Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

School dropout, problem behaviour and poor academic achievement: a longitudinal view of Portuguese male offenders

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School dropout, problem behaviour and poor academic achievement: a longitudinal view of Portuguese male offenders

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This study examines school dropouts from the perspective of male adults themselves through interviews with offenders currently serving sentences. Participants were 10 Portuguese male inmates, between the ages of 19 and 46 years of age, incarcerated in two prison facilities on the Azores. Qualitative and interpretative methods were carried out using a semi-structured in-depth individual interview that was audio-recorded and conducted on the basis of a list of topics. Interview transcripts and thematic analysis were used in data treatment and analysis. The findings primarily indicate that poor academic achievement and emotional and behavioural difficulties of participants played a particular role in early school dropout. The trajectories that these individuals followed within the education system presented problem behaviour, learning disabilities and/or foster care interventions. While school dropout circumstances were apparently various, analysis showed that they were underpinned by three distinct sets of conditions generally not addressed by the education system. The analysis of the triggering factors and the maintenance dynamics of school dropouts indicated three distinct types: retention/absenteeism, life turning points and positive resolution. Implications for secondary prevention and screening practices are discussed.

Keywords: school dropout; problem behaviour; delinquency; criminality; qualitative study

The extensive literature on criminality suggests a clear correlation between adult criminality and juvenile delinquency, where the last is an excellent predictor of the first (Agra and Matos 1997; Born 2005; Cusson 2006; Farrington 2003; Gassin 1994). A closer look at the early onset and development of antisocial and aggression behaviour patterns is required in order to be able to suggest implications for the promotion of pro-social behaviour in prevention and intervention strategies (Tremblay, LeMarquant and Vitaro 2000). Assuming the diverse pattern of antisocial behaviour, a specific risk factor may be used as a predictor of a variety of antisocial behaviours, and its neutralization through specific and precise preventive actions could result in a reduction of social problems (Baldry and Farrington 2000).

In the last decade, Portugal, as with other Western societies, has been concerned with school violence, especially when the media address administrative and pedagogical measures adopted by the government or other authorities (Carvalho 2005; Correia and Matos 2003; Pereira 2001). Current discussion focuses on the growing awareness of the difficulties regarding the management of school discipline – for instance, violent episodes between peers – and the influence of contemporary and significant social and ethical changes. The

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different expressions of antisocial behaviour in childhood and adolescence provide great constraints on the educational practices of teachers and other school staff and interfere with academic achievement (Farrington 2005). When dealing with these limitations and constraints, schools tend to tighten their discipline policies into a *zero tolerance* standpoint and apply measures that generate segregative methods and procedures. In this context, antisocial behaviour disturbs the school atmosphere, challenges internal cohesion and rigidifies relationships that emerge primarily in the process of teaching/learning, resulting generally in unsatisfactory school-related experiences for some of the students.

The vast majority of children present specific risk factors such as poverty, crime, neglect or abuse, in which cases traditional discipline methods and policies may worsen rather than reduce problem behaviours (Gottfredson et al. 2005; Janosz and Le Blanc 1999). Some authors argue that, since there are certain segments of the population that are particularly at risk of engaging in violence, school violence may be regarded from this point of view as a result of the influence of culture, society and politics, leading to *social vulnerability* (Soulet 2007; Vettenburg 1999; Walgrave 1992).

Problem behaviour is often connected with learning problems, poor school performance, progressive disengagement and early school dropout. Portuguese data from Pereira (2008) confirmed that students with poor academic achievement show more aggressive behaviours than successful students. Research shows that the development of most antisocial behaviours depends on the balance between risk and protective factors associated with individuals, families, schools and communities (Gottfredson et al. 2005; Catalano et al. 2004). School-level research has identified the effects of specific environmental factors that influence youth behaviour, such as the characteristics of the school and classroom environments, interrelationship-level experiences, peer group experiences, personal values, attitudes and beliefs. On the other hand, curriculum issues, teaching strategies and expectations as well as the school achievement ambiance are the major aspects that structure student's opportunities to learn (Gottfredson 1990). This in return enhances institutions' ability to convey formal and informal knowledge – such as interiorising social rules and values – which occur essentially through personal experience. Some school-related experiences and attitudes often precede delinquency, and these include poor school performance and attendance, low commitment to schooling and low attachment to school. It is recognized that school disengagement is typically a function of past experiences of poor school achievement and subsequent experiences of misunderstanding, criticism and rejection (Gottfredson 1990; Hawkins 1995). These result in lower levels of engagement, unsatisfactory relationships, negative feelings and students becoming less interested in self performance in school-related activities. As to peer-related experiences, many are school-centred and include peer rejection and association with delinquent peers. At an individual level, impulsiveness and low levels of self-control are found, as well as early problem behaviour, disobedient attitudes, a tendency to favour beliefs about the advantages of the violation of the law and low levels of social competency skills. The research literature links these factors with crime and delinquency (Gottfredson et al. 2005; DiClemente, Hansen and Ponton 1996).

It should be highlighted at this point that the research on school violence and academic achievement uses predominantly quantitative methods and addresses generally prevalence issues and associated risk factors. This fact contributes to the limitations of common research to tackle the subjective aspects that may explain disengagement in school related activities. The present investigation seeks to explore school dropouts among Portuguese adult and young incarcerated male offenders using a qualitative interview study with thematic analysis. This qualitative approach examines the perceptions, reasons and

personal motives underlying school disengagement, focusing on significant events of a social nature and life courses, and targeting the early-onset of male juvenile problem behaviours. Participants were asked to describe and discuss their school experiences, focusing on achievement, child baseline behaviour, school environment and eventual dropout. Narratives were explored in terms of school disengagement, significance of the representations and implications of school dropout in the process of developing a deviant behaviour pattern. The study is part of a broader empirical investigation concerned with autobiographical narratives regarding antisocial behaviour, violence and school victimization, and relates bullying phenomena during childhood and life-course criminality.[1,2] It is not within the scope of this paper to draw an extensive review of the literature on school dropout and its relationship to delinquency and criminal pathways (Agra and Matos 1997; Baldry and Farrington 2000; Born 2005; Catalano et al. 2004; Cusson 2006; DiClemente, Hansen and Ponton 1996; Farrington 2003, 2005; Gassin 1994; Gottfredson et al. 2005; Gottfredson 1990; Hawkins 1995; Tremblay, LeMarquant and Vitaro 2000) but to explore life stories and look closely at the challenges that these individuals endured during their child and youth development.

The next section identifies and develops concepts that the study addresses and for which there are generally agreed-upon definitions.

Note about terminology

Regardless of the specific behaviours, aggressive behaviour falls into the main category of antisocial behaviour, while juvenile delinquency is characterized by a range of antisocial behaviours that are typified as crime by the state law and the juvenile code. The various dimensions of delinquency, as well as the evolving policy-making process of the Juvenile Justice System, shape a concept that goes beyond legal intervention for a crime or act committed (Fonseca 2004; Negreiros 2008; Weiner 1995) and where both psychiatric and legal definitions combine. Poor academic achievement is identified when a student performs academically below the average level in relation to his age group in a conventional educational setting, resulting in insufficient academic marks, disqualification, grade retention and eventual non-attendance.

The general label of emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), though arguable (Macleod 2010), suits our investigation, as both *challenging* and *vulnerable* young people characterize our group of participants. Experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties may be associated with mental health *disorders* depending on whether the symptoms are clinically significant in a way that is beyond the limits of what is considered normal functioning. Psychological disorders most commonly encountered in school-aged children and adolescents are described in the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (DSM-IV-TR) published by the American Psychiatric Association (2000). This classification of mental health problems features specific behaviour patterns such as conduct disorder (CD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The concepts of CD and ODD draw from psychopathology and characterize two kinds of anti-social behaviour that are clinically significant (Kazdin and Whitley 2006). According to DSM-IV-TR criteria, CD may be diagnosed when a child seriously misbehaves with aggressive or non-aggressive behaviours towards people, animals or property, the essential feature being a repetitive and persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others and major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated. Children with ODD show a recurrent pattern of negative, defiant, disobedient and hostile behaviour toward authority figures (APA 2000). Broader

labels such as *disruptive*, *challenging* or *troublesome* may encompass both CD and ODD, relating the impact that the behaviour has on disturbing the school learning environment. Whatever the case may be, a childhood behaviour disorder consists of a marked pattern of social impairment and maladjustment that results in repetitive acting-out behaviour and not in an isolated incident. The present study decided on a terminological alternative – *problem behaviour* – as it offered a wider definition and subsumed a variety of behaviours.

Research method and procedure

The investigation was approved by the Directorate General of Prison Services and gathered the participants' individual written consent. Prison staff and administrators also provided feedback and guidance, particularly regarding feasibility issues and enlightenment on institutional needs and regulations.

Population, field site and setting

Participants in this study were 10 Portuguese male inmates, between the ages of 19 and 46, serving prison sentences in the Azores archipelago. The data presented in this article were combined from two separate prison populations as the study was carried out in two small towns.[3] Five participants ranged between the ages of 26 and 30: two were between the ages of 21 and 25, two were between the ages of 31 and 35 and one was 46 years old. As for the marital status, seven were single, two said they had a partner and one was married. With regard to employment previous to incarceration, four were nonspecific workers in the building industry, two were painters in the building industry, two were agriculture workers, one was a warehouse keeper and one a nonspecific worker in the automobile industry.

Apart from the theoretical interest in both the research design and specific field site, the choice of this population was also based on the availability of and accessibility for the author who conducted the interviews.[4] As the study was of an exploratory nature, it was not appropriate to define and attain factors such as homogeneity or power. Nevertheless, inclusion criteria were defined in order to provide understandable and relevant views. Included were actual conviction, age limit of 50, expressive and communicative skills, completion of mandatory schooling and voluntary participation. Participants were initially referred by the Prison Board of Directors, followed by a group meeting with the inmates that was carried out by the first researcher in the prison setting. This initial encounter focused on the project framework and procedure. Ethical considerations regarding confidentiality and anonymity were discussed, inviting inmates to participate. While opportunistic rather than purposive sampling was used, a final group of 10 inmates was recruited.

The Azores are an archipelago which consists of nine major islands. The predominant characteristic of the Azorean social context is its rural sociocultural environment. Inhabitants make their living essentially out of agriculture, dairy farming, livestock and fishing. In addition to tourism becoming the principal service activity, the regional government employs a large percentage of the population in many aspects of the service and tertiary sectors. Core policy strategies are identical to those practised in mainland Portugal. The specific geological characteristics and subsequent economical setbacks explain its long history of emigration to North America, mainly the United States and Canada. The group of participants in this study reflects this reality, with one individual having gone through his childhood and early adulthood abroad.

Basic education[5] takes nine years and is compulsory for all Portuguese children between the ages of 6 and 15 years of age. Primary school covers lst to 4th grade for pupils

between the ages of six and 10 years, while middle school is for pupils between the ages of 10 and 15 and covers 5th to 9th grade. After successfully completing nine years of compulsory education, children aged 14 to 15 may decide to continue secondary education, in either general or technological courses. There are also other types of school education such as the apprenticeship system and vocational education. Students with disabilities, considered as having special educational needs, are integrated in normal primary and secondary schools under specific conditions.

In Portugal, the age of criminal responsibility is considered to be 16 years old. As for young offenders, the Portuguese Criminal Code involves a special jurisdiction[6] for a young person aged 16 to 21 suspected of engaging in criminal activity. Although the Portuguese criminal justice system deals with young offenders differently from adult offenders, this distinction concerns predominantly court decisions and procedures, and young offenders are mainly sentenced to adult prisons. As a result, in both of the facilities involved in the study, as in the majority of the Portuguese regional detention and prison facilities, distinct age groups of sentenced offenders and awaiting-trial detainees are mixed.

Instrument and procedure

A semi-structured interview was conducted individually for each participant in an accustomed setting in the prison facility. The qualitative method followed Bertaux's (2005), Finger's (1989) and Josso's (2002) core ideas and concepts. Themes were elicited progressively, rather than being decided in advance. The informal and conversational tone of the semi-structured research interview was highlighted by the nature of the questioning being based upon a prepared list of topics rather than a formal interview script (Guerra 2006). These topics formed a *loose* guide to the conversation, allowing participants to explore issues that were pertinent to them rather than those assumed by the researchers. The purpose was to reach each personal perspective and discover the interviewee's own framework of meanings. The study depicted here concerns aspects solely related to school dropout and associated data but this methodological procedure covered a wide range of phenomena (Saraiva, Pereira, and Zamith-Cruz 2009). The interview was structured as a whole following eight main topics: school trajectory, school dropout, school violence, school bullying, family and significant others, secondary socialization, criminal trajectory and present and future expectations. In the beginning, participants were asked to recall and describe school experiences, and as narratives progressed, data concerning academic achievement, baseline behaviour and relationship with peers, teachers and other school-staff were gathered along with specific life episodes, and the perspectives and interpretations of these experiences. Where development or clarification was required, the interviewer suggested a further explanation underlying the participant's own description of a major life event and personal impact. Duration, richness of content and the inquiry style indicate that in-depth interviews have been conducted. While there was initial concern that the interviews might be complex and difficult to conduct, in actual fact they turned out to be enjoyable and open conversations. Document analysis was a complementary procedure to allow for confirmation of convictions and sentences; this ultimate procedure was completed in close collaboration with the prison staff.

All 10 interviews were carried out between March and June 2008. The average duration registered was approximately 60 minutes. One pilot interview was carried out prior to the study to improve the interview process and to provide feedback on the goals of the research, allowing refinement of the topics and themes to be explored, as well as a more comfortable management of the interview by the first researcher.

Data management and data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and transcripts were checked for completeness and accuracy. A *portrait* of each participant was written, describing his major life course and a synopsis of each interview was drawn. Content analysis was applied (Bardin 2008; Guerra 2006) with sampling and coding procedures. A similar approach using retrospective data and a life-course viewpoint was also employed in other qualitative studies (Jahnukainen 2007; Kivirauma and Jahnukainen 2001). The main objective was to provide the basis for identifying all relevant patterns in the data and so characterize school dropout phenomena. This way, the approach of the data was inductive not deductive.

School dropout data units consisted of narratives that described the process of dropping out of school, the reasons to justify it and the consequences of this event. Coding units were not quantified in number or percentage, as the study only focused on the evidence or lack of evidence of a given category. The theme was the analysis unit of the coding procedure and a cut rule based on meaning was used, for these options suited the nature of the instrument in a better way and tackled the specific subject matter of the study (Bardin 2008).

When dealing with *a priori* coding, categories are established prior to the analysis and are then based upon the theoretical reference. The authors presumed irregular school trajectories were to be found, in which poor academic achievement and inadequate baseline behaviour would play a particular role. With regard to school dropout, we assumed it would occur before reaching basic school qualification, and as a result early school dropout was considered. Another aspect would be that absenteeism and disengagement could presumably be part of the dropping out process. These initial questions that guided our research are to be found in Figure 1. Each interview followed a particular speech and evoked specific contexts of the events; therefore, context units were also considered in the coding
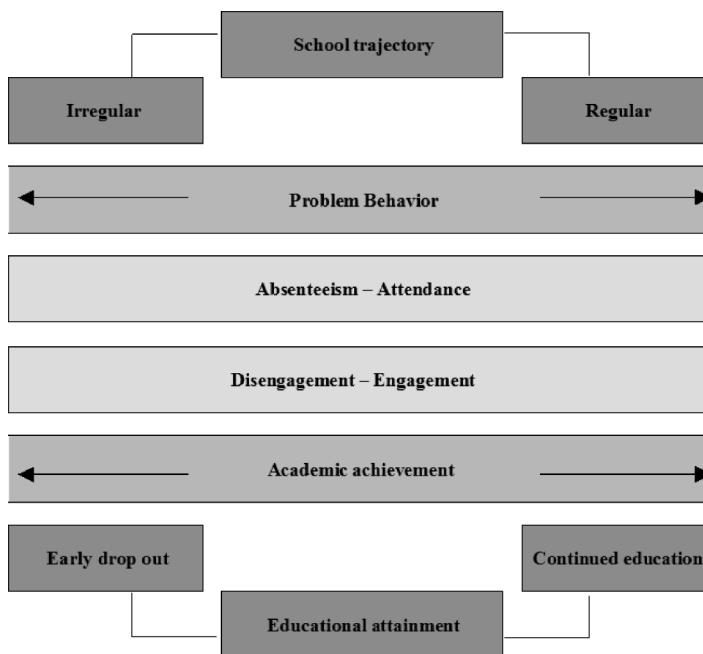

Figure 1.   Key research dimensions.

process. This aspect is concerned with the whole interview and therefore, the synopses of the interviews as well as the relevant life courses were also important at this stage.

Transcripts were then scrutinized for evidence to support and develop the initial codes, and an iterative process then occurred in which the transcript material altered the initial codes, until the investigator believed that a fair and accurate picture had been drawn. In the first stage, an individual and chronological analysis helped us visualize each participant's school trajectory (vertical analysis). This then allowed us to establish subgroups on the basis of similarity of the main features of the early life courses and specific characteristics, namely life turning points, family dynamics, secondary socialization, criminal trajectory and mental health information. Categories were tightened up to a point that they maximized mutual exclusivity and, as the coding process developed, new categories emerged. Revisions of the initial categories were made as necessary, complementing in this way with *a posteriori* categories. Throughout the process of multiple readings it was often necessary to explore similarities of concepts and compare categories and constructs between interviews (horizontal analysis). We looked for diversity and similarity of ideas and paths as well as alternative or oppositional perspectives, but we also checked the coherence of the life narratives. The aim of this process was to reach clear categories of different school dropout pathways and the presentation of case descriptions. When this was complete, transcripts, portraits and codes were sent to the thesis advisors for their approval or amendment.

Findings

Descriptive data

The mean age of participants (n = 10) was 29, with one participant being significantly older (46). In general, individuals predominantly came from average and low socioeconomic status families. Document analysis confirmed the crimes for which participants were serving sentence: three were imprisoned for aggravated larceny; two for drug trafficking; one for robbery; one for assault; one for aggravated larceny, robbery and driving without a licence; one for driving without a licence and dangerous driving; and one for larceny, swindling and document forgery. Seven had served previous prison sentences and therefore were considered recidivists. Five had other known alleged offences for which they were under investigation or awaiting trial. Three participants were serving sentences of between four to five years; three had been convicted for less than one year; two were serving a one to two year sentence; one was serving a two to three year sentence; and one was awaiting trial at the time of the interview. This last participant had previous criminal records, had served several prison sentences immediately before his cooperation and was detained and awaiting trial for seven other alleged offences. He was, therefore, considered for the study.

Considering the number of participants and with respect to the ethical norms adopted, the predominant features of psychosocial data were listed in the next table (Table 1).

School trajectories presented problem behaviour and/or learning disabilities and/or foster care, namely in residential group facilities. Four participants presented problem behaviour; six presented delinquency patterns of behaviour; six drug abuse; and four adult psychopathology. In some cases, problematic behaviour or significant psychological disorders were acknowledged and recognized: some had been submitted to psychiatric hospitalization in the past or to outpatient facilities and others mentioned being voluntarily medicated with anti-psychotics, antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications. Nevertheless, the specific behaviour problems identified above did not always depend on the direct account by participants but were rather inferred from their narratives, where descriptions

Table 1.   Background information on the interviewees ($N = 10$) according to family characteristics and social context of the child development.

	Variable/characteristic	F
Family context	Domestic violence	4
	Separated parents	3
	Death of one parent	3
	Alcoholic father	2
	Illness of one parent	2
	Immigrant	1
Foster care	Child neglect	1
(residential group unit)	Child abuse	1

of child baseline behaviour and latter psychosocial characteristics related to a set of DSM diagnostic criteria specific to some disorders.

Early dropout and frequent retentions

Seven out of 10 participants dropped out before completing basic school. The average age was 15, which indicates that although they attained compulsory education (nine years of schooling) they did not achieve the required standards of general assessment at a normal age. Consequently, each participant registered on average more than one grade retention while attending school: five presented retention in primary school, two of which were retained twice. Table 2 shows participants' educational level (highest level of schooling attained or diploma granted), age at school dropout and previous grade retentions.

School dropout types

Three distinct school dropout types – *retention/absenteeism, life turning point and positive resolution* – are presented here in relation to the dynamics that produced them, namely triggers and maintenance factors. The categorization of the dropout processes considered the sampling units related to the topic and the temporal criteria, specifically life-course *turning points* (Clausen 1995; Gotlib and Wheaton 1996).

Three study participants cited having to start work as the most unequivocal and straightforward explanation for dropping out of school prior to completing basic school education. However, further exploration of motives and baseline behaviour led to a deeper analysis and the definition of the sub-category *retention/absenteeism*. Life-changing circumstances and their traumatic impact were determinant for four participants, for whom the normal course of daily life was changed, resulting in school dropout. These were considered in the *life turning point* category. The last category of school dropout types, labelled as *positive resolution*, depicted education continuing generally after a period of school interruption, or in the presence of special educational modalities. In fact, three participants carried out a nine-year education trajectory (or more) and were therefore considered in this sub-category. This did not necessarily mean academic achievement, as they presented, nevertheless, irregular school trajectories. Two of them were taught in alternative education curricula and for two study participants, positive resolution was achieved after a maximum period of one year of school non-attendance. For each of these situations, further exploration allowed us to gather the factors that may have facilitated this positive outcome.

Table 2. Interviewees' educational level, age at school dropout and retentions ($N = 10$).

Basic compulsory education	
Primary school	
4th grade	0057: Special education until the age of 16
Middle School	
5th Grade	0056: dropout at 15 1 retention (4th grade) 6th grade attendance
6th Grade	0052: dropout at 15 2 retentions (1st and 4th grade) 7th grade attendance
	0053: dropout at 16 1 retention (5th grade) 7th grade attendance
	0055: dropout at 17 Retentions were likely but not mentioned 7th grade attendance
	0059: dropout at 15 1 retention (1st grade) 7th grade attendance
7th Grade	0049: dropout at 15 2 retentions (1st and 5th grade) 8th grade attendance
	0051: dropout at 15 2 retentions (2nd and 3rd grade) 8th grade attendance
Secondary education	
Secondary School	
12th Grade	0048: interruption at 16 Retentions were likely but not mentioned
	0058: interruption at 12 No grade retentions
Total	10

Dropout – retention/absenteeism

This first type apparently combined different processes but, in general, the participants' trigger for dropping out of school was last year's grade retention, mainly linked to periods of school non-attendance and as contextualized by a behaviour pattern that indicated problem behaviour, as exemplified in the following quotation:[7]

> I was going to give up studying, I was going to quit school and get a job. When I got to middle school, I didn't feel like studying anymore. Already in primary school I lacked patience, in middle school it was even worse, it was too much. . . . That's when I started to give it up and I skipped school so often that I failed because I skipped so often. When I got home I told my mother: Listen, I want to quit school because I failed again, I don't want to study anymore. And that's how it happened. Then I started to work. (Cod. 0049, dropped out of school at 15 while attending the 8th grade)

Maintenance factors found were manifested as a lack of interest in school activities, prospects or opportunities of other natures, evidence of prior problem behaviour, deviant peer association and juvenile delinquency, as illustrated by this excerpt:

> During 6th grade, it was unlucky, I broke my leg and I failed that year. I was nearly two months at home. Already before that I sometimes skipped school to go to bullfights. I always returned to school. After that I started working, then I began to challenge bulls and started to get the taste of it. Sometimes they make bets and stuff, you get some money. I got used to it. (Cod. 0056, dropped out of school at 15 while attending the 6th grade)

Labour market integration was primarily mentioned as a reason for school dropout, following the desire to earn money at an early age. Nevertheless, intentions differed from what actually happened, mainly due to deviant peer association and later, drug abuse. The main contingencies related to the eventual dropout revealed daily instability, disorganized routine and change in social environment. Being emotionally unprepared, lacking in social and personal skills and having weak reading and writing competencies, these youngsters faced drug abuse opportunities as well as small group criminality.

Dropout: life turning point

The analysis of data concerning turning points in the life-course was determinant for the conceptualization of this type of school dropout. The data addressed predominantly environmental circumstances such as a shift in the family economical situation and some other traumatic events such as the impact of the loss of one parent or specific events occurring in foster care residential units. It was often stated that these events were followed by the need to find a job in order to subsist or assist the family, but the main trigger of school dropout was of another nature and therefore elicited other reactions such as depression, flight or accountability.

One of the participants mentioned his father's death as the most upsetting incident that later caused dramatic life changes, including school dropout and a depression episode:

> Then I stopped studying. At the time, my father got sick. He had heart problems, he was 36 years old. I then had a nervous breakdown. After that my father died and from then on I didn't want to study any more. For one year I went to school at night but then I dropped out of school because what I really wanted was to help my mother: she was a widow at 32 with four children. I don't know why I blamed myself, you know, for my father's death, and something got hold of me. I was cut off from the world and I didn't talk to anybody. For almost a year I was locked up, it was almost as if I were imprisoned in my room, I didn't go out. (Cod. 0052, left school in the 7th grade at the age of 15)

Another participant mentioned his parents' separation and his father's passing shortly afterwards as reasons for starting to work in order to help provide economic means for the family. For these two participants, the perceived need to drop out of school was connected to the assumption of the responsibility to provide for their family, following the loss or absence of a significant family member. School dropout was followed by unspecific, low wage and inconstant jobs. Nonetheless, the initial purpose of providing for their family underwent variation predominantly due to deviant peer association, juvenile delinquency and/or substance abuse. The next text segment illustrates this variation in outcome.

It was because of the people I hung out with. I also didn't think further. They skipped school too. They wanted nothing out of life. Unfortunately I also started smoking *(tobacco)*. We went out with our girlfriends and as they did crazy things I went along. Thefts. They stole and I used to go along. They stole quite a lot. (Cod. 0053, dropped out at 16 in the 7th grade)

This dropout type was also linked to other maintenance factors and contingencies such as escape from a situation perceived as harmful in a foster care context. Two individuals directly related school dropout to incidents occurring in child protection institutions, one of them referred to severe aggression of an adult staff member and the need to avoid the consequences of his behaviour by running away.

I dropped out of school at 15, I had good marks though. I was expelled because I beat up a 37-year-old man. I had to run away – I knew the situation would either get worse or I would be punished for many years. (Cod.0051, dropped out at 15 while attending the 8th grade)

In this case, an act of severe aggression triggered the decision to run away to avoid punishment. The individual therefore dropped out of school. Deeper analysis revealed the motive for this aggression was the alleged attempted rape of his younger brother by the 37-year-old adult figure. Later, the relationship with his mother proved to be very dysfunctional and he moved in with some friends who used drugs. He progressively became drug addicted as well and was subsequently introduced into dealing.

In a similar situation, another participant mentioned imprecisely that anger and frustration started from the daily routine in an institution. Although revealing only ambiguous reasons, his description of dropping out of school showed a clear-cut in his life course. During the interview, the non verbal communication indicators led researchers to believe that this was most likely the result of a traumatic event still concealed. In both of these situations, the life turning point caused an escape reaction. In these cases, street life experiences, youngsters' vulnerability and the lack of positive family references played a particular role and were combined with deviant social environments where drug abuse and delinquent acts often occurred.

The participants in this category presented school dropout as a reaction to either a traumatic life event or an important change in the basic structure assisting development, such as child protection institutions. As a result, this shift occurred following an incident associated with loss or harm in whichever life environments.

Dropout: positive resolution

Positive resolution was the label established for a third school dropout type, where the compulsory education was completed. The temporal factor present in *early* school dropout was determinant in this category and age of dropout and completing or not nine years of schooling was also considered. In fact, 18 was the mean age found for the completion of education in this sub-category. Two individuals interrupted school attendance during a period of time – not longer than a year – and had the intention of actually dropping out. The third individual presented early detection of learning disabilities and a subsequent adapted school intervention, but in the end neither reading nor writing skills were achieved. The next quotation illustrates the positive resolution type.

I left school at 16. I started working in a factory, but my parents made me stop – they talked to my boss at the factory and she wouldn't stop nagging me about going back to school. Eventually I went back to school. (Cod.0048)

Nevertheless, this participant registered an irregular school trajectory with a striking pattern of conduct problem behaviour and consequently, school intervention varied between alternative educational programs and frequent school transfer. Another participant also mentioned the reason why he suspended school at 12: his mother got sick and had to go through medical procedures only available on another island where she stayed for over a year, leaving a husband and eight children. Being one of the eldest, he felt compelled to work with his father in agriculture (mainly breeding cattle) and assisting his brothers and sisters on a daily basis:

> At the time my mother was on another island for surgical treatment of a heart condition. I left school to work at home and milk cows with my father, and at the age of 13 I went back to school. I started to attend normal school during the day; after that I quit day time and studied at night. (Cod. 0058)

As depicted in the next text segment, protective factors related to the family influence and organization were determinant for the continued education, even after a period of school non-attendance and intent to quit:

> My parents used to say that I should go to school to learn and not to fool around or make fun of anyone. And I went to school to learn, but once I was out of school I would have fun too. My younger brothers didn't want to finish their education. I told them they would regret it later. They probably can't read. They hardly can sign their names. To find a job nowadays . . . (Cod. 0058)

Discussion

In the qualitative study of adult and young offenders, we focused on the triggering factors and the maintenance dynamics of school dropouts. While the circumstances of school dropout were apparently varied, analysis showed that they were underpinned by a common set of conditions generally not addressed by the education system. Evidence presented in this paper regarding the triggering and maintenance of school dropout indicated three distinct types: *retention/absenteeism*, *life turning point* and *positive resolution*. Differences were mainly grounded in critical life events and psychosocial and context-related vulnerability factors.

In *retention/absenteeism*, poor academic achievement is highly associated with problem behaviour, and these participants presented early grade retention (primary school) or admitted poor school adjustment in the 1st grade. In a similarly designed study using event history analysis among students who repeated grades, Roderick (1994) explored the impact of being overage and school dropout, and argued that students who ended 6th grade overage for that grade experienced substantial disengagement during middle school. These students had either dropped out or showed significant declines in attendance. Furthermore, Janosz et al. (1997) found that school experience variables, such as grade retention, school achievement and school commitment, were the best screening variables for potential dropouts. If family, behavioural, social and personality variables could all, as expected, predict dropping out of school, school-related variables showed a significantly higher predicting rate for early dropout. In a meta-analysis on longitudinal research, Jimerson (2001) questioned the subsequent influence of the decision of grade retention on the development and achievement trajectories and defended appropriate remedial intervention strategies. Continued use of grade retention is a limited intervention strategy that clearly demonstrates the abyss between research and practice. With future educational professionals' training in

mind, new views on long-term effective solutions have been cited 'to consider student developmental and achievement trajectories in order to reinforce and strengthen pathways that promote social and cognitive competence' (Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple 2002, 455). Further research needs to explore better the related processes of school maladjustment, child learning disabilities and problem behaviour, as academic achievement and social/emotional adjustment are highly connected (Murray-Harvey and Slee 2007). Considering school absenteeism as part of a manifested behaviour pattern, the nature and typology of non-attendance should also be explored in schools' daily practice in order to detect and intervene better on this observable and measurable indicator. In this sub-category, the major consequence of school dropout was an unstable life routine, but this aspect was an ongoing process initiated during school time and aggravated through less standard supervision structures. There was also the obvious conflict between the idealization of independence and the daily labour obligation. Another determinant factor was the engagement in deviant processes through peer association as a self-identification and personal validation strategy.

Life turning points are dramatic events that cause anger/rage or depression leading either to impulsive and destructive acts with severe consequences or withdrawal from normative support structures. This category designates the need for timely and appropriate protective measures targeting single parent families, families who have lost a member and children in the foster care system in order to provide ongoing grief support or promote resilience and family adaptation processes. As for the particular situations that happened in the foster care residential units, it was established that the impact resulted from impulsive and/or aggressive attitudes from the individuals themselves. These attitudes were either persistent or magnified by the severity of the consequences of the behaviours, namely severe physical assault. On the other hand, the participants' perspective showed that specific events or relationships linked to the foster care unit activated these reactions and were unquestionably based on abuse experiences. When the case is abuse and mistreatment during state provision measures – that ought to shelter and ensure a proper environment for healthy development when family structures fail – a better look at the way an organization functions is required. Adequate and continuous training and supervision of professionals who are dedicated to children and youngsters under government protection is needed in order to contain and help children process negative past experiences, adequately sustain life plans and have appropriate accommodations put in place.

The *positive resolution* category reflects continued education, but school trajectories show that, although attending school, the learning potential is limited by either cognitive skills or behaviour problems, and both situations may also exist. A better look at the onset of specific behaviour, emotional and/or cognitive difficulties and the adjustment of pedagogical strategies by teachers is worth the effort, especially when combined with the immeasurable gain of working as a team with the rest of school staff and other institutions. As teachers are being held accountable for structuring students' learning opportunities, there are advantages in taking a more active role in understanding students' difficulties using the most promising tool – building relationships. Another point of view would be that the school must go out and promote family/school cooperation, because parents' involvement in school activities and their children's education path is of primary importance, as demonstrated here. It is not that parents are unwilling or unable to do so, but more that school can seem strange and distant, particularly to the more social, economical and culturally vulnerable community groups.

The present study offers to some extent a contribution to the exploration of different types of school dropout in the light of the works of Janosz et al. (1997). It is important to

notice that the dominant research approach has been some form of multiple regression analysis using the dichotomy graduate *versus* dropout, with a particular focus on risk factors. This rather static approach seems to have little impact on social policy strategies, as many of the variables are unaffected by interventions or educational strategies. This suggests that we may be able to identify who is most at-risk of leaving, but evidence of effective intervention strategies is limited. Regarding a comprehensive view of school dropout, schools need to address the developmental history of students that are at risk, as opposed to the traditional approach of focusing on individual factors that are often limited to cognitive ability.

Limitations

The aim of qualitative research is to offer a glance at another person's perceptual world (Glaser 2006) as participants share perceptions of their life experiences and researchers avoid bias and subjectivity. The current study though had a number of limitations that need to be kept in mind when drawing conclusions. A central question regarding in-depth interviewing methods and comprehensive analysis lies on the unavoidable issues of representativity and generalization given the low population size. Qualitative research can better be described by the pursuit of social significance (Guerra 2006): it allows for practical reasoning and consideration of exceptional and complex life aspects or contingencies of a specific universe of participants, in the sense that the individuals themselves discuss and justify their own attitudes and behaviours. The current study also comprised a group of individuals, mostly young adults with an average age of 29, who attended school from the 1980s to 2002. One exception was made for an older participant whose school trajectory covered the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. The time lapse between the experiences portrayed here and the contemporary education system may differ significantly, especially with regard to pedagogical strategies and equity policies. Nowadays, school trajectories and the learning potential of all children are supposed to be more adequately apprehended.

Concerning attitude and conduct, maladjustment is positioned on an axis of the frequency and severity of behaviours. Based on the clinical symptoms to which the different narratives predominantly led, conduct disorder was the most plausible pattern of behaviour, but association with other disorders may have occurred as well. Nevertheless, the retrospective nature of our data and the methods used do not allow for a clear identification of the specific behaviour that may have been involved, nor was it its aim.

Combining other methods of data collection, such as extensive document analysis (school or psychiatric medical records) or interviewing other sources (parents and teachers), should be considered in future qualitative research, because it would allow confirmation of some statements and conditions. The use of narratives is commendable in school dropout research and therefore, mixed methodology should be encouraged. Also, in regard to methodology, the process of data analysis tended to code mainly at the descriptive level rather than explaining or developing an in-depth understanding of dropout processes. This second option would substantially improve the theoretical depth of analysis. Accordingly, future research on the subject should consider more elaborate coding procedures such as the ones involved in a *grounded theory* approach (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998) as a way to push coding to the explanatory level.

Implications and future directions

The purpose of this paper was to present clear categories of different school dropout types, to allow for case description of adult and young male offenders and to highlight the

triggering factors and the maintenance dynamics that in their early life histories were associated with these dropouts. In contrast to the generally low achievement indicators of the participants, whose school pathways are saturated by failure, these individuals apparently have a standard learning potential, exception being made to one who presented cognitive impairment to some degree. The influence of context factors such as school environment and school educational projects and curricula, peer association, siblings' position and family dynamics come into view as influencing aspects that future research should reflect on in order to reduce dissatisfying school experiences and dropout incidence. Policies should look at the design of the educational system that is practised both in and out of school in order to generate fairness of opportunity and help avoid the social costs of marginalized adults with few basic skills. While this does not mean that early school dropout *causes* negative outcomes, or that a high school diploma is an imperative solution, data do imply that students at risk of dropping out are a high-risk population who demand specific programmatic interventions aimed at increasing the likelihood of success in basic school education.

We hope that these results will sensitize school professionals and public policymakers to the importance of developing integrated multilevel intervention strategies and to taking into account the complexity of the situations of these young people, who may need help in their emotional and behavioural difficulties but whose clear need for validation should be met in a more satisfactory way. It is also important to appraise, first, the extraordinary potential that schools bear for preventing delinquency and crime, as they offer regular access to students throughout their developmental stages, starting in the early school years. Second, schools present a skilled workforce to promote healthy and harmonious child development both at the prevention and intervention levels. Addressing school wellbeing issues should be given high priority throughout the curriculum and through partnership initiatives in order to reduce risk factors, increase protective factors and ultimately influence the quality of students' experiences of school (Murray-Harvey and Slee 2007).

In general, the findings suggest further investigation into the role played by school disengagement, peer group dynamics (Eslea et al. 2004), conduct disorder and oppositional deviant disorder onset at an early age (Keenan and Wakschlag 2004) relating to child/adolescent stages and normative development pathways (Elder 1995), child resilience to stressful circumstances (Annaut 2005; Cyrulnik 2003; Gotlib and Wheaton 1996; Liebenberg and Ungar 2009; Ungar 2007), and parenting and parent–child relationships. The challenge is to find ways of reflecting the complexity of the phenomena underlying the occurrence of early delinquent trajectories.

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Notes

1. The first language of the authors is Portuguese.
2. This study is part of the *Childhood memories and school violence: A biographical study of adult and young offenders* project, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in childhood studies degree program at the Institute of Education, University of Minho, Portugal.

3. To ensure anonymity, the names of the towns were not mentioned nor were the real names of any study participants used .
4. Author: ABS, Social Reintegration Counselor at the Directorate General of Social Reintegration, Portugal from 2004 to 2007.
5. Basic Education System Act: Law no. 46/86; Basic and Secondary Education Registration and Attendance: Law no. 301/93; Amendment to the Basic Education System Act: Law no. 115/97; Second Amendment to the Basic Education System Act: Law no. 49/2005.
6. Special Criminal Regime for Young People (16–21): Law no. 401/82.
7. For the purpose of this paper communication, all text segments originally in Portuguese were translated to English by the first researcher.

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