an ongoing process influenced by multiple variable. Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthammer-Lober, and Kalb (2001) found a familial link with 8% of the families studied accounting for 43% of all arrests. These researchers studied multiple generations of families with a history of delinquency. Preski and Shelton (2001) found a significant correlation ($p<.05$) between parent and sibling criminality and the occurrence of delinquent behaviors. A review of the existing research literature suggests a definite link between family structure, stability, and support and the onset of juvenile delinquency.

The Relationship between Delinquency and Parenting Style

Research suggests parenting style may have a direct impact on the development of juvenile delinquent behaviors. Degarmo and Forgatch (2005) argue studies have shown parenting style during development has a direct impact on the child's subsequent engagement in delinquent behaviors. Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, and Sameroff (1999) and Gorman-Smith, Tolan, and Henry (2000) present studies which argue a strong parenting style of supervision along with positive involvement with their children results in a lower occurrence of juvenile delinquency. In contrast, parents who provided weak emotional support and a lack of consistent discipline resulted in children who were more prone to engage in delinquent activities and socialize with other delinquent peers (Henry, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 2001). Families with dysfunctional parenting styles tend to result in problems relating to the social adjustment of the children within that family (Kimonis, Frick, & Barry, 2004). Poor parenting styles, suggests Booth-LaForce and Oxford (2008), results in children who exhibit attachment problems. Poor attachment is a key determinant in delinquent outcomes (Johnson, 2009). Johnson goes on to argue that studies have shown poor parenting to be a major contributory factor in the development of delinquency.

Peer Associations and Delinquency

Peer association is a common area of research when studying delinquency. It has been theorized that juveniles who associate with delinquent peers who are non-violent tend to engage in non-violent delinquent behavior (Henry, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 2001). Conversely,

individuals who socialized with violent offenders tended to engage in violent anti-social activities. Socializing with delinquent peers, as argued by Chung and Steinberg (2006), is the "strongest proximal risk" factor when it comes to the development of delinquent behaviors (p. 320). This is especially true when associating with violent peers. Delinquent associations, argues Agnew (2005), not only reinforces but also models antisocial behaviors. Another important consideration is negative peer relationships may make the individual more prone to engage in anti-social or delinquent behaviors (Siegel & Welsh, 2008) accompanied by an increased risk of drug use in these individuals. Juvenile delinquency is not always a solo event. Research evidence suggests juveniles are more likely to commit delinquent acts when with friends (Erickson & Jensen, 1977). In their report to the National Institute of Justice McCord and Conway (2005) suggested evidence indicates that while research in juvenile delinquency tended to focus on a single actor, crimes committed with one or more co-actors represented the largest proportion of criminal acts.

Evidence exists which suggests an apparent correlation between the development of delinquent attitudes and peer associations. The question that is raised is "do negative peer relations lead to delinquent behaviors or do delinquent behaviors lead to negative peer relationships?" Siegel and Welsh (2008) have suggested the following four possible scenarios. Control theory, the first suggested scenario, would argue these individuals lack the requisite social skills and therefore cannot establish or maintain peer relationships which are positive and rewarding. As a result, delinquent juveniles were prone to associate with like minded individuals. Another popular theory in relation to developing delinquent attitudes and behaviors is "good" individuals are corrupted by negative peers who influence them to commit anti-social acts. The third suggested scenario argues the development of the juvenile is moderated by peer relationships. Negative peers foster the development of delinquent behaviors while associating with non-delinquent peers moderated the juvenile's delinquency. The fourth and final theory suggests juvenile delinquents actively seek out delinquent peers as a matter of necessity. Association with other delinquent individuals both sustains and fosters delinquent activities. While each theory has some merit, Siegel and Welsh suggest research evidence clearly indicates peer relationships play a major role.

The Impact of Educational Experiences

Specific experiences related to the educational setting and delinquency has been identified by research. Evidence suggests, for example, a disproportionate number of delinquent individuals manifest with an absence of essential skills in the areas of reading and writing (Katsiyannis, Ryan, Zhang, & Spann, 2008). These same researchers also identified evidence which indicated these individuals were frequently identified as learning disabled.

Another aspect of education that appears to influence delinquency is engagement. Hirschfield and Gasper (2011) argue that both emotional and behavioral engagement impacts delinquency. Cook, Murphy, and Hunt (2000) conducted a randomized experiment utilizing the Comer's school development program. They report findings which indicate a link between emotional and behavioral engagement and delinquency. Disengaged juveniles tend to lack supportive social connections. This lack of social connections tends to result in a limited number of friends and typically a feeling of isolation. The outcome of this lack of social connections is very often a higher risk of delinquent attitudes and behaviors which in turn leads to adjudication. Cook, Murphy, and Hunt (2000) argue the existence of a reciprocal relationship between delinquency and engagement. Disengaged individuals tend to engage in increasing numbers of delinquent behaviors and an increase in delinquent behaviors tends to lead to increased disengagement.

A Possible Link between Academic Failure and Delinquency

Lucio, Hunt, and Bornovalova (2012) have defined academic failure as a grade point average (GPA) of less than 2.0. It has also been defined as a failure of the individual to obtain those basic skills which are viewed as necessary by society (Rafoth, 2004). Forsyth, Story, Kelly, and McMillan (2009) and Bidjerano (2010), argue academic failure does not necessarily need to meet a predetermined definition. They talk in terms of perceived failure and argue the individual only needs to see them self as a failure to suffer the related impacts. This approach is very much in line with the idea of strain theory. Johnson (2009) argues strain theory explains juvenile delinquency in terms of the individual's need to commit delinquent acts in an effort to deal with the frustration associated with the failure to meet the prescribed goals of society. This failure does not need to be actual failure. Anticipated or perceived failure, according to Johnson (2009), is sufficient to trigger a response.

The question emerges as to what the exact link, if one exists, is between delinquent attitudes and behaviors and academic failure. It has been argued, Khoo and Oakes (2003), a group strategy exists in which delinquent peers adapt delinquent behaviors as a mechanism through which they are able to cope with academic failure and the negative social comparisons placed on them by society. Khoo and Oakes (2003) suggest the juvenile views these negative comparisons as a threat to their self-image and often do not see any other means available to them for coping. Brinkman and Bulman (1977) suggest negative comparisons can create feelings of inferiority and jealousy within the individual. Bers and Rodin (1984) argue these negative comparisons may lead to depression, low self-esteem, sadness, and anger in adolescents which may foster a need for retribution. It is this need that manifests in deviant attitudes and behaviors. It is suggested juveniles who fail to acquire social status resulting from positive academic comparisons will typically engage in behaviors that establishes them as "tough" and beyond the need for academic success. Bidjerano (2010) was interested in the juvenile's self-conscious emotions as they relate to their perceived academic failure. He suggests that negative emotions which are associated with academic failure may impact the individual in destructive and demotivating ways. Deviant behaviors can be the direct result of these emotions and may further prevent the individual from engaging in educational pursuits leading them to continued academic failure.

Academic failure or the perception of it, argues Turner and Waugh (2003), can be more subjective than objective. The straight A student who earns a B on an exam, for example, can perceive this as much a failure as does the student who achieves a failing grade. Obviously a single poor grade does not lead to a life of delinquent behaviors; however, a recurring history of such failures can result in a demoralized individual.

Research evidence has been consistent in suggesting the existence of a negative correlation between delinquency and academic performance (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). The data suggests academic failure may be either a significant predictor of delinquent behavior or may, in fact, be co morbid. Bidjerano (2010) postulates the relationship between delinquent outcomes and academic failure is complex. Academic failure is not always an absolute event. A learner, for example, may fail one class but be well above average in others. When looking at a case of delinquency one cannot simply look at an isolated case of academic failure. McEvoy and Welker (2000) points out not every juvenile who experiences some level of academic failure will engage in delinquent behaviors. Equally important, argue these authors, not every juvenile delinquent has experienced academic failure. Reviewing the current literature reveals a strong argument for a connection between juvenile delinquency and academic failure. However, while research evidence suggests a correlation, causation remains elusive. In addition, while academic failure may well be a predictor of delinquent behavior; the specific behaviors remain unpredictable.

Critique of the Previous Research

The understanding of juvenile delinquency has been greatly expanded by the previous research. Despite that, the prior research falls short when it comes to presenting the full picture.

The current literature, in many cases, utilized an approach in which observations along with third party reporters provided the data. The percentage of the prior research which sought to explore delinquency from the perspective of the juvenile is small. The current study utilizes a previously untapped data source, the juvenile delinquent. As discussed earlier, how an individual perceives factors like academic failure, engagement, and social relationships may play a significant role in the development of delinquent behaviors.

The current literature offers valuable insight into the possible causes of juvenile delinquency. This serves as a good starting point from which the researcher or service provider can begin to understand delinquent behaviors. By examining the lived experiences of the juvenile delinquent this current research broadens that understanding. Unquestionably, juvenile delinquency is a human experience. Any quantitative research that has already been conducted or may be conducted in the future will never provide us with the complete picture of what it is to be a juvenile delinquent.

To achieve the goal of mediating juvenile delinquency we must first understand it. The cost of juvenile delinquency on society has been documented in various studies. However, society is not the only identifiable victim of delinquency. The juvenile delinquent engaging in antisocial behaviors is also a victim. Examining and understanding exactly how the juvenile delinquent perceives their lived experiences may provide insight that will allow us to better understand juvenile delinquency and possibly provide methodologies and treatments to deal with it.

Role of the Researcher

As an educator who has worked with adjudicated juvenile delinquents in placements for over twelve years, I have developed some preconceived notions and biases. Perhaps primarily, I have discovered that in the majority of the cases the offender has, at some point in their life, also been a victim. Many are the product of environmental factors over which they have no control. This has fostered in me a deep desire to better understand the mind of the offender.

Chenail (2011) addresses the significant issues of instrument and researcher bias. The author points out the underlying concerns of such bias when conducting qualitative research. Chenail (2011) offers two methodologies which can be employed to counter bias. The first is conducting a pilot study in which a small sample of the intended population is interviewed in an effort to test the proposed instrumentation. Chenail (2011) points out this method is not always feasible particularly in cases where available participants are limited as in the case of the current study. The second methodology, "interviewing the investigator" (p. 258) entails conducting a pre-data collection interview utilizing a second party who acts as the investigator while the researcher fills the role of participant. The primary goal of either approach is to reduce or eliminate bias. In the current study pilot testing or interviewing the investigator were not practical solutions. An alternative approach was used to address bias. The research questions were field tested prior to IRB approval. The field test consisted of submitting the proposed open-ended questions to five experts in the fields of psychology, qualitative research, and juvenile delinquency. The field testers reviewed each question for appropriateness. The reviewers then made recommendations for changes in the structure of the questions, the order of the questions as they are to be presented to the participants, and the elimination or addition

of questions. Having outside experts review and make recommendations helped to eliminate any bias the researcher brought to the development of the research instrument.

The review of the literature undertaken for this study has revealed several theories regarding the causes of delinquency (Andrews, 1981; Mallett, Stoddard Dare, & Seck, 2009; Smith, 2008). There is a lack of literature to be found that examines delinquency from the juvenile's perspective. While the researcher has some bias in terms of the status of juvenile delinquents, he does not have any ideas concerning the juvenile perspective. The goal of this study is to understand the juvenile perspective.

I was the primary actor in the collection and analysis of data in this study. Other individuals, aftercare workers for a juvenile placement agency, made initial contact with the potential participants in an attempt to protect their privacy. I conducted all other aspects of the study.

Prior to commencement of the participant selection process documentation was submitted to the Capella University Internal Review Board (IRB). The primary mandate of the IRB procedure is to ensure the safety, well-being, and privacy of research participants. Prior to the actual data collection process the IRB reviewed and ultimately approved procedures for participant criteria and selection, data acquisition and analysis, as well as data storage and security. Prior to IRB submission the research plan was reviewed and approved by the research supervisor and the dissertation committee.

Informed Consent

Participation in this research study was strictly voluntary. Prior to researcher contact, the potential participants were advised they were not obligated to take part in the study. In addition, potential participants were informed that no sanctions or repercussions would be applied in the event they chose not to be part of the study. The researcher was not informed of potential participants names until after the potential participants were contacted by their after care worker and presented with study information. At the time potential participants expressed an interest in the study they either contacted the researcher directly or provided permission for the aftercare worker to pass their information on to the researcher who in turn contacted the participants. Potential participants were provided the opportunity to review documentation concerning the nature of the study. In addition, individuals were provided with ample opportunity to review and discuss the study with the researcher before signing the informed consent form. Participants who completed these initial stages were informed, at the time of the initial interview, that they could either refuse to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with or they could drop out of the study at any point.

Right to Privacy and Protection From Harm

A primary consideration of this study was the protection of the participants' privacy. In an effort to meet that goal each participant was asked to select the location at which the interview would be conducted. It was essential the interview be conducted in a location that was private and quiet in order to protect the participant while at the same time insuring an atmosphere in which the participant felt comfortable talking. Ultimately, six of the eight interviews actually took place in the participant's residence. The remaining two interviews took place at the place of employment of the participants.

Collected data and documentation (including transcribed interviews) were placed in a safe that was both locked and only accessible to the researcher. Password protection was used to secure and protect any computer based data. In an effort to protect the identities of the participants each were assigned a code which was used to identify the various pieces of

documentation. Other than the informed consent form the participant's name or any other identifying information did not appear on any data or documentation.

Credibility, Dependability and Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four criteria that should be considered before undertaking a qualitative study. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility centers on the establishment of believability of the results in terms of the perspective of the participants. The researcher plays an integral role in establishing credibility. Is the researcher trained and experienced sufficiently to conduct the type of research proposed? In the case of the current study the researcher has undergone considerable course work at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in research methodologies. This background includes both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In addition, the researcher has had the opportunity during his course work to read, review, and analyze multiple qualitative studies including several which incorporated a similar research design.

The replicability of a study by other researchers is paramount when considering dependability and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study was undertaken utilizing documentation that is both clear and detailed. In addition procedures were presented incorporating sequential descriptions of the methodologies, procedures, and background theories related to the study. This documentation insures the replicability of the study by other researchers.

When conducting qualitative research, transferability refers to the degree to which the sample population represents or is reflective of a much larger population. The participants for this study were drawn from the larger population of juveniles who were adjudicated and court ordered to a placement facility across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. An additional aspect of transferability involves documentation which is well written and descriptive of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The intent of this documentation is to allow other researchers to transfer the assumptions and context of the study to a different context.

Confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), relates to the extent to which it is possible to confirm or corroborate the results of the study by others. In the typical research setting studies will often have more than one researcher involved or outside experts may play an active role in the research. In the case of a dissertation study, as this study was, outside collaboration is not feasible. However, in such a study there typically exists a dissertation committee which includes a dissertation supervisor and two or more additional committee members. The role of these individuals is to oversee the study and offer suggestions and guidance to the researcher in an effort to keep the study on track and ensure the credibility, dependability and transferability of the study to the greatest extent possible.

Methodology

Yin's (2009) model of the collective case study was the primary designed used in the current study. This methodologies incorporated in this study are those described by Yin (2009) as a holistic design incorporating multiple cases. It is possible, according to Yin (2009) to conduct a case study without the use of a formal design plan. This study uses a generic qualitative inquiry approach (Merrian, 1998), with a goal of using a semi-structured interview process to describe a social phenomenon. This design is the appropriate choice when conducting research with the goal of understanding and relating a lived experience (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003).

Sample

For this study purposeful sampling was used to gather participants. Purposeful sampling is the appropriate approach when conducting a study with the expressed goal of providing a rich descriptive picture of the participants' lived experiences, (Frankel & Devers, 2000).

Yin (2009) argues the typical criterion used to determine sample size is irrelevant in the case study. Yin goes on to state the appropriate sample size is dependent on the level of certainty the researcher wants about their multiple case study. Yin suggests a study in which the theory or question is straight forward a sample size of two or three might be appropriate. On the other hand, a study with a more subtle theory or where a high degree of certainty is desired, a sample size of six or more may be more appropriate. For this study, a goal of between eight to fourteen participants was appropriate. While the research question of this study was essentially straight forward, the size was chosen with the idea of obtaining data saturation and a higher degree of certainty. In order to avoid potential issues related to conducting research with minors and/or prisoners a selection criteria was established that stipulated participants were to be over the age of 18 and they could not be, at the time of the study, incarcerated, under indictment, on probation or parole, or otherwise involved in the justice system. Potential participants were selected from a population of former students who were placed with a private residential program. Aftercare workers from the various residential programs who had regular contact with former students made the initial selection and contact. A packet of information which included an introduction letter, informed consent form, and a demographic form was given to each potential participant by the aftercare worker. Potential participants who were interested in the study were provided with the contact information of the researcher. An alternative method was utilized as well in which interested participants gave consent to the aftercare worker to provide their contact information to the researcher who subsequently contacted the individual.

Method of Data Collection

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were the primary means of data collection. Interviews with the individual participants occurred at a time and place chosen by the participant in an effort to insure the privacy and comfort of the participant. The utilization of semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data is consistent with the research design of this study (Kvale, 1996). This approach allows the researcher to make adjustments and modifications to the interview structure and the questions used as the need arises over the course of the different interviews.

Open-ended questions allowed the participant to describe in their own terms their lived educational experiences. After the interview the recorded session was transcribed into a document form. Each participant was given a hard copy of their interview session to review. This procedure allowed the participant the opportunity to modify or change their responses and served as a means of member checking of the data. See Appendix A for sample interview questions.

Data Analysis Methodology

The study design used called for thematic analysis as a means to analyze the data collected. "Thematic analysis is a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns" (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926).

Thematic analysis is a foundational component of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify themes or patterns which

emerged when examining the various cases. Common themes or patterns allow for the development of a single, rich descriptive picture of the lived educational experiences of the adjudicated juvenile. This can best be shown in the following example.

The first question proposed to each participant was "How would you describe yourself as a student?" The responses to this and all the other questions were entered into NVIVO-10, a qualitative data analysis program. The program separated each question and presented them along with each participant's response to that question. Once the responses were grouped by question, NVIVO-10 was used to code each response. By studying the grouping and coding of responses similarities and differences were identified. The following reveals the format provided by NVIVO-10 and shows the relative ease at which the researcher is able to analyze each response and identify themes or patterns. The following was modified slightly from the actual printout. In an effort to make it more readable to the reader a dashed line was added between each participant. In the actual printing formatting was used to identify the beginning and end of each response.

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student
Researcher: "How would you describe yourself as a student?"
Participant 10: Ah, attentive, um, able to pick up things quickly if, taught in the right system.

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student
Researcher: "How would you describe yourself as a student?"
Participant 11: Tardy. I was tardy all the time. Focused, I can say that.
Researcher: You were focused?
Participant 11: Uh huh.

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student
Researcher: Oh, first question "How would you describe yourself as a student?"
Participant 4: Uh, as a student I would say pretty, I'm actually pretty cool. Umm, very, I'm very into school. I like school. Um, I like to, one thing I was always into is um, completing school. Ah, I took that when my grandmother died as, as something I needed to do. Ah, and wanted to get done. So I have that educational perspective for myself. /sniff/

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student
Researcher: All right, question number one: "How would you describe yourself as a student?"
Participant 5: As a gentleman and a scholar, No, I'm playing. Umm, I think I'm very knowledgeable. Um, in both of my classes I actually attend on campus I'm weeks ahead and have A's in my classes. The teachers at this point just have me helping them teach what all the other students are behind in. I guess it's fairly similar to what I was doing in ARC.
Researcher: I have to interrupt you here for one second I have to make a make a point. The information we're talking about now is prior to adjudication.
Participant 5: Oh, before. Adjudication.
Researcher: Before adjudication.
Participant 5: Woo hoo, that's a whole nother story.
Researcher: Yeah, so in high school, before you were adjudicated, how would you describe yourself as a student?
Participant 5: Ok, that's a whole nother story. Before I was adjudicated I, well I never went to high school. I went to like two days of high school. Um, I got locked up. Um, when I was going to school I was always in special needs classes and I was falling behind in those I was just, not doing well in any area of school,

socially, academically.

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student

Researcher: All right, question number one: "How would you describe yourself as a student?"

Participant 6: Grades, I was able to keep up. I was a very intelligent young kid and I had no problem keeping the bar probably above from what I remember B's. You know, A's and B's when I was pre-adjudication. Now, my experience at school; however, was a little rough as far as being picked on and things like that. So, my focus if I didn't have to be focused on those things my grades probably would have been better. But, for the most part because I was able to pick things up quickly I didn't have a problem with materials and taking tests and all those kinds of things.

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student

Researcher: "How would you describe yourself as a student?"

Participant 7: Ah, Before I got into ARC? Um, I was, I didn't pay attention to detail. Um, didn't take anything seriously. Um, clowned around all the time. Uh, didn't, didn't put 100% into anything. I didn't have goals. Basically.

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student

Researcher: "How would you describe yourself as a student?"

Participant 8: This is, um, from elementary to the beginning of high school? Um, very.um, how can I say this? Artistic. Just was more interested in painting and drawing and, um, very distracted.

Q.1. Description of Participant as a student

Researcher: "How would you describe yourself as a student?"

Participant 9: Um, I would say in my stay in school before placement I was a jokester, um, I was a trouble maker. Um, at the same time I was a very intelligent kid. Um, I knew everything that I was doing for the most part and I just chose to act out a lot in school, in public school, just for attention.

The above example not only demonstrates how thematic analysis was conducted, it also shows the benefits of a semi-structured, open-ended approach in which the researcher can adjust questions and guide the interview as needed.

Results

This study was designed in manner that would allow the researcher to examine the lived experiences of former juvenile delinquents and then to create a richly detailed picture of these lived educational experiences. Each participant provided a richly detailed description of their own experiences in the educational setting prior to adjudication. Utilizing each of these descriptions and analyzing them in search of themes and patterns resulted in the creation of the "best picture" of these experiences.

Thematic analysis was utilized in an attempt to identify commonalities in the various cases. While certain commonalities were indeed identified, the data also revealed variations in the participants' descriptions. One such variation noted existed in how the individual saw them self in terms of academic failure or success. As was discussed earlier, research has shown the perception of success or failure may play a role in the onset and continuation of delinquent attitudes and behaviors (Turner & Waugh, 2003). The data collected and analyzed in this study suggests that the individual's view of academic failure may not play a significant role. While some of the study participants did indeed see them self as a failure, other participants saw them

self as a success academically. While a qualitative study cannot positively identify a causal relationship, this does raise the question of how much of a role does the perception of failure play.

While variations in the detailed descriptions did exist, several unanticipated and surprising, as well as some not so surprising commonalities emerged. Ragin (1994) discussed the use of qualitative research in terms of comparing multiple cases looking for similarities. Ragin argued that by examining the similarities between cases the researcher can establish a composite image of the research subject. The commonalities between cases suggests traits that makeup, in this case, an image of what a typical adjudicated juvenile may look like in terms of educational experiences. Taken as a whole the composite image of the lived educational experiences of adjudicate youth yielded the following individual:

1. Where it may be expected that the delinquent juvenile would engage in acts of bullying, this individual was the victim bullying and not the perpetrator. For example:

> Participant 4: "growing up going to school I always had an issue with peers. um, on a level of either being bullied or just not being liked."
> Participant 5: "he was like one of the bullies and he had a bunch of friends who were bullies and they were always making fun of me…"
> Participant 6: "I was a really skinny, small kid so my experience was a lot of bullying, a lot of being picked on, made fun of."

2. Disciplinary actions often resulted from this individual as the result of fighting. The fighting, however, was very often not an act of direct aggression but rather a response to the bullying they were subjected to. This is seen in the following dialogue:

> Researcher: "Were you ever expelled or suspended"
> Participant 7: "Ah, suspended, yes. A few times for fighting."
> Researcher: "Can you describe in your own words the situation that led to your being suspended?"
> Participant 7: "Um, ah, being bullied a little bit, ah, and you can only push a person so far."

3. Academically this individual was an average student earning grades which fell within the average range of C – B. Despite this average performance this individual is equally likely to describe them self in terms of being a positive or negative student.

> When asked to describe their grades Participant 10 responded: "I got mostly B's and C's."
> Participant 7 responded to the same question: "before [placement] they were C's and B's."
> When asked to describe himself as a student Participant 10 stated: "Ah, attentive, um, able to pick up things quickly if, taught in the right system."
> In response to the same question Participant 7 responded: "I was, I didn't pay attention to detail. Um, didn't take anything seriously. Um, clowned around all the time. Uh, didn't, didn't put 100% into anything. I didn't have goals. Basically."

4. In terms of academic success or failure this individual sees them self as either an academic success or failure in equal amounts.

When asked if they saw themselves as a failure Participant 7 responded,

"Before [placement] yes" while Participant 10 responded: I would say I was a success."

5. Negative peer relationships were prevalent in the lived experiences of this individual. These relationships can likely be linked to the bullying they endured. Close friends do exist; however, they are limited in number.
When asked to describe peer relationships typical responses included:

Participant 7: "I didn't have too many friends. Um, I had a lot of anger problems and, ah, an oddball to say in that society."
Participant 5: "Bad, poor."
Participant 6: "I probably had about only maybe 2 close friends."
Participant 4: "I had a few good friends that were there to actually help me."

6. This individual recognizes serious trouble in school as relating to suspension or expulsion. Interestingly, they did not identify their arrest and subsequent adjudication as serious trouble.

Participant 6: "Serious trouble would be like being expelled or it was ISS before I ended up getting ISS, in school suspension."
Participant 11: "Serious trouble? Um, ISS."

7. Student-teacher relations do not appear to be significant in the lived experience. These relationships can be positive, negative, or non-existent and while there may be a significant teacher relationship in the past experiences they often serve to ameliorate the individual's self-esteem; however, they do not appear to impact delinquency or adjudication.

Participant 8: "Some, elementary I had good relationships with certain teachers. In high school, um, I was pretty much good with all my teachers."
Participant 5: "Um, I never had relationships with my teachers before I was locked up. I couldn't tell you the names of one teacher I had."
Participant 10: "Um, relatively fair, um, I got along well with most if my teachers."

Two of the participants were able to identify specific student-teacher relations in terms of being a positive experience. One such experience was described by Participant 4; "She taught me a lot, was there when I was struggling through everything." A second participant. Participant 8, described a positive student-teacher relationship in which an art teacher took particular interest in the student and went to bat for the student in an effort to recognize his artistic talents.

Discussion

Two major conceptual themes were identified from the interviews, social interactions issues and self-efficacy.

Social Interactions

Preliminary expectations of this study included the preconceived notion of a delinquent individual who exhibited anti-social behaviors. It was anticipated these individuals commonly would engage in aggressive behaviors including the active bullying of other peers. The analysis of the data revealed a surprisingly different individual. While the individual did engage in fighting they typically did so not as an aggressor but rather as the result of their own victimization. These individuals were not bullies but rather the victims of bullies. Prior research would suggest juveniles who were subjected to bullying were much more likely to develop issues of low self-esteem, isolation, and insecurity in the educational setting (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000). The participants' descriptions support that conclusion. It might be expected that issues of low self-esteem and isolation would result in an absence of close relationships with peers. This too was evident in the descriptions. Participants, with two exceptions, did indeed report low numbers of close friends. Participant 5 reported no close friendships while Participant 4 reported many. In terms of friends being positive or negative, participants were equally split while describing these relationships.

> Participant 10: "My close friends in school they were, they were, you know, they got A's , B's, C's. Kinda guys on the football team, basketball team, baseball team."
> Researcher: "So, you were more or less with the negative crowd?"
> Participant 5: "Yeah, and even then I didn't hang out with them after school it was just in school."

Self-Efficacy in Education

Below average academic performance on behalf of these individuals was also anticipated. However, the data revealed individuals who were, in fact, average students academically. While some reported some incidences or periods of time where they were below average, every participant reported an over all image of a student whose grades fell within the C-B range. Despite their average academic performance the participants were just as likely to describe themselves as academic failures or successes. The likelihood exists that this variation in self-image relates back to the previously discussed findings of Glover, Gough, Johnson, and Cartwright (2000).

In 100% of the cases studied the participant described peer relationships in negative terms. Relationships with their teachers, however, were more or less split between positive relationships and negative relationships. Positive student-teacher relationships were more likely to occur early on. As the individual progressed in school these relationships tended to become increasingly negative. Two participants identified specific student-teacher relations in terms of being a positive experience. Positive student-teacher relationships may help to foster feelings of worth in the student who in turn becomes less depressed and exhibits less negative behaviors (Ming-Te, Brinkworth, & Eccles, 2013). However, analysis of the data collected in this study revealed no clear connection between delinquent behaviors, subsequent adjudication, and student-teacher relationships positive or negative.

Disciplinary action in school was a common occurrence reported by the participants. Incidents of suspension were reported by 100% of the participants with some experiencing multiple suspensions. When describing what they considered to be serious trouble for a student in school the participant all described suspension or expulsion as serious trouble. Suspension occurred in these cases as the result of fighting, disrespect, truancy, or bringing weapons to school.

Analysis of study data presents an adjudicated youth who is an average student lacking the social skills needed to succeed in the educational setting. This individual experiences a limited numbers of close friends. Peer relationships tend to be negative and they are subjected to the bullying behaviors of others. Student-teacher relations are described in either positive or negative terms. While these individuals tend to be average students grade wise, they see themselves as academically successful or as failures in equal proportions. Their descriptions of their school experiences as a whole is typically negative and they are likely to have truancy issues as a result.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977b) would argue the existence a relationship between behaviors and environmental factors that is reciprocal. This would suggest the participant's delinquent attitudes and behaviors revealed in this study are related to their lived experiences. Experiencing negative social relationships results in these individuals developing increased levels of anti-social behaviors. This increase in anti-social behaviors then would be expected to increase the number of negative social relationships experienced by the individual. This could be manifested in terms of perceived negative student-teacher relations yielding increased negative or disruptive behavior in the classroom which in turn results in increased negative student-teacher relationships. According to Bandura (1997b) the cycle of negative social relationships leading to increased negative behaviors which in turn leads to increased negative social relationships is the driving force behind delinquency.

This study did reveal, however, discrepancies between what was observed in this study and what social learning theory suggests. Social learning theory argues that a large part of learning is observational (Bandura, 1977a). By observing negative behaviors in others the individual learns and adopts these behaviors. Repeated victimization of the individual by bullies would, according to this theory, result in individuals who would in turn engage in similar behaviors. However, the descriptions provided by the participants in this study would indicate that this is not the case. The reported experiences of these individuals may have indeed influenced their delinquent attitudes and behaviors; however, not in terms of adopting these behaviors as their own. The question of credibility in terms of the descriptions related by the participants is hard to pin down in concrete terms. It can be pointed out; however, that the descriptions are remarkably similar between participants. Having no contact between participants during the research makes it highly unlikely that the participants would all fabricate similar descriptions. Perhaps at best we can accept these descriptions are accurate and truthful from the perspective of the participant.

One conceptual theme that emerged from the data was self-efficacy and self-esteem. The extent to which the individual believes that success is possible is described by Bandura (1977b) as efficacy expectations. Bandura (1977b) argues these expectations have a very strong influence on achieving that success. If an individual believes they can be successful their chances are greater than those would do not accept that success is possible. Participants in this study who held an image of them self as a failure may very likely insured their failure. Having low efficacy expectations may cause the individual to not even attempt success. This may be the driving force behind those participants in this study who viewed them self as academic failures leading to the self image of being unfocused and not interested in academics. School experiences for individuals with low efficacy expectation as described by the participants in this study tended to be described as "horrible" or "terrible." Such a negative view could possibly foster a sense of low self-efficacy and self-esteem. This creates a cycle in which failure leads to delinquency and delinquency leads to failure.

In a study conducted by Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, and Baumert, (2006) the researchers report the absence of this relationship. Instead, they state no significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement was evident. The current study tends to support this position. From the rich descriptions of the participants an individual is revealed who, despite

their negative self image, went on to become successes obtaining either a high school diploma or a GED. In addition, each participant reported achieving over all grades which would be considered to be average grades for a high school student. One significant point that should be noted here is these individuals achieved success post adjudication. The possibility cannot be ignored that the treatment these individuals received while in placement, both therapeutic and educational, may have helped to mediate their low self-esteem. This subsequent higher level of self-esteem may be what led to their success.

Limitations

Selection bias is a limitation common to the case study design (George & Bennett, 2005). Conducted research using a small sample size relative to the overall population of interest can result in selection bias. Selection bias occurs when the sample selected disregards possible significant portions of the population which may have an impact on the study results. The sample selected for this study, only eight participants, is very small and selective compared to the general population of prior juvenile offenders. Analysis of the study data does indicate; however, that data saturation was achieved in a segment of the interview questions. It must be considered in any case that a larger sample may have yielded a different result. In addition to the limitation of sample size, the demographics of this study, see figure 1, reveals other limitations.

Figure 1. Demographics

Person	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	GED	HS Diploma	College	Year in college
Participant 10	20	male	Black/African American (non-Hispanic)	Yes	N/A	Yes	did not complete
Participant 11	22	male	Caucasian/White	Yes	N/A	No	N/A
Participant 4	21	male	Caucasian/White	N/A	Yes	No	N/A
Participant 5	21	male	Caucasian/White	Yes	N/A	Yes	Freshman
Participant 6	31	male	Caucasian/White	Yes	N/A	Yes	Sophomore
Participant 7	29	male	Mixed	N/A	Yes	Yes	Freshman
Participant 8	22	male	Caucasian/White	Yes	N/A	Yes	Sophomore
Participant 9	20	male	Caucasian/White	Yes	N/A	Some	Freshman

The sample population selected for this study consisted of male participants. No responses were received from former female juveniles who wished to participate in this study. This is likely related to the failure on the part of the program director and/or aftercare worker to solicit participants. In addition to only male participants the sample was skewed ethnically. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2011) reports that statistically Whites compose 34% of juveniles placed while Blacks represent 41% and 21%. of the individuals in placement were Hispanic. A quick look at Figure 1 reveals Whites composed 75% of participants in this study, 12.5% were Black and one participant described himself as mixed (White and African American). This ethnic makeup is not representative of the general population reported by The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2011).

The ages of the participants also raises some concern. The length of time the individual has been out of placement may have a negative impact on their ability to accurately recall their pre-adjudication experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue study credibility involves establishing a sense of believability that the participants accurately recalled and relayed their experiences. Did the memory of their experiences alter significantly over time? Analysis of the data collected in this study reveals eight separate cases that are all remarkably similar. As noted previously, data saturation did occur in some questions. Therefore, it is unlikely time would

have impacted the memories of these participants significantly in the same manner and to the same extent.

Another point to consider in terms of limitations to the study is the fact that only former adjudicated youth were studied. Two possibilities need to be considered. The first possibility is the descriptions offered by the participants significant only to adjudicated youth. The second possibility is non-adjudicated youth would offer the same or similar lived experiences. While it is a fact that a qualitative study cannot identify a causal relationship, the data collected does offer insight into the experiences of these individuals. This, however, would only be valid if their experiences were significantly different from other individuals not adjudicated.

Recommendations for Future Research or Interventions

This study presented insight into the lived educational experiences of adjudicated youth. The limitations discussed earlier offer an opportunity to expand the research from this base. The issues of population sampling should be addressed in future studies. When conducting these studies a larger sample size is called for. In addition, the sample demographics should be expanded to cover a broader segment of the general population of interest. The new sample population should include an ethnic diversity that is more representative of the population described by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2011) and to include females.

The concern over recall can be addressed by interviewing juveniles still in placement. However, such a study would require strict controls to insure the safety and well being of the participants. It is questionable if such a study would receive IRB approval. One final recommendation addresses the question as to whether or not these experiences are unique to these individuals. Concurrent studies should be conducted in which both adjudicated and non-adjudicate individuals are asked to describe their lived experiences. By comparing the descriptions provided by both groups it may be possible to visualize any similarities or differences in these experiences. This would serve to answer the question of uniqueness.

Ultimately studies of juvenile delinquency should have a goal of discovering possible interventions. A qualitative study such as this one is not designed to identify treatments or methodologies. However, analysis of the data did reveal one significant finding that needs to be mentioned, bullying. While this study cannot identify the extent to which bullying impacted the individuals, it raises the question of what that impact might be. A review of recent literature reveals multiple studies addressing the issue of bullying. As a result of these studies several programs have been develop to prevent and mediate bullying in schools. While this study cannot reveal the impact of bullying, clearly any mediation efforts could prove beneficial.

Burkhart, Knox, and Brockmyer (2013) presented their early intervention program, ACT Raising Safe Kids Program on Children's Bullying Behavior; Esteki Azad and Amiri (2012) developed the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; and Pack, White, Raczynski, and Wang (2011) developed the Safe School Ambassadors Program. Each of these programs have been successfully applied in schools. Other programs either currently exist or are being developed that may be equally effective. Ultimately, the schools hold the major share of responsibility for selecting a program that meets their needs in their particular setting. What is essential is that they make a choice and do something to alleviate the problems of bullying in their schools.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1) How would you describe yourself as a student?
2) How would you describe the grades you received?
      i. Describe your experiences in terms of academic success or failure.
3) How would you describe your relationships with your teachers?
4) How would you describe your peer relationships while in school?
      i. Describe your close friends in school. (Were they successful academically?)
5) Did you have truancy issues? How would you describe the situations that led to your being truant?
6) Describe a typical day when you were in high school.
      i. Describe any specific incidences, either positive or negative that particularly stand out for you?
7) Describe what you consider to be "serious trouble" for a student in school.
      i. Did you ever get into trouble in school?
      ii. If so, would you describe in your own words the first time you remember getting into trouble.
      iii. Were you expelled or suspended? Describe in your own words the situation leading up to your being expelled or suspended.
8) Describe for me in your own words what juvenile delinquency means.
9) How would you describe your overall school experience?

Author Note

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Article Citation

Donges, W. E. (2015). A qualitative case study: The lived educational experiences of former juvenile delinquents. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(7), 1009-1028. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/7/donges4.pdf