

## **Young ethnic minority men and their movement into gang related street communities – a question of preventing feelings of social alienation**

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### **1 Introduction**

In a Danish context, children and adolescents in gang related street communities (Mørck et al., 2013; Petersen, 2017, 2018) have become one of the most discussed issues in recent years as a topic both in the media image and on the political agenda. This results from comprehensive police efforts in specific urban and residential areas as well as politically motivated initiatives implementing stronger punishments for gang members, the establishment of visitation zones, and increased police surveillance. These gang conflicts often have a strong presence in the media and the number of wounded and killed in these conflicts are periodically calculated. On the political agenda as well as in the media these street gangs are often referred to as immigrant street gangs, i.e. groups of children and adolescents with a different ethnic origin than Danish, who move around in urban and residential areas, commit severe crime and create insecurity for the population.

Klein et al. (2001) draws attention to how gangs in a European context primarily encompass young people with ethnic minority backgrounds reflecting the immigration and refugee patterns characterizing the different countries in Europe. Van Gemert et al. (2008) explained how the gang affiliation of young ethnic minorities must be seen as a symptom of a difficult assimilation process at a social level that has not been adequately achieved. The research shows that young people in gang related street communities often is young men who experiences difficulties relating to schooling, and young men who have mental difficulties, e.g. aggressive behavior, difficulty in managing temperament and low self-esteem (Gaines, 2010; McDaniel, 2012; Lachman et al., 2013; Alleyne & Wood, 2010, 2012).

This signals challenges to “social cohesion” for the young members of gang related street communities with ethnic minority backgrounds – also pointed out by Safipour et al. (2011) who argue that explanations to account for the presence of challenges of social cohesion in society, depend on the young ethnic minorities’ sense of not belonging and their sense of social alienation.

Safipour et al. (2010, 2011) consider the concept of social alienation as the individual’s fundamental sense of belonging – or not belonging – to society, sense of meaninglessness, loneliness and feelings of being insignificant to society while at the same time identifying the fact that social alienation is related to challenges of integration amongst young people with ethnic minority background. In recent times, the concept of social alienation has been explored as the correlation between school and education. Schultz & Rubel (2011) point out a correlation between young men’s experiences of not “coping” in school, having difficulty in establishing friendships and confidence in teachers and school systems. Empirical results also indicate that immigrant background is an important factor in relation to feelings of social alienation. Several studies have suggested that young people with immigrant backgrounds

experience a higher degree of feelings associated with depression and alienation, suicidal thoughts and low self-esteem, compared to young people who do not have immigrant backgrounds (Newman & Newman, 2001; Safipour et al., 2011).

The feelings of social alienation among men in gang related street communities are analyzed based on Holzkamp's (1983, 1998) concept of conduct of everyday life. A concept that argues the importance of understanding a person's participation and ways of living as a subject actively engaged in and with its social conditions and opportunities. The concept of conduct of everyday life is here presented as a category that contributes to analyzing the correlation between the subject and society and draw the attention to a person's experiences and actions in everyday life and how these are associated with experiences related to opportunities for participation in different communities (Holzkamp, 1983, 1998). Højholt (2012) emphasizes the concept of participation as a main concept to understanding the relation between human beings and their social possibilities, but also how difficulties in participation in communities may lead to experiences of not belonging, loneliness and participation from marginalized positions.

The school community, and the young men's difficulties in participation, are based on Mehan et al.'s (1986, 1993) concept of hidden social skills. The hidden social skills include a set of norms, values and ways of behavior that need to be learned throughout school life, alongside and hidden from the official curriculum of the school. These hidden social skills, Hundeide (2004) has very aptly termed as the hidden curriculum. A hidden curriculum that so-called ordinary children and adolescents in the school system have acquired, especially through their upbringing, however difficult to acquire for pupils with difficulties and they are therefore at risk of being identified as difficult pupils whom the school lack the ability to embrace.

The analysis discusses two pivotal themes, respectively related to an upbringing in the so-called ghetto areas<sup>1</sup> and the young men's participation in school life where the young people experience feelings of not belonging and exclusion. The concept of social alienation, as presented in this article, is associated with experiences of inability to participate and belonging to communities outside their everyday life in the ghetto areas where the young men have grown up as well as in school where experiences of stupidity, the teachers dislike and difficulties in understanding the school curriculum appear. The analyzes point to the fact that the young men's experiences of difficulties in participating in communities may increase the risk of becoming involved in gang related street communities as part of a community and a place to belong.

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called ghetto areas are on the government's list of socially deprived residential areas (SUB). Under the Social Housing Act the Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs defines and publishes annually a list of socially deprived residential areas (ghettos). On January 1st 2014, the government came up with new criteria for socially deprived residential areas. The list includes social housing areas that have at least 1000 residents and fulfil three of the following five criteria. The five criteria are 1) The proportion of residents between 18-64 years of age without connection to the labor market or education surpasses 40% (average for the past 2 years), 2) The proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-western countries surpasses 50%, 3) The number of convicted for violation of the penal code, the gun law or the law about psychedelic drugs of residents at the age of 18 or older surpasses 2.70% (average for the past 2 years), 4) The proportion of residents between 30-59 years of age who solely has a basic education (incl. unspecified education) surpasses 50% of all residents in the same age group, 5) The average gross income for taxpayers between 15-64 years of age in the area, excluding students is less than 55% of the average income of the same group in the region.

## 2 To conduct research with young men in street gangs

In order to see the context of exploring young men in gang related street communities and their feelings of social alienation, the research project *Voices from a gang*<sup>2</sup> that form the basis of this article will be briefly presented (Petersen, 2015, 2017, 2018). The empirical basis for young men in gang related street communities is placed within the qualitative research method through *semi-structured in-depth* interviews with 19 young men (Kvale, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Barbour & Schostak, 2005), who all have in common that they are affiliated to gang related street communities around Denmark. The individual semi-structured research interviews were conducted places around Denmark and lasted between 1-2 hours for each research interview. As a basis, the aim of the research project was to capture knowledge of children and adolescents in gang related street communities, their upbringing and living conditions, but in particular a focus on social pedagogical interventions that have been initiated through the young people's childhood, adolescence and for some also in the early adulthood (Petersen, 2015, 2017).

In a Danish context, the research on children and adolescents in gang related street communities is still relatively limited – in particular in comparison to the international research field that at the same time has quite a long tradition, since the first studies of young men joining gangs already appear in the 1930s. In particular, in the American research (Thrasher, 1927; Whyte, 1943) in which the research studies of young men joining gangs were closely related to sociological studies of poor neighborhoods and people with unequal living conditions. Several studies indicate that young people in gangs commit more violently crime in comparison to young criminals not affiliated to a gang. The criminal acts in gangs consist of robbery, violence, assault, drug sales, burglary as well as the use of firearms and knives, drive by shooting, etc., especially aimed at other and rival street gangs (Pyrooz, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Esbensen & Carson, 2012).

Qualitative research – especially ethnographically inspired fieldwork and research interviews, also has a long tradition and has contributed to capture knowledge about young people involved in gang related street communities (Del Carmen, 2009). Several studies point out, among other things, the fact that young people with ethnic minority backgrounds are often joining gangs, while Klein et al. (2001) also point out the same for young men living in socially marginalized positions in society. Concepts such as gender, masculinity and identity are also associated with the research field (Alleyne & Wood, 2010, 2012; Del Carmen, 2009; JoeLaidler & Hunt, 2012; van Gemert, 2013; Fraser, 2017). The Nordic and Danish research also shows a preoccupation with exclusion processes in school, street life and street culture, ethnicity and constructions of ethnic minority youth such as troublemakers and criminals. This may lead to a risk of marginalizing groups of youth in society (Mørck et al., 2013; Björk, 2013; The Fall, 2013; Rostami, 2013; Gilliam, 2015; Andersen, 2005; Jensen, 2007;; Bengtsson, 2012; Kalkan, 2014; Lagermann, 2015).

The data collection in the research project has taken place in the period 2013-2018. The analysis of this article are based on six of the young men who have currently contributed to the research project. The article thus includes data from the individual qualitative research interviews with Said, Samir, Omar, Henry, Abdalla and Hans. As common factors the six

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<sup>2</sup> The research project *Voices from a gang* has elapsed in the period 2013-2018 and a report has been published, which includes ten young men's perspectives related to their upbringing, everyday life and social pedagogical interventions (Petersen, 2015, 2017). In addition, a research and knowledge gathering based on research within youth gangs, from an international and national perspective has been published (Petersen & Ladefoged, 2018b).

young men all arrived in Denmark in their early childhood years, are descendants of immigrants from the global south and have grown up in residential areas that are periodically included in the government's list of socially deprived residential areas.<sup>3</sup> Through their childhood and youth, the young men have also attended schools near these residential areas and several of them have changed school several times. The six young men are at the time of the interview, aged 17-26 years. The young men all have in common that they are affiliated to a gang related street community, and common to the young men is the fact that none of them are employed, while some of them have been enrolled in different educational programs, however, not yet completed. Some of the young men have been affiliated to different social pedagogical projects, for example having a mentor, with the purpose of focusing on education or work. The six young men whose data is included in this article also report experiences of being arrested by the police, and serving prison sentences / or being locked up in a secure institution.<sup>4</sup>

Central to the research project is the methodological basis that considers the young men as co-researchers in the research process. Holzkamp (1998) points out how the concept of co-researcher indicates that the subject should not be included as an object in the exploration, but rather as a co-researcher engage in the subject's own daily life. In this context, the importance lies within the fact that the young men in the research project are not subject to the researcher's objective external view, but rather treated as co-researchers in the research process. This means that the researcher as well as the co-researcher are perceived as subjects, both active participants in a research project, however, from their individual perspective and point of view, but fundamentally a collaboration (Højholt, 2002; Kousholt, 2005, 2011; Schwartz, 2007, 2014). A collaboration in which the young men who participated in the research project have been instrumental in exploring the relevant structures of research – what is relevant and important knowledge related to (social) pedagogical interventions to prevent young men from movements into gangs, and which problems are associated with existing interventions.

### **3 A theoretical approach – social alienation from the standpoint of the subject**

This article is inspired by Safipour et al.'s (2011) understanding of social alienation, and in this context the concept explores how the sense of social alienation have lead the way to involvement in gang related street communities for young men of ethnic minority backgrounds.

At the same time, the gang involvement helps to reduce the young men's experiences of not belonging or difficulties in achieving access to community benefits, in terms of good schooling, education and work. By building a strong cohesion and community, a place is created experienced as belonging "for life", which will have an impact on conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 1983, 1998, Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013).

Throughout the time theories of alienation, or the significance of alienating processes for the individual and the individual's life, have been in focus within the disciplines of both social

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<sup>3</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>4</sup> In a Danish context, a secure institution is for young people under the age of 18, who must not be imprisoned with adults. Denmark has a total of 8 secured institutions that are managed in accordance with the Law on Social Services and provide social pedagogical tasks in relation to young people who have been convicted of serious criminal acts or if required due the young person's dangerousness or difficulties with retention to stay at a secured institution (homepage of Danish Regions).

studies and humanities research. Marx (1968, 1978) was as the first sociologist occupied by the concept of alienation (*Entfremdung*), especially within his sociological analyzes of society and associated the alienation process to the social power that arises when people experience the productivity forces in a capitalist system, controlling them, rather than being under their control. The key elements of Marx's analysis of alienating processes was the importance that the individual had the opportunity to control his own life. This constituted an analytical framework to understand the consequences of social processes in society that affected the individual and was instrumental in experiencing the lack of control over his or her life.

Since this work of Marx, the concept of alienation has been discussed several times within both social studies and humanities research (Seeman, 1975, 1991; Affinnih, 1997; Safraz, 1997, 1991; Israel, 1970; Israel, 1970, Durkheim, 1984).

In this context, the concept of social alienation is linked to theoretical and analytical work based on the concept of conduct of everyday life. A concept developed within the critical psychological tradition, especially in a German and Danish context (Holzkamp, 1983, 1998; Dreier, 2003; Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). This aims to focus on people's understandings and actions related to their everyday lives, of course based on the person's *own perspective*. When the young men's conduct of everyday life is explored, it opens up opportunities to capture the factors put into play for the young men, what is important to them, and how they experience and act in the different communities in which they participate as part of their childhood and adolescent lives (Højholt, 2002; Petersen, 2015). In the young men's perspectives and experiences on their own everyday lives and their participation in different communities, two key contexts emerge that seem to have an impact on experiences and feelings of social alienation; respectively an upbringing in the so-called ghetto areas as well as experiences in attending school.

Children and adolescents' upbringing in the so-called ghetto areas are typically identified in the research as outlined residential areas for poor citizens in society often with ethnic minority backgrounds and at the same time symbols of segregated, socially excluded and marginalized groups in society (Børresen, 2002; Bauman, 2004 ; Wacquant, 2008a, 2008b; Swartz, 2009). In an international perspective, research in children and adolescents' upbringing and their everyday life in the so-called ghetto areas (the inner-city black ghettos in the US, the *farvelas* in Rio, the *banlieues* in Paris and the council estates in Glasgow and London) contributes to identifying how an upbringing in these residential areas may increase the risk of developing criminal acts, including movements into gang related street communities (Trasher, 1927; Whyte, 1943; Vigil, 2002; Del Carmen et al., 2009, Petersen & Ladefoged, 2018b).

For the young men who have contributed with their perspectives in the research project, the importance of growing up in the so-called ghetto areas is associated with their conduct of everyday life. The residential areas where the young people have grown up turn out important because they seem to represent the opportunities for a community with other young people and an everyday life on the local streets, often without adults interfering. However, at the same time seems to place restrictions, as activities take place outside these residential areas which the young men do not seem to be able to participate in; leisure activities, leisure work and social intercourse with other young people who do not live in the residential area. It is also important to emphasize that everyday life in one context also seems to have an impact on young people in other contexts, as pointed out by Højholt (2002) and Lagermann (2015). The upbringing in these residential areas appears in the young men's stories as primarily residential areas for population groups from the global south, and follows the young men into

the local district schools, where the representation of so-called “Danish children” is limited, and predominantly holds children of ethnic minority background.

Mehan et al.’s (1984, 1993) concept of hidden skills brings here an analytic concept that shows how young men have in common them considering school life as being difficult for them. In particular, the six young men presented in this article help to identify the contours of a hidden curriculum (Hundeide, 2004). There seems to appear some rules, norms and values associated with attending school and collaborating with teachers, which the young people have been unable to comprehend, and which over time has become the young people’s own subjective stories about “feeling stupid” or not “being gifted in school”. Over time, the young men have developed experiences of not “doing well” in school. In particular, Mehans et al.’s (1984, 1993) perspective is relevant that when children and adolescents are designated with behavioral difficulties in school, the school as a system and the teachers’ teaching seems to disappear from the context, creating an understanding of the children and young people as an individualized problem. In a Danish context, this is supported in several studies that explore children and adolescents with ethnic minority backgrounds in relation to schooling and education and helped to illustrate how young people – especially young boys and men – have difficulties in coping with the Danish schooling and education system (Andersen, 2005; Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2008; Gilliam, 2009). These young people are also overrepresented in the crime statistics (Petersen & Larsen, 2016) and have difficulties in obtaining affiliation to the labor market (Ejernæs, 2014; Greve, 2016) in comparison to young people with ethnic Danish background.

#### **4 Two pivotal and related themes – analytical readings**

The six young men all have in common that they in different ways are affiliated with a gang related street communities, some for shorter periods, others with a feeling of being affiliated with this gang “for life”, no matter what life brings. Some of the young men have been affiliated with the same gang, since they were 12-13 years old, while others have moved between different gangs. The perspectives of the six young men are *not* identical simply because their respective perspectives and standpoints are involved, as previously stressed by Højholt (2005) in relation to research on children and young people’s perspectives within the research process.

This is rather a plurality of scientific and theoretical perspectives engaged in the subject’s active involvement in terms of specific social contexts (Holzkamp, 1983, 1998; Dreier, 1979, 2004, Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013).

As described earlier, the critical psychological way of thinking is occupied with the subject as an acting subject in and with its societal conditions and possibilities. This starting point in the subject has several simultaneous theoretical and analytical implications; we must understand the subject as acting and that these actions must always be understood as subjectively reasoned in a concrete practice under certain social conditions. An analysis of the empirical material must necessarily relate to this subject understanding and constantly focus on the meanings and actions associated with the subject’s participation.

The analytical reading of the data material is in particular connected to two pivotal concepts within critical psychology. Meaning, which includes an analysis of the conditions’ meaning for the subject and reasoning, which includes an analysis of the subject’s reasons for action in relation to the given meaning to the conditions (Markard et al., 2004; Bechman Jensen, 2005; Petersen, 2009, 2015). This focus of analysis means that the gathered data material are read

from a perspective that concentrates on approaching the significance different conditions and factors appear to have for the young men.

Two pivotal and closely related themes, which appear from the reading of the data material, seem significant from the standpoints and perspectives of the young men. Partly the upbringing and everyday life in ghetto areas and partly several and difficult experiences with school attendance. From the reading of the data material, the two themes turn out to be pivotal for the young people's perspectives on their own life. However, the everyday life in the residential area is not solely of importance, but also experiences from other contexts. What goes on in one context thus seems to be of significance in another context, in this case the school and the young men's experiences with the school as a dull place that presents difficulties. In the following, these two particular contexts must be emphasized, which contribute to analyzing how feelings of social alienation, especially associated to experiences of exclusion and powerlessness, appear to have led to the young men's movements into local gang related street communities.

### **5 Theme 1: to grow up and live in the ghetto – a way into gang related street communities**

The six young men who have participated in the research project all have in common that they have grown up in different urban and residential areas in Denmark, characterized as so-called ghetto areas. In a sociological perspective, these includes specific urban and residential areas for poor citizens in society often with ethnic minority backgrounds (Børresen, 2002; Bauman, 2004; Wacquant, 2008a, 2008b; Swartz, 2009). This factor is substantially in line with general research related to gangs, both in the Nordic and international context, which in particular emphasizes upbringing in specific residential areas (Puhakka, 2005; Del carmen, 2009; Petersen & Ladefoged, 2018b). The young men describe almost identical stories on how their childhood and early youth life in the so-called ghetto areas was displayed around playing and living in the local streets. For all of them this have meant a relatively early knowledge of local street gangs in the area, and several of the young people also have older brothers and cousins who were already affiliated with the local gang. This contextualization of young people's everyday life (Holzkamp, 1993, 1998) in the so-called ghetto areas helps to identify the particular age period of 12-14 years to appear as a period when the young boys - by different ways and with different personal reasons - move closer to or into a local gang related street community.

Saif, one of the young gang members, takes a remarkable view in understanding young men's movements into gang related street communities, stating that young men with different ethnic backgrounds do not meet at each other's places after school, in the evenings or in the weekends. They meet on street corners and in shopping centers in the local residential area, and do not spent time at each other's places "like the Danes". Saif also reports how he and his friends often get bored and do not really have anywhere to stay. Leisure activities and youth clubs in the local residential areas close at certain times and from there they have nowhere to go, as Saif explains. Saif, one of the first young men who participated in the research project, at the same time, explains that the friends you have and hang out with are also the friends you follow when you moved towards a local gang related street community. If you fail to follow the same path, you are at risk of being left out as "friendless", as Saif explains.

Both Samir at the age of 17 and Omar at 18 years old tell how they as quite young had older brothers who participated in a local gang related street community and therefore had a place to meet. The fact that older brothers and older boys hang out and have a community of

friendships, parties and sports activities, is illustrated by Del Carmen (2009), who emphasizes that young people in gang related street communities often spend a lot of time together on the street, driving around, talking, playing some ball, and partying. It is quite central that this particular community, and the importance of belonging here, has a certain significance.

The opportunity to spent time together, having friends, and belonging to a group, is identical in Samir's and Omar's stories and both of them describe the movement into a street gang as a "before and after" life. Before the movements into the gangs, there were many days of boredom and feelings of loneliness, while after they describe a daily life with togetherness and places to be. Both Samir and Omar illustrate an upbringing comprised of difficulties in finding things to do, and a wish to participate in different leisure activities like the "Danes", but without knowing how to obtain. The contours of social alienation (Safipour et al., 2011) appear in several of the stories told by the young men, such as different feelings of loneliness, lack of access to leisure activities, leisure jobs, or friendships with other young people living outside the local residential area. Kalekin-Fishman (2006) draws our attention to the fact that feelings of social alienation also relate to experiences of social loneliness and not belonging to society, experiences that are particularly evident in the young men's stories about their early youth. Both Samir, Omar and Saif in particular focus on experiences of not belonging, through experiences with not having access to parties, discos, cafes and girls – these issues are experienced merely "because they are not Danes." Saif who is 25 years old have a clear image of him and some of his friends trying to enter parties but were told that they could not come in because "it was a private party" or at discotheques where they were refused access "because it was too crowded" or they "did not wear the right clothes". However, now that he is affiliated with a gang related street community, he always has a place to be where parties can be held and girls are invited.

Henry, one of the oldest young people who participates in the research project and who has been affiliated with a street gang since age 14, focuses on the fact that gang membership gives access to opportunities for belonging to a community. In this context, Højholt (2012) points out that the concept of participation is a key concept for understanding the relationship between human beings and their social possibilities. As part of the learning and development of children and adolescents, participation is associated with becoming part of communities with other children and adolescents, for example in school or through leisure activities, and that there is a fundamental sense of belonging. Henry emphasizes in the research interview the importance of joining a brotherhood and that this brotherhood is associated with the specific residential area where the young people have grown up. It is not necessarily the crime that emerges first, but the importance of social intercourse, the sense of belonging and togetherness, and for some places to spent time together that indicates the first movements into a gang related street community (Petersen, 2015, 2017, 2018).

## **6 Theme 2: The importance of schooling – experiences of hopelessness and powerlessness**

The school is a particular context in which several studies have identified young people's experiences of social alienation (Schulz & Rubel, 2011; Hawkins et al, 2000), including young people with ethnic minority backgrounds (Newman & Newman, 2001; Safipour et al. 2011). Feelings of meaninglessness in relation to the school and its meaning to the young men also appear in the interviews. The six young men share a common perception of not being especially gifted in public school based on their academic performances and in different ways, they did not remember their schooling as happy. These findings are highly consistent with international research in relation to children and young people in gangs in which the young

people's difficulties in school appear (Gaines, 2010; McDaniel, 2012; Lachman et al., 2013; Alleyne & Wood, 2010, 2012; Petersen & Ladefoged, 2018b). Common to the six young men is also a very unclear perception of their ideas for a future in relation to education and work. Common to the young men is also the fact that none of them has ever had a job, either an after-school job or has withdrawn from schooling to get a job. These findings show that young men joining gang related street communities appear as a vulnerable group of young people in Danish society – especially in an educational view. This finding is highly consistent with international research in which Gaines (2010) has identified that young people who are experiencing discouragement adopt a more positive attitude towards gangs. In a study, Pyrooz (2012) has identified that young people affiliated with a street gang are less likely to finish their schooling compared with young people who are not involved in gangs.

In this context, the data material shows that the young men have almost identical experiences in relation to school, which they consider a difficult place to stay and feelings associated with not belonging in particular appear.

For the young people, a number of stories recount school trouble, fights because of “bad temper”, expulsion from several schools, even if this was unwanted, and also experiences of not being able to see themselves as part of schooling, either as gifted students with academic skills or with a strong interest. In a Danish context, Andersen (2005), Gilliam (2009), Kalkan (2014) and Lagermann (2015) have explored how schooling for some boys with ethnic minority backgrounds leads to experiences of marginalization and movements into the streets – experiences that mark the boys as troublemakers and difficult to embrace in school. Mehan et al. (1986, 1993) point out that children and adolescents with difficulties in school are often decontextualized from the everyday life, content and structure of the school. The difficulties of the children and young people are not attributed to the school as an institution or the teachers' teaching methods, but tend to designate the children and young people with behavioral difficulties in school. This tendency to decontextualize seems to leave these difficulties to the children and adolescents themselves as their own individual difficulties, which they have to deal with and find meaning in – and at the same time manage to deal with – even many years after school is completed. This particular fact also emerges for the young men, whose stories in the research interviews, to a large extent, indicate that they consider themselves to be “somewhat wrong” that, for example, they have not been very skilled or clever in the context of school and education.

Let us have a closer look to the above by looking into the interviews with Abdalla, one of the young gang members who is now 20 years old. Abdalla has never experienced academic skills, and at the same time always had a feeling of “boredom”. During the interview, Abdalla elaborates that the boredom comes from the fact that he does not really think that he was skillful in terms of the subjects, and even though he would like to be educated, he has not yet succeeded. He has passed his final exam and on several occasions he has considered going through a youth education programme but has been unable to concentrate on this. Abdalla is affiliated with a social pedagogical project with the purpose of helping him to clarify schooling and education, but Abdalla is aware of the fact that he cannot really focus on schooling and education; because of the way, he lives his life. Several attempts with homework assistance have been made, and support for enrollment in school, but Abdalla has difficulty in concentrating. During the interview, Abdalla pointed out that his not being skilled in school and losing focus probably was one of the reasons why he moved into a gang related street community. Abdalla remembers that he often ditched classes in school, and

instead hung around in the street with some friends, smoked some cannabis, and started committing minor criminal acts when he was 12-13 years old.

Saif, Samir and Omar have identical experiences, especially in terms of being scolded by the teachers, being told many times that they were troublemakers and spoiling it for their classmates, and especially Saif has been attending several schools, because he was always in “the troublemaking group in school”. Samir and Omar have both been placed in a secure institution<sup>5</sup> during their school days because they “committed minor crime acts”. Both of them explain how they ditched classes many times because of boredom, and have been kicked out of school because they participated in fights or were involved in school vandalism.

Farmer & Hairston (2013) have identified how young people involved in gangs often experience expelling from school and have experiences of rejection by their classmates, compared to young people not affiliated with gangs. Hans, one of the youngest gang members, who participated in the research project, focuses on how experiences of rejection, in the form of classmate teasing, scolded by the teachers and very often getting into school fights, has led to him not completing his schooling. He has lived in the street where he moved into a local gang at an early stage. Hans reports that he has a serious temper and that everyone in his school “knew this”. During recess, he was often teased, and then he was unable to “control his temper” which led into fights with the other pupils. He has been attending several schools through childhood and youth and has not completed his primary school exam.

The key issue to the young men is how their stories about school life have turned into stories of their own limitations, lack of concentration, not being academic skilled, or experiences of boredom. This also points to how the school as an institution tend to individualize the children and young people’s difficulties as something bound to themselves and their own responsibility (Mehan et al., 1984, 1993). This individualization of children and adolescents in relation to the school’s demands on how the young people should behave seems to become an experience that the individual young man must subsequently carry around, as part of his own story. As we begin our research interview, Samir explains almost apologetically, how he failed to focus enough on school attendance and that he should have “got his act together”, then he might have done better. Samir also explains how he believed that his teacher did not like him. He always yelled at him in front of the class and scolded a lot. How to behave in school and how to become a good student whom the teacher likes is a difficult question for Samir to answer. “He simply does not know”, but perhaps something about “not making trouble” is the closest for Samir to answering this question. We laugh a little in a despairing mood when I ask him if it would have helped to do his homework in order for him to be prepared for class. This slightly despairing laugh between us encircles that the key issue to Samir in relation to his school experiences was the fact that it was hopeless for him, “no matter what he did.”

## **7 Conclusion**

This article has revealed how feelings of abandonment, hopelessness and a sense of exclusion are related to young men in gang related street communities, especially through their conduct of everyday life in the residential areas where they grow up and throughout their schooling (Holzkamp, 1983, 1998). The results of the analysis show how feelings of social alienation among young men with ethnic minority backgrounds are about a sense of loneliness and not

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 4.

having success in school, and how these feelings seem to be reduced through affiliation and retention to gang related street communities.

These alienating processes have emerged as a result of objective living conditions: upbringing in poor and socially exposed residential areas, ethnic minority backgrounds, poor and inadequate schooling, and lack of leisure activities, prosocial communities, and lack of access to education and work (Safipour et al., 2011). Through childhood and youth, these objective living conditions have turned in to subjective life constraints to the young people, associated with diffuse feelings of not feeling adequate, not being able to control their own lives, and not belonging in society. The affiliation to a gang related street community can help counteract the sense of lack of control and loneliness while providing access to privileges and influences and creating opportunities for belonging.

For the young people with a different ethnic background, these stories are about lifelong friendships, a brotherhood, and to stand up for each other – no matter what – even to risk one's life. It is about friendship forever, attending kindergarten and school together, practicing the same leisure activities, and to be familiar with each other's families because the young people have been next-door neighbors. It is also about older brothers affiliating with the same street gang, or even the older brother of a friend, and thus leads to this community.

“It is about much more than crime,” Henry recounts during the research interview, and this much more seems to represent a special community, a special place to belong. “It is about standing up for and always assist each other and not failing any friends”, Hans also recounts. Whereas Saif reports that if you fail to participate in this community, you are “alone in the world” and “friendless”. There is a very specific life story at play, a life story associated with everyday life, and which is a determining factor in helping to create affiliation, meaning and importance for the young in everyday life, both backwards, in the present moment and in the long term.

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