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# Revisiting the Narratives of Finnish Early School Leavers: Mapping Experiences of Detachment through a Self-determination Theory Lens

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## ABSTRACT

Basic psychological needs and people's experiences affect the choices they make, and further shape the trajectories followed through school. The present study focuses on the perspectives of people who left school without graduating. Through narrative interviewing processes we collected the storied experiences of eleven imprisoned early school leavers in Finland. We triangulated data-driven themes and used as theory the concept of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Of these, relatedness was the most common and a shared topic brought forth by the participants. Experiencing dissatisfaction and frustration as a result of the need for relatedness played a crucial role in the participants' narratives. The dissatisfaction experienced manifested itself in a sense of detachment and alienation from school as a society of peers and adults. The conclusion of this study discusses different kinds of structure that can either support or hinder the need for satisfaction.

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## Introduction

While self-determination theory (SDT) shows clear benefits in terms of supporting needs, especially the need for autonomy in classroom settings (Filippello et al., 2019; Jang et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017), much less is known about need perceptions of students who are at risk of leaving school before graduating. Moreover, there is a gap in knowledge about perceived dissatisfaction, which is linked with indifference in need support, being a rather new concept on the continuum of need perceptions (Cheon et al., 2019; Costa et al., 2015). To widen our understanding of the reasons behind premature school leaving, it is important to explore processes and experiences linked with diminishing school motivation and engagement.

Self-determination theory postulates that human beings share an inherent tendency to seek the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that are basic nutrients for healthy development, motivation, and wellbeing (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Perceptions of the satisfaction level of each need have consequences according to how well the need is satisfied; high levels of perceived need satisfaction promote intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). A low state of need satisfaction of one or more needs tends to lead to amotivation

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and maladaptive outcomes, such as substantial sources of need satisfaction, defensive and aggressive behavior, and avoiding environments in which needs are thwarted or poorly met (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). People who leave school prematurely have been, in SDT terms, amotivated towards school (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In Finland, the discontinuation rate in education is 5.9 per cent (Statistic Finland, 2021). However, there are groups of people among whom the discontinuation rate tends to be higher than among the general population, such as short-term prisoners (Kivivuori & Linderborg, 2009) and the Finnish Roma (Rajala & Blomerus, 2016), among others. These groups of people tend to be stigmatized, the Finnish Roma facing a special cultural prejudice as well (Berlin, 2015; Friman-Korpela, 2014; Roman, 2018). Vauhkonen et al. (2017) suggested that reasons behind early school leaving often include diverse and accumulating elements, such as problems with parenting and coping. Furthermore, recent studies have highlighted the importance of relationships with other people, which can either foster or hinder school engagement (Nouwen & Clycq, 2019; Parviainen et al., 2021). Muhonen et al. (2016), and Pöysä et al. (2019) highlighted the quality of teacher–student relationships and the role of teachers in supporting students. Additionally, Fandrem et al. (2021) and Lyyra et al. (2016) suggested that loneliness and peer victimization are elements that can diminish school engagement.

Within the research body of SDT, issues related to school motivation and engagement have mostly been studied using quantitative methods, the findings showing benefits of students' perceptions of need support in the school environment (Ratelle & Duchesne, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Stroet et al., 2013). Ryan and Deci (2020) encouraged qualitative research approaches for deeper understanding of need perceptions and phenomena around them, especially in school settings. Furthermore, as each need can emerge on different levels of satisfaction, Bartholomew et al. (2011) proposed that, when examining negative experiences, it is important to include need thwarting and perceptions of frustration of each need to better understand need perceptions at the low end of motivational functioning. While early school leavers can be considered amotivated in relation to school, they may have more positive perceptions of other life domains. Accordingly, we believed it important to include all levels of experience and circumstance linked to relatedness in the present study to provide space for what the participants told us so as to also identify issues not following the presuppositions of the theoretical framework. The perspective of early school leavers can expand our knowledge of these research problems by providing insights into need perceptions among students within the process of leaving school. Furthermore, Granfelt (2017) suggested that a prison environment, where people are separated from their daily activities, provides a mental space for reflecting on one's past experiences. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study using narrative interviews with Finnish early school leavers, who were imprisoned during the time of the interviews, to examine the participants' experiences of need satisfaction in different contexts (Pikkarainen et al., 2019, 2021). Here, we develop further our analysis of the data set. Focusing on the need for relatedness, we aim to identify aspects of need dissatisfaction and indifference, as well as dynamics between different need states, as expressed in the participants' narrative accounts.

## Conceptual and ethical commitments of the study

Narrative research approaches are based on the proposition that people shape and share their experiences by the telling of them and also a commitment to respect this kind of storied experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative accounts, produced through interviews, consist of the storied experiences of a group of participants with whom the interviewer has created a research relationship (Clandinin, 2013; Heikkinen, 2002). Following the conceptualizing of Dewey (1938/1997) and, later, Bruner (2004) and Clandinin (2013), we understand lived experience as a dynamic continuum shaped by former and present interactions with one's environment. As Clandinin (2013) highlights, a storied experience is a co-operative product of the conversational interaction between the teller and the listener. Accordingly, while

interpreting meanings identified in narrative accounts in a theoretical framework, the researcher needs to acknowledge the borderlines between presupposed, researcher-driven conceptualizing of phenomena and lived experience storied by people participating in the study. As suggested by Jonsen and Jehn (2009), we applied triangulation by using a theory, which in the present study is the concept of the three basic psychological needs as an organizing tool of the data.

Conducting a narrative study is an ethical act from the first steps of the research plan to the production of the research texts and their publication (Josselson, 2007). An ethical attitude of respect and care, as well as the principle of not harming the participants or the group they belong to, are the basic guidelines of the research practices and further use of the research texts (Josselson, 2007). While negotiating with the participants the meanings of what has been told, the researcher emphasizes the nature of the participant as a specialist on the issue at hand and posits herself as a listener and learner (Clandinin, 2013).

In the present study we used a theoretical framework provided by SDT, the research body of which mostly consists of quantitative studies (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Stroet et al., 2013). Following the conceptualization of Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017, 2020) and Vansteenkiste et al. (2020), we understand by relatedness a sense of belonging, being connected with other people, feeling significant to others, as well as a desire to be integrated with a social group or groups, either with people imminently present or with a group physically further away. Relatedness, as a basic psychological need, plays a crucial role in school motivation and engagement throughout the school years, as it is especially interwoven in the developmental tasks of school age, when skills needed for independent adulthood are learned in interaction with surrounding people (Ratelle & Duchesne, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, perceptions of relatedness play a role in support for other psychological needs, when need support is provided by other people (Ricard & Pelletier, 2016; Wood, 2016). Hence, we have also included in this article support, indifference, or thwarting of competence and autonomy when linked with interaction with other people.

While examining autonomy support, Cheon et al. (2019) proposed the existence of three distinguishable states of need satisfaction rather than two: frustration at the lowest end of need satisfaction and satisfaction at the highest, adding dissatisfaction in between these two levels of need satisfaction. Elements predicting these perceived experiences have been divided into three levels as well—need thwarting, indifference, and support for each need—from the low end towards the higher-level facilitators of need satisfaction (Cheon et al., 2019). Cheon et al. examined perceived dissatisfaction with autonomy using questionnaires for students to provide self-reported responses to indifference on the part of teachers, thus providing descriptions of the practical implications of manifestations of indifference and dissatisfaction. To identify the different aspects of circumstance, the background factors that enhanced or prohibited satisfaction of the need for relatedness, and in addition to identify aspects indicating indifference, we distinguished between circumstances as background settings and circumstances as experiences, as shown in Table 1. These descriptions, composed for the questionnaires, provided an operationalized view of the theoretical framework and enabled the identification of meanings resonating with the framework in the narrative accounts. While the narrative accounts provided insights into the kinds of experience the participants identified as individually relevant to their path out of school, the operationalized descriptions in the questionnaires enabled us to find matches between these two.

In SDT, structure is seen as a crucial element of facilitating a need-supporting environment and interaction, within which need satisfaction can emerge (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The research body emphasizes that good structure in educational settings consists of clearly informed expectations, consistency, and informational feedback that acknowledges effort, improvement, and mastery (Jang et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Structure is a crucial element of healthy development in other life domains too. Parenting and familial structure, within the cultural and societal environment, shape the quality of circumstances for children's experiences of need satisfaction (Ratelle et al., 2017, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, during the developmental age, when the children are dependent on their family, experiences of physical and

**Table 1.** Description of circumstances and experiences linked with the three basic psychological needs.

Circumstances	Experiences
Supporting Respect, care, and safety Informative, encouraging, and understated feedback Structure providing consistency in guidelines and expectations Listening to a person's perspective Acknowledging improvement and mastery	Satisfaction Sense of belonging, connection, and trust Feeling significant to others Experiences of warmth, bonding, and care
Indifferent Neglecting, ignoring Important others pay little or no attention to a person's needs Weak structure Important others ask a person to set aside his/her psychological needs	Dissatisfaction A sense of disregard A sense of detachment A sense of being detached from peers A sense of being insignificant to important others A sense of being ignored or neglected
Thwarting Controlling relationships, exclusion Non-existent structure, chaos Rejection Controlling behavior Suppressive or contradictory feedback Verbal and/or physical violence Leaving without care or support Abusive behavior	Frustration A sense of social exclusion A sense of hopelessness A sense of alienation A sense of helplessness A sense of loneliness A sense of coldness from important others Feeling distant from important others

Sources: Cheon et al. (2019), Costa et al. (2015), Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017, 2020), Van der Kaap-Deeder et al. (2020), and Vansteenkiste et al. (2020).

psychological safety are crucial for healthy development, as well as trust in receiving care and need support for the three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As Ratelle and Duchesne (2014) proposed, the developmental tasks of age shape the dynamics and manifestations of need perceptions, for instance in adolescent students' adjustment to school.

According to the SDT research literature, it can be presupposed that people who leave school prematurely have encountered need thwarting in school settings and experienced frustration of one or several of the basic psychological needs. However, what roles perceived dissatisfaction and circumstances shaped by indifference play in school disengagement, as well as how these experiences are shaped by earlier qualities of need perceptions, remain unknown. By using a narrative approach, we aim to widen our understanding of need frustration and dissatisfaction from the perspectives of people involved. Our research task is two-fold, as we focus on the concepts of indifference and dissatisfaction in relation to the need for relatedness. We aim to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What kind of circumstances and experiences did the participants identify as individually relevant concerning indifference and dissatisfaction with relatedness in their process of leaving school?
- (2) What examples of accumulation could be identified in relation to participants' experiences of relatedness?

## Participants, interviews, and data management

After obtaining a research license from the Ministry of Justice, Finland, the first author conducted the interviews between November 2015 and June 2017. They began with two pilot interviews, followed by interviews with 11 imprisoned participants, as described by Pikkarainen et al. (2021). Data analysis started during the co-operative interview process, when the interviewer discussed with the participants the issues and meanings described by them to establish, as far as possible, an accurate and mutual meaning of what had been said. Interim narrative accounts were negotiated with the participants, and they could make changes to the text, if they wanted to. This enabled an atmosphere of mutual trust and highlighted the participants' roles as experts on the issue. All participants' names were changed and names of places were replaced with general expressions.

We used ATLAS.ti 7 and ATLAS.ti 9 for managing the narrative data and created codes by applying manifestations of need perceptions, presented in [Table 1](#) as a basis for key codes. The coding process produced a set of described circumstances and storied experiences for each code. When a storied experience or a described circumstance was linked with several needs, it was coded with all matching codes accordingly. Following this process, we found that most extracts coded as descriptions of competence or autonomy co-occurred with descriptions of relatedness. The narrative accounts provided illustrative descriptions of how the participants viewed their school time and what kind of experiences and circumstances they considered significant in their process of leaving school. As a result of the in-depth narrative interviewing process, we could identify participants' real-life experiences and find matches with the theoretical pre-assumptions. Furthermore, the storied experiences illustrated how different levels of need frustration were manifested during the participants' school years and how that affected their process of leaving school.

## Findings

The main topics in the narrative accounts were linked with indifference and thwarting of relatedness in the school context. Perceived levels of support for autonomy and competence included descriptions of people involved and interactions with them. The participants' need perceptions were strongly linked with interpersonal relationships. Illustrative scripts of how the storied experiences and circumstances were coded are presented in [Table 2](#). An overview of the decade participants spent at school and descriptions of school arrangements and social relations described during the interviews have been published by [Pikkarainen et al. \(2021\)](#). In the current article, we focus on the participants' views on what they identified as individually relevant concerning experiences around relatedness.

### *Teachers' indifference*

In the present study, the teachers performed different roles in the narrative accounts of the participants. Need supportive and warm relationships with teachers were described as elements creating eagerness to go to school. Teachers who provided a need supporting structure and a sense of safety were described as good teachers. On the other hand, need thwarting manifested as external control without informative explanations; for example, creating situations in which a student's low level of achievement was publicly shamed, and suppressing talk, coloured by prejudice, about the minority culture of a student. Indifference emerged in the form of neglecting to provide support for students' learning difficulties, ignoring a need to intervene or a weak reaction to a student's increasing absence from school, as well as ignorance about a student's cultural background, with no attempt to learn more about it.

Siiri, a woman of approximately 30 years of age, representing the Finnish ethnic majority, talked about a neglected learning difficulty that made her try to avoid reading because others would be listening:

I remember language lessons, Finnish, English and Swedish lessons, we had to read out loud a bit of text. I was always hoping that the lesson would end before it was my turn. I always tried to avoid those situations. No one paid attention to it, only myself. I had learned properly how to read quite late, in the third grade. My mom told me that she noticed that I have dyslexia, but it was never given any attention during my school time.

Later, in vocational school, she said that she had been invisible to teachers, that is, nice and quiet. In the third year there, she had started to use drugs, even in school, and to be absent more and more frequently, often explaining her absences beforehand. She said that the teachers did not notice or react in any way. Pregnancy ended Siiri's attendance at vocational school, and during the interview, several years later, she was still pondering on whether she could complete her studies.



**Table 2.** Circumstances in the background of need perceptions and experiences storied by participants—examples from the narrative data.

Supporting	Satisfaction
Sanna "I had a good home and a good family. I can't blame them for anything."	Saara "The school assistant, her persistence with me, was that why I got along with her so well? Maybe I tested her a little, how much she would stand."
Saara "I think I got enough support at school. I wasn't in normal classes; I was placed in a youth home. It was different, less kids in a class."	"When she encouraged me, said that I can do it, I felt that I really will be able to do it! Small things, they mean so much!"
Johanna "When she [the teacher] noticed that I hadn't raised my hand for a long time, she would ask me, 'Johanna, what do you think of this?'"	Aaro "If you feel safe, it's easy to do things; you don't need to use energy being alert all the time."
Indifferent	Dissatisfaction
Iiro "There was not an actual care-keeper; I was managing things quite a lot on my own."	Tuomas "I didn't spend leisure time with my classmates. They were so childish. I spent my time with a little bit older people."
Siiri "I had been quiet and harmless for two years [in vocational school], so they didn't pay much attention. I invented good reasons for absences and later on I often went to school high on drugs. The teachers didn't notice it at all."	Tuomas "There was nothing to do in school. It was boring. I didn't learn a thing. There was nothing but sitting. I found much more to do elsewhere."
Sanna "The teacher, he was in the habit of showing off; he kind of needed to gain authority and he always wanted that his word was the law."	Siiri: "I was kind of invisible to teachers." Markus: "I think they didn't focus on how to make me interested in school. It might have [interested me] if I had been in a normal class. They just threw me among the special kids, in the special class."
Thwarting	Frustration
Sanna "I remember the first Swedish lesson, when the teacher came in: 'I love children and the children love me. I have a whole dozen of them and everything is done as I say.' When someone was slow in learning, he singled out that child and asked again and again. He did it to me the very first day and after that, I didn't speak a single word of Swedish."	Johanna "Especially with my own child I realized that it's not the school. It's the being alone, the reason that I couldn't stand it. Because I didn't have even friends, nothing interested me."
Markus: "The headmaster said, 'Enough of you, no need to come back!'"	Johanna "From a child's point of view, you are ashamed of being alone, but you just try to show that you are not lonely. But then you really are so lonely anyway." Saara: "The sense of being an outsider, that's how I felt in my childhood [among peers in elementary school]." Sanna "I hate when someone is singled out. She may have some real problems with learning, but she is singled out and made to seem even more stupid than she is, not even given an opportunity to learn. You get kind of locked up, even if you would want to learn you cannot. I hated it, and I couldn't even hide it; if nothing else, you could see it in my eyes." Johanna: "If a child can hate an adult, I did hate him [the teacher]. He used such a tone of voice to me and used to say that you [the Finnish Roma] usually don't do homework, don't much go to school."

### ***Dissatisfaction and frustration within peer relations***

Lack of friendships with peers in the school environment detached the participants from school society. Five of the participants said that they had moved to a new school at least twice during their comprehensive school years. Reino, a male participant in his forties, stated that he and his siblings were bullied as a result of their family's Roma background. He described how he felt about moving to a new school:

During the breaks, we were in the same yard with the bigger kids, I told the teacher [about bullying] but they didn't stop. Once a teacher took hold of the back of my neck and he shouted at me. I was shy, and I was always



afraid of that teacher. We were placed in a small group with my siblings, and it was better; I didn't need to fear the teacher or the other kids. But then we had to move to another city, and it started all over again. It wasn't nice.

Cultural prejudice manifested as bullying, but Reino also described a helpful intervention by the school staff. The help was only temporary, though, due to moving to another school again. Reino emphasized also that the reason for being bullied was not only prejudice against Finnish Roma but also being the only one (with his siblings) who somehow differed from the others in the school.

Being interested in different issues from classmates also limited friendships and a sense of belonging to the peer group at school. Two of the participants had been coached for competitive sports during their school years. Sanna, a female participant in her forties, representing the Finnish ethnic majority, talked about her school time and sporting activities:

I was one of the top athletes in Finland when I was young. I had the sport, I lived kind of in my own world, so that the school class didn't interest me at all. I had the sport and the school had a side role. I had more friends among sports. At school I was kind of different. I think the others were so spoiled, they spent an hour to prepare their make-up in the morning. And I had started with training at six and slept in the school bus. I didn't bother to do any make-up.

The sense of being different from one's peers was also expressed by Tuomas, a 40-year-old male participant representing the Finnish ethnic majority: "Some [students] find it difficult to learn, but I didn't. Some are bullied, but I never was bullied or bullied someone myself. I have just been kind of odd in my own way."

### ***Accumulating need frustration intertwined with indifference***

Accumulating need thwarting circumstances were identified both generally and as obstacles accumulating from particular circumstances (poverty, belonging to a stigmatized minority group, learning difficulties at school, weak parental care). Illustrating the former, cultural prejudice stigmatizing the Finnish Roma was described as a life condition, the manifestations of which emerged in the school context as rejection by peers and negative attitudes in the form of suppressing comments made by some teachers. Johanna, a female participant in her early thirties who came from a Finnish Roma background, described her school situation and experiences:

During the third grade, the classmates started to say that they cannot hang out with a gypsy, that their parents wouldn't let them. I was not allowed to visit anyone anymore, because I was a gypsy. One teacher was kind of, what I remember from a child's perspective, that he didn't like gypsies. I felt he was a disgusting adult; I didn't like him at all. His behavior, the way he talked to me, "You are not in the habit of going to school anyway, or doing homework," and things like that. At some point I just didn't do any homework anymore. Nobody told me one can stay out of school, but at some point, I just stopped going. My parents didn't know that I didn't go to school. I just stayed somewhere outdoors, played that I was sleeping in a bus stop or something. I went back home after school hours. At school they didn't know where I was.

Johanna described her mother's reaction when she learned that Johanna did not show up at school: "My mother tried to tell me to go to school, but I didn't. It wasn't such a big thing [in our family], school." Johanna said that her mother had not completed school either. Johanna also said that, because Finnish Roma have low expectations of gaining a job in the labour market, her family did not perceive education as a route to a better future and, as such, deemed it to be not worth bothering with.

The teacher's outspoken prejudice combined with a weak educational tradition within Johanna's family gave space for Johanna to stay at home rather than persist with school. The situation also indicates indifference on the part of the adults: neither the parents nor the school personnel knew where a third grader was during school hours. Johanna was allowed to stay at home, participating in household work and taking care of her younger siblings. During the fourth and fifth grades, Johanna said she went to school only occasionally and, after that, never again.

### ***Experienced need frustration shaping the participant's attitude in another context***

Kaisa, a female participant in her early thirties, representing the Finnish ethnic majority, experienced physical abuse, and the threat of it, at the hands of her father, who also followed a disturbed parenting pattern and provided inadequate care. She described the consequences of domestic violence and the coping strategies she had created in response. Her experience also included being a “daddy’s girl” and her father coaching her in competitive skiing during elementary school. Their relationship thus involved two conflicting elements. Kaisa described the consequences of domestic violence on her relationships with her classmates:

Maybe it’s the fear at home, the fact that you cannot rebel against your own father, that you won’t let others do it to you, so that you try to keep the control [of others], so that you just have to show that you cannot be bossed around.

Later in the interview, Kaisa described how the need to dominate classmates had manifested itself in her case:

When someone said that she wouldn’t dare to do something, I was like, I will do it then. Everything, from shoplifting to all other things. I said to others that they are so sissy. I was terrible to them. The other kids, they mostly obeyed me, they were so different from me, more sensitive than me, from happy families. They didn’t know a thing of the evil world.

Kaisa did not share her experience of domestic violence with her peers at school. Kaisa said she had a feeling that her peers would not have understood her if she had told them about her experiences: “I somewhat knew their family lives, and no others had this, they had everything okay. So, if I had told that my dad beats us and does it frequently, they would have been so confused.”

Not being able to share her experiences and her need to dominate peer relations created and maintained a distance between Kaisa and her schoolmates. Additionally, the situation meant that Kaisa’s mind was occupied with things other than studying and learning.

### ***Cultural aspects as elements promoting need thwarting***

Indifference to the participants’ cultural background manifested as a lack of attempts by teachers to try to learn about and understand cultural habits that shaped the participants’ daily lives. On the other hand, the participants talked about their own sense of being different from their peers and even being ashamed of their familial background. Ritva, a female participant from a Finnish Roma family, described her conflicting perceptions of her familial culture and the majority culture of the school environment:

At the age of eleven to thirteen I went through my own rebellion, when you are ashamed to say you are a gypsy and all that. You are ashamed to take friends to your home because of the culture and the difference; it’s such a different view.

Transition from adolescence to adulthood was described by the Roma participants in a way that indicated maturing and taking responsibility for one’s own family at a relatively early age. At the same time, the choice to follow the cultural habits of the Finnish Roma was realized, including wearing cultural clothing and becoming an adult member of the extended family. Reino talked about his transition to adulthood, after which he no longer attended school:

Interviewer: You talked about your decision not to go to school anymore. How did it happen?

Reino: Ay, I had other things to do. With adults, of course. I went to a visit in another city, with relatives. A Roma boy, at that age, he needs to know all the Roma things. The boy wears this kind of dark trousers, at about the age of 13, as I did. At 15 he is kind of an adult, even though he is not, but in certain issues he is.

Regarding the reaction of his parents to his leaving school, Reino said that his parents tried to tell him to go to school. The school personnel attempted to persuade him to persist in school. Instead of

continuing at school, like his siblings, Reino started a family of his own at the age of fifteen. In line with Reino's observations, all female Finnish Roma participants talked about starting their own families as teenagers, some before the age of 16, which added to the difficulty of persisting at school.

Ignorance of the habits of Finnish Roma families was described especially by Saara, a female participant in her twenties. When she was six years old, she moved with her Finnish Roma mother and siblings into an area that was mostly inhabited by another Finnish minority in addition to the main population. Saara told about her sense of being an outsider within a cultural setting different from her familial culture:

It would be important for the teacher to know something about the habits, to understand, so that if there is not a Roma assistant or a teacher, there would be some knowledge. I wish I would have had things like that when I was at school. They didn't know a thing of my culture; there was the other minority. And you start to ponder, where you belong to. The sense of being an outsider was quite crucial in my childhood.

### ***Accumulating indifference and need thwarting leading to maladaptive activities***

The fact that the participants had committed crimes indicates that they might have participated in maladaptive activities at some point in their youth. Five of the participants talked about being involved in drug abuse or being addicted to drugs. Tuomas, mentioned earlier, described the turning point in his life, shaped by drugs: "During elementary school I went to school, but I wasn't keen on studying, it was just 'have to' to me. When I started junior high, I was hooked on heroine, when I was 13."

After that, Tuomas was placed in a special class. He described his attitude to school as being that he didn't see any point in studying because all he needed to know, he learned somewhere else. When asked what would have been interesting to learn in school, he answered that it might have been nice to learn how to make drugs. He described a period of drug use at school as a good period to be there: "Well, in a good mood, it was easy to be there!" When drugs were not available, Tuomas said that he couldn't bear to go to school.

David, a 20-year-old male participant from a Finnish Roma background, said that he started "to do bad things" when his absences from school increased during the third grade. He described his experience of the combination of amphetamine and ADHD. He underlined that he was not an addict but had used drugs:

Other people, with no ADHD, they get such an energy from speed [stimulant], but me, I'm not talking all the time, I can focus on things, and I notice things. Something must be wrong, when amphetamine makes me calm down.

Both Tuomas and David, as well as three other participants, had been taken into care by childcare authorities. This indicates a weak parenting structure as an indifferent or need thwarting general level circumstance, shaping the development of the participants during their childhood.

### ***Between supporting and indifferent circumstances***

Need-supporting circumstances and need satisfaction created counter effects that temporarily overpowered the negative impacts of dissatisfaction and frustration on motivation to attend school. A shared positive element described by the participants, was the circumstance in which a teacher had time for them as students. Furthermore, a teacher's sense of humor and an informal and friendly way of communicating with students were described as encouraging and inviting in terms of engaging with schoolwork. Teachers who could explain issues in a clear way and practiced equality were described as good teachers. Kaisa, the participant who had experienced domestic violence, described a teacher she labelled a good one: "He could explain things in such a clear way, so that even I could understand."

Johanna talked about her relationship with her peers, which had been shaped by cultural prejudice towards the Finnish Roma. She had been rejected by them as a result of their own parents'

outspoken prejudices. In between disappointments, she also had an encouraging experience of friendship: “I remember a girl who had been a good friend of mine for a couple of months, a new girl in the school. I went eagerly to school, because I knew she was my friend.”

Siiri, who described feeling invisible to teachers, talked about the importance of friends during elementary school: “We disturbed the others; the studying was not so interesting for me. We were often kept after school because of that. The friends were much more important than the actual schoolwork.” While her motivation to attend school was the opportunity to be with friends, actual schoolwork had a marginal role.

### **Summary of findings**

Indifference on the part of important others in the school environment was reflected in dissatisfaction and diminishing interest in school tasks. Accumulation of dissatisfaction and need frustration at a general level distracted the participants from studying, making them indifferent to educational tasks. Moreover, the participants talked about a sense of detachment from people involved in school society. The detachment resulted from various sources: cultural prejudice, being interested in different issues compared to their peers, a sense of not being understood by peers or school personnel, inner burdens not shareable with people in school, and a sense of simply being kind of odd compared to one’s peers. However, in addition to negative experiences, we identified other kinds of interest outside the educational setting that overpowered school in the lives of the participants, such as starting a family, pregnancy, and a sporting career.

### **Discussion**

Detachment from people within the school context was a shared experience in participants’ process of removing themselves from school. When relationships with important others had been shaped by indifference or thwarting rather than need support, the participants described experiences that indicated a weak sense of belonging with people in the school environment. Regardless of gender, age, and cultural background, the participants described the sense of being an outsider in the school society as an important element during their removal process. This alienation was described as experiences of loneliness, a sense of being rejected or targeted by prejudice, a lack of acceptance, understanding or respect, and the lack of a possibility of sharing one’s feelings with people within the school society.

Indifference and experiences of dissatisfaction could be identified in two separate ways. As predicted, based on the SDT research body, the participants talked about experiences of dissatisfaction and frustration related to educational settings: loneliness, a sense of being ignored, neglected or rejected, and a sense of not being respected. In addition, the participants reported that they themselves were indifferent to school tasks. As a predictor of reported indifference to school we identified low levels of satisfaction of the need for relatedness in both societal and familial contexts. These circumstances created a state of mind in which coping with obstacles outside school tasks was a major concern of the participants and the importance of school diminished. This created an accumulating transfer effect, in which a past negative experience shaped a further experience, affecting the participants’ expectations, attitudes, and behavior in school settings. Adding to the findings of Cheon et al. (2019), we suggest that dissatisfaction perceived in a school setting might be shaped by students’ past negative experiences. This may create an accumulating effect, which makes these students more prone to react with dissatisfaction when facing indifference on the part of teachers or other school staff than an average student would be.

From the perspective of their life situation and the developmental age of the participants, the choice to leave school can be seen as meaningful for them; that is, because they did not perceive need satisfaction in the school environment, it became meaningless to them. A lack of connecting experiences within the school society gave space for and invited the participants to seek satisfaction of the need for relatedness elsewhere, out of school. The need for relatedness was involved in most

of the descriptions of circumstances and experiences. This may seem to contradict the suggestion of Yu (2019) regarding the greater importance of perceived competence compared to other needs in educational settings. Furthermore, the research body of SDT highlights the importance of autonomy support to students' motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020, among others). However, the participants in the present study may have reacted to feedback from other people in a more sensitive way than the average student as a result of their past dissatisfaction or frustration with fulfilment of the need for relatedness. Moreover, the participants did not report high expectations of educational achievement, if any at all, and hence may not have paid attention to perceptions of competence. Additionally, support, indifference, or thwarting of the need for autonomy and competence included interaction with teachers, parents, or peers. Consequently, the findings highlight the importance of satisfaction of all the psychological needs for a successful school path. However, as supporting a need included elements of relatedness, experienced support level of each need was intertwined with the satisfaction level of relatedness.

Structure has been noted as a crucial element of need support and healthy development too (Jang et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Based on the present study, structure can be seen from multiple perspectives. While a good structure is seen as a safe and predictable environment, the experiences of the participants indicate a weak structure or lack of structure, called chaos by Vansteenkiste et al. (2020). A general indifference to needs and weakness of structure created a space and invited the participants to turn to other sources of structure as a need supportive element, when parenting and school did not meet their needs. These kinds of alternative structure either provided elements for a good life without completing school, when the participants could choose taking a job, or created an externally controlled, maladaptive, and need-thwarting lifestyle, as in the case of drug addiction. The participants who had been taken into care lived through a fundamental change of structure: from a situation indicating structural chaos to an institutionally-defined structure that provided need support within the resources provided by childcare professionals.

The fact that the interviewer was also the interpreter of the data can be seen as a limitation of this study, as the whole process was shaped by the same researcher. On the other hand, the narrative interpretation, which started during the interviewing process, had an important role in identifying the meanings of the feelings and experiences described by the participants and, hence, also in choosing categories for coded extracts. Furthermore, the participants represented expertise on the issue, having lived through the process of leaving school prematurely, as well as experiencing tough circumstances and confronting obstacles. Hence, understanding the meanings of their observations requires taking a look at the participants' backgrounds, descriptions of which could be provided here only in a shortened version. Additionally, a deeper look into the triangulation process might have provided a broader understanding of the data.

The results of the present study invite future investigation of the borderlines between the concepts of indifference and thwarting, as well as the experiences of dissatisfaction and frustration, among the SDT research body. The dynamic interplay of need perceptions, as well as their accumulating and transferring effects, provide interesting avenues for research. Different forms and qualities of structure, as facilitating elements of need support, would also be interesting issues for future studies. Furthermore, quantitative studies among the research body of SDT might benefit from the findings of the present study when further developing the questionnaires investigating need perceptions; for example, by including aspects of past experiences and life circumstances of the participants in the research plan.

## Conclusions

According to the findings of this study, the participants highlighted the lack of a sense of belonging to the school community and a lack of being accepted and respected by teachers and peers during their path out of school. We concluded that accumulation of negative experiences, and the circumstances related to them, made the participants more sensitive to further indifferent or thwarting

circumstances and hence more prone to a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration regarding their needs than they might have been with a more positive background. The findings invite educators to apply pedagogies that enhance the support needed to create a sense of belonging within the school environment for every student, as well as strategies and programs preventing negative behavior such as bullying. In addition, concerning the field of children's welfare, it is important to co-operate with families and support parenting structures beneficial to children's development. For policy makers, in terms of SDT, need support can be operationalized by providing schools with enough time and personnel to enhance the quality of communication and childcare professionals with sufficient resources. From the perspective of a student at risk of leaving school, lack of such time, personnel, and resources indicates indifference, even need thwarting, on the part of society.

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