

## USING FOCUS GROUPS TO GIVE VOICE TO SCHOOL UNDERACHIEVERS

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*Abstract.* This paper analyses discourses on school failure of gymnasium students. Research strategy for establishment of dialogue with students is focus group. The method of analysis of the material obtained in the conversations with students is discourse analysis. First, two dominant strategies of focus group usage are discussed: as means for collecting data from subjects and as a social emancipatory practice. The prevailing discourses about school failure of students are mapped: the discourse of school as an insecure investment, the discourse of school marginalisation, the discourse of disinterest of students, the discourse of disinterest of teachers and the discourse “school success does not have an alternative”. The concluding part discusses research implications on social position of students in power relations in education.

*Key words:* school failure, discourse analysis, focus groups.

When you talk about school failure with those that this failure refers to – with students, the picture about the studied phenomenon acquires a somewhat unexpected appearance. The usual concepts we use to describe the phenomenon of underachievement, change meanings, lose their well-established modes of usage and get replaced by other concepts. When talking to students, we become witnesses and participants of discourses different from those that dominantly shape our viewpoint on the problem we talk about in this paper. Observed from students’ perspective, school failure assumes a “human face”, becomes a story about an individual and his/her efforts to interpret and manage his/her life.

The possibility for the “other viewpoint” on school failure to appear is the result of the research strategy I opted for in this paper. That is focus group, as a framework for analysing the discourse on school failure of gymnasium students. Therefore, in the first part we will speak about the research strategy as a practice of enabling and reinforcing students’ “voices”. In the second part, discourses that students rely on in interpreting school failure

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will be mapped. Finally, the third part of the paper will present researcher's reflexive observations about the role he had in the research and about the importance of this research as a social action.

### *Focus group as an emancipatory practice*

Focus groups are predominantly positioned as a type of group interview with the following basic features: 1) the instance of a moderator and 2) controlled social interaction, as a source of information and topics for research analysis (Pavlović & Džinović, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Puchta & Potter, 2004). The role of the moderator is to set the "scene" of the focus group, and to maintain it by different techniques, as its director and the main character at the same time (Pavlović & Džinović, 2007). This implies that the social character of the focus group and how the participants will be positioned depend on the way the moderator structures the focus group dynamics and the rhetoric and means of power he/she uses in playing his/her role. The prevailing model of moderating focus groups stems from the practices of examining and interrogating individuals, as the procedures used to "extort" the useful data from them.

Still, in the past three decades there appeared focus groups with a significantly different structuring of social interaction, which predominantly relied on innovative and critical understanding of social research. The basic innovations and strategies of critical reconsidering are: (1) discourse analysis instead of revealing the truth, (2) sensitivity for the connection between knowledge and power, (3) sensitivity for specific meanings used by individuals in interpreting and creating the world they belong to and (4) research as a social negotiation and social change (Bruner, 1990; Smith, Harré & Langenhove, 1995; Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Parker, 2005; Stojnov, 2005; Gergen & Gergen, 2004). The changed roles of the researcher and the respondent are accompanied by the change in the positions of the moderator and focus group participants, which changes the appearance of the scene and the rules of its maintenance. The key change regards the *redistribution of power* in the focus group, which, in particular, means that the moderator is no longer an "untouchable" figure, "pulling all the strings" in social interaction. Instead he/she structures and organises the contemporary community, based on dialogue with other participants, polyphony of voices and solving the current social problems (Pavlović & Džinović, 2007). The structuring of social interaction as a context for affirmation of pluralism of discursive means implies a flexible setting of the focus group scene, the moderator's readiness and skill to creatively shift the topic of the focus group and adjust-

ting it to the needs and interests of participants. The other significant mechanism of power redistribution is the turn towards personal meanings that respondents ascribe to statements. The moderator renounces a “big privilege” to interpret respondents’ speech as a scientist and in such a way to impose the dominant social meanings to it. The meanings that persons create and use to interpret events in their lives are “closer” to everyday social interaction and enable better understanding of the social relations as well as individual actions (Bruner, 1990; Garfinkel, 1967; Kelly, 1955).

“Giving voice” to those who cannot be heard in institutional educational practice is a common strategy for the majority of research studies in education which used focus groups. Definitely the most popular example is Freir’s “project” of critical pedagogy (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). The goal of Freir’s focus groups was initiation and support to social changes, using the pedagogical practice of “collective raising awareness” of mechanisms of social oppression. Currently, focus groups are most often used for evaluation of educational practice from the perspective of those who learn (Gilrane, Roberts & Russell, 2008; De La Ossa, 2005; Tackett, 2005), or those who are in the role of teachers (Younger, Warrington & Williams, 1999; Easthope and Easthope, 2000), for establishment of dialogue and giving voice to “cultural minorities” in multicultural educational environment (Okamoto *et al.*, 2008) and for development of health and prevention programs in school which would be more based on students’ needs (Wyatt, Krauskopf & Davidson, 2008; Hopson & Steiker, 2008). It is important to point out that the mentioned focus groups were applied in school and that they were not only a research tool, but also a practice of school democratization. This indicates significant possibilities for the researchers, professionals and other educational staff to be in the role of educators and creators of changes in educational practice, using focus groups as a productive and innovative research strategy.

### *Why give voice to school underachievers?*

What the prevailing scientific discourses on school failure have in common is the treatment of failure as a „deficit“ of an individual, his/her family, school or social surrounding (Albrecht & Braaten, 2008; Bilić, 2001; Gumora & Arsenio, 2002; Malinić, 2007). In other words, the dominant social constructions of school failure determine it as a deviation from the norms of educational productivity, rational behavior, and intellectual or emotional maturity (Foucault, 1969; Stojnov, Džinović & Pavlović, 2008). Placing school failure in the fields of psychological, psychiatric and physiological

discourses encouraged the practice of pathologization of educational subjects and legitimatization of various “politically incorrect” treatments of them. To be “a bad pupil” is construed as “abnormal” and, as a threat to society, it requires procedures for helping such individuals.

The strategies of solving the school failure problem do not count on the dialogue with the students, as a democratic means for inclusion of school underachievers into negotiation about educational meanings and values. Giving voice to students and readiness to hear what they think about school success means that students are not positioned as passive “cases” to be investigated, but as persons who endeavour to find personal meanings of school achievement in attempt to control their own life. When we take into consideration students’ perspective we are able to see school failure as someone’s “choice”, which is very meaningful and valuable for them (Stojnov, Džinović & Pavlović, 2008). Consequently, the rhetoric of school failure as resistance to the prevailing educational discourses is invited. These alternative discourses open the possibilities for new constructions of school failure and new, more socially acceptable, ways of dealing with the problem.

#### *Methodology of focus groups in this research*

The semi-structured guide for the focus groups in this research was constructed. Three main topics were discussed: (1) the meanings of school achievement; (2) students’ perception and opinions of school underachievers and (3) institutional procedures against school underachievers. The basic strategy of using focus groups was to merge research, as the enterprise of understanding students’ rhetoric on school achievement and failure, with the social action of the articulation and “enhancing” their voices. The duration of the focus groups was 90 minutes each. The conversations were audio recorded, with the approval of the participants, and transcribed.

*Focus groups recruitment.* The structure of the sample is described in Table 1. The criterion for being chosen in “bad students” groups was that the student had a failing grade in two or more subjects. The students whose grade average in some of the classification periods (trimester or term) was above 4.50 are defined as “A-students”. Participants were the students of two gymnasiums: The Third Belgrade Gymnasium and The Gymnasium in Šabac. The two schools are representatives of the institutions of middle education in a great city (Belgrade) and a typical Serbian town (Šabac). There are different criteria for the eligibility of individuals for participation in the focus groups, which a researcher should be aware of, as well as of their implications on power relations and social consequences of the rese-

arch (Pavlović and Džinović, 2007). In this case, the selection of students marked as bad could have additionally strengthened and supported this specific pathologization of individuals in the education system, especially because of researcher's expectation that in focus groups with "bad students" different discourses on school failure will be manifested, those that are "characteristic" for this group of students. However, compliance with the prevailing categorisation assumed undertaking of a sensible risk, in order for the voice of the "categorised" to be heard and things viewed from their perspective.

*Table 1: Structure of the sample*

Participants		Focus groups	"Bad students"	"A-students"
n	48	6	32	16

*Analysis of focus group conversation.* Various analyses of the materials from focus groups are possible, which again depends on the way of moderation and goals of focus groups. When the goal of focus groups is to give voice to certain groups, mostly qualitative analyses are applied, focused on personal stories and the meanings used by individuals – narrative analysis (De La Ossa, 2005) or discourses which pathologise or marginalise individuals – different kinds of discourse analysis (Moreau, Osgood & Halsall, 2007). The procedure for the analysis of the conversation in this research is discourse analysis, which places emphasis on the connection between discourse and exercising power over individuals (Parker, 1994, 2005).

#### *Discourses on school failure of gymnasium students*

The most influential discourse in the conversation about school failure with students is the *discourse of school as an insecure investment*. We are dealing with a "local" version of pragmatic discourse, which in circumstances of reconsidering the content and purpose of school in life positions the educational practice as fairly useless. Namely, dominant argumentation is that school knowledge makes sense only if it is useful and provides a well-paid job and financial comfort. In that sense, school achievement is more and more frequently observed as an investment, which often does not return the desired "profit":

Student K.: *Why would I study now, in gymnasium, when, well... if I go to faculty, graduate from that faculty and without a job. How many people are there, who graduated from faculty, without a job?... Or you know*

*someone at a position ... Regardless of me graduating from faculty, if she graduated from the same faculty and knows someone, she will get that job, and not me.*

Moderator: *Why is that discouraging?*

Student K.: *Well, studying isn't a guarantee for me to have a job, as everyone says, it doesn't have to be that way...*

Student V.: *As though I were losing hope...*

Observed from the students' perspective, school is no longer a certain road towards a professional success in life, as educational authorities and parents officially communicate. Such an argumentation indicates the insecurity felt by the students with regard to important choices in life, as well as the sensation of responsibility to "hit the winning combination". Students are facing the challenge of different "strategies" for being successful: opulent parents, providing welfare and private schooling, regardless of the success in secondary school, "private business" of people "who had not studied, and drive a Porsche", relying on influential acquaintances. From the perspective of the discourse of school lucrateness, the true failure is to be poor, to have a poorly paid and unappreciated job, to expose your family to financial insecurity, to remain at socioeconomic margin of the society. Therefore, in this discourse, school failure becomes a significant strategy of reconsidering the educational achievement, based on the assessment of relations between investment and profit. School failure ceases to be irrational behaviour, the consequence of a cognitive or emotional deficit and becomes a rational decision not to invest in the activities whose benefit is uncertain, which helps in "keeping open" numerous other possibilities, approaches, strategies for professional success and personal satisfaction.

*Discourse of school marginalisation*, by its effects, is connected with the effects of the previous discourse, strengthening the students' rhetoric about the importance of critical attitude towards traditional school values. The basic argumentation in this discourse is that school is no longer the central and most important content in students' life, that is, that school does not determine them in the degree in which it used to do:

Student K.: *I think that school is a bit old-fashioned, that it doesn't have the means to attract attention. Because, there are so many other interesting contents... I don't know, Internet, chatting, cafes, disco clubs, going out.*

A simple and strong message of students is that life is "somewhere else", that along with school practice a multitude of more important, more attractive, personally more relevant social rituals take place. In that sense,

the demands of school practice, such as focusing and shaping attention, interests, desires and personal needs in accordance with the norm of educational achievement, are facing different kinds of resistance on students' part. To be somebody who has fun, who does not miss out on anything, who is a part of peer society and spends time with his "buddies", "leaves home in the morning, and comes back in the evening" is an identity that suits the students much more, for which they are ready to struggle. It is an opposite response to the identity of a "nerd", as an individual who agrees to educational obedience. In that sense, there is a change in the meaning of successfulness in school and positioning of school successfulness in the context of overall life successfulness:

Moderator: *When is someone really successful in school?*

Student J.: *When he manages to organise his time, when he manages both to study and go out, when he manages to do everything... to have free time for everything...*

Student M.: *And that, in addition to this he's a good student. That he doesn't miss out on anything, that he doesn't neglect his friends, that he has a social life.*

In this argumentation, it is emphasised that school is experienced only as means for accomplishing practical goals, that school is neither "everything in life" nor that somebody's accomplishment as a person is judged exclusively with respect to it. The basis of such a reconsideration is "we-are-now-seventeen" or "when-am-I-going-to-have-fun-if-not-now" feelings, pointing out to a different, unknown to school aesthetics of living. Discourse of school marginalisation is one of the remaining "disobedience" strategies and calling into question something that is served to one generation as given, determined in advance and socially dominant.

To be a bad student, as a personal experience of oneself, is also constituted around rhetoric means belonging to the *discourse of disinterest of students*. The surprising "turn" in power relations is the "confession" of students that they are lazy. It seems as if they agreed to a pathologising position defined by the old pedagogical discourse of laziness. Their own laziness is described as the lack of will to study, that they cannot "make themselves to take the book", that they do not have work habits and delay the beginning of studying:

Student A.: *I suppose none of us here tries hard... Simply, when I don't feel like studying, I'll not sit down and study, but it's just the period that I'm in.*

Moderator: *Why?*

Student A.: *I don't know... I can't...*

Student B.: *I don't have the will...*

Student A.: *I don't have the will, exactly.*

Moderator: *What does that mean: „I don't have the will“?*

Student A.: *Well, because it depends on what different people like. For example, for natural sciences, I can't in any way...*

Student B.: *Yes, and it's so boring... math... it takes a lot for it... and then it's easier for us not to try... and that's scraping through...*

However, a more profound conversation on the topic of laziness positions this “bad characteristic” in the discourse of disinterest for studying school curriculum. What was marked as a personal shortcoming or an omission in education turns out, again, to be a strategy of reasonable giving up from investing in activities that do not have much sense for an individual, that he/she “does not recognise oneself” in. Laziness, as a passive act of “not doing anything”, becomes an active effort and resoluteness in refusing to “play by the rules” of the adults and the contents relevant to them.

One of the prevailing discourses of school failure in conversations with gymnasium students is the *discourse of the disinterest of teachers*. In the context of that discourse, the character of an unsuccessful student is constituted as a “victim” of the disinterest of teachers, their inadequate and unprofessional behaviour. Students' failure is presented as a consequence of the lack of teachers' enthusiasm for pedagogical guidance of the young and their educational development:

Student I.: *I neglected many subjects that way because of teachers. The teachers are not at all... didn't get me interested in that subject, they did it superficially, just to cover that material, it is important for them to stick to the plan and program and to do as it says, and whether someone would understand them or not... they weren't interested in that at all.*

Moderator: *How does that influence failure?*

Student I.: *Well, for example, I don't want to have any kind of relationship or contact with that teacher, because he... as if I didn't exist there, as though we were all one and then he speaks, looks at the wall, looks at the corners of the classroom and talks to us...*

Student K.: *Ignores the students, literally...*

Such an ignorant relationship presents an “unpleasant surprise” for the students when they come to secondary school, since the majority of them have positive experiences with teachers in primary school. The new experi-



ence is perceived as being left to themselves, the giving up of important adults on them and as a “wall” of the lack of understanding that permanently creates tensions, hostilities and “fighting back” on the part of students, in the form of giving up on the subject in question. Especially emphasised in the discourse of the disinterest of teachers is students’ rhetoric indicating an undesirable and incompetent way of teaching school curriculum:

Student V.: *One group of teachers literally just talk, talk, talk for 45 minutes, don't stop.*

Student J.: *What would you like, for them to sing?*

Student V.: *I don't know, in some group to do something...*

Student A.: *It would be interesting, for example, for them to divide...*

Student V.: *And not: I sit there for 45 minutes, and listen to him, and the next class he gives grades.*

Students expect the teachers to recognise and appreciate their numerous psychological needs, experiences, and problems in mastering the curriculum, showing a prominent sensitivity to psychological support and acceptance on the teachers’ part.

On the margin of school practice there is a *discourse “school success does not have an alternative”* and its character of a student who, despite uncertainties, obstacles, reconsidering, chooses to achieve high success in school. In that sense, successful students in secondary school seem to be in the situation to justify and search for legitimacy of their agreement to discipline. This implies that being a successful student, observed from the perspective of successful students, assumes overcoming numerous obstacles, disputing, lack of understanding, frustrations and despite them continuing with “getting straight A’s”:

Moderator: *Why do you study?*

Student M.: *Well, because I... here's my personal example, I'm aware that I'm not capable of cheating, that I'm not capable of stealing and then I choose the option to study and work...*

Moderator: *As the only resource at your disposal.*

Student M.: *Yes, exactly. I was raised that way.*

Moderator: *Others? Why do you study?*

Student J.: *For the same reasons, that is definitely the harder way, but I will build my way on my own.*

Student B.: *I'll be happy when I succeed in it...*

It is necessary to choose the “harder way”, while the majority chooses the “easier”, to resist the messages that they are “fools because they put in effort” or to overcome the feeling of injustice because “I study and someone comes and cheats and gets the same grade as I do”. However, it is important that successful students get support in their family, which points out to the fact that the family is the strongest “anchor” of meaning and importance of their educational choices. Persistence to endure on the “road of knowledge”, on the other hand, can also be observed as a risky strategy, with no alternative solutions and alternative strategies of “swimming” in power relations. We are dealing with “putting all the eggs in one basket”, the interpretation of one’s own identity around a small number of discursive possibilities and rhetoric devices. In that sense, the strategy of reconsidering the importance of school achievement turns out to be the “courage” to call into question the dominant social discourses and readiness for the “risk” of using the manoeuvre space of alternative discourses of successfulness, accomplishment or morality.

#### *Conclusion: reflexive view on the research*

The importance of the research is that it represents one of the first steps towards alternative construing of school failure and school success. It suggests that the “lack” of educational productivity is not a meaningless or pathological act but the treasury of rich stories which are open for negotiation and accounting. Also, the research has supported the affirmation of the voices that determines school failure as a “personal issue” of each student and as an issue of his/her personal responsibility for achievement in school. The argument that school success is “my thing” and that no one should “meddle”, “exert pressure”, “blackmail” students with regard to studying school material is noticeable in the majority of mapped discourses on school failure in this research and presents one of the major foundations of individual resistance to dominant social expectations.

The implications of this research on educational practice and students’ position in school are also subject to reflexive analysis. This research, according to the way in which social interaction in focus groups was structured, is closer to the practice of examining and collecting data about the subjects than to transformative social action. However, what was initially an interview gradually grew into the dialogue of different “worlds”, permeation of numerous voices, by which participants were able to raise awareness of their voices and “stand behind them”. From such a social relation I carry the experience of a better understanding of school success as a matter of a

successful search for personal meaning and important answers in life, and not only an impersonal variable in the multitude of other variables. Finally, the strong experience that I have now is a considerably larger trust in students that they “know what they are doing” and that they act as all other people – trying to take care of themselves the best way they know. It suggests that the dialogue with the students should be continued and enhanced as a way of including them in the process of coping with the problem.

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 ФОКУС ГРУПЕ КАО СРЕДСТВО ДАВАЊА ГЛАСА  
 НЕУСПЕШНИМ УЧЕНИЦИМА  
*Анстракт*

Рад се бави анализом дискурса о школском неуспеху код ученика гимназије. Истраживачка стратегија за улажење у дијалог са ученицима је фокус група. Метода за анализу материјала, добијеног у разговору са ученицима је анализа дискурса. Прво, разматрају се две доминантне стратегије употребе фокус група: као средства за прикупљање података и као социјалне еманципаторне праксе. Мапирани су преовлађујући дискурси о школском неуспеху: дискурс школе као несигурне инвестиције, дискурс маргинализације школе, дискурс незаинтересованости ученика, дискурс незаинтересованости наставника и дискурс „школски успех нема алтернативу“. У завршном делу се разматрају импликације истраживања на социјални положај ученика у односима моћи у образовању.  
*Кључне речи:* школски неуспех, анализа дискурса, фокус групе.

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ФОКУСНЫЕ ГРУППЫ КАК СРЕДСТВО ПРЕДОСТАВЛЕНИЯ ГОЛОСА  
ПЛОХОУСПЕВАЕМЫМ УЧЕНИКАМ

*Резюме*

Работа занимается анализом дискурса о неуспеваемости в себе у учеников гимназии. Исследовательской стратегией для вступления в диалог с учениками являются фокусные группы. Методом для анализа материала, полученного в разговоре с учениками, является анализ дискурса. Во первых, рассматриваются две господствующие стратегии использования фокусных групп: как средства для сбора данных и как социальной эмансипаторной практики. Обозначены преобладающие дискурсы о школьной неуспеваемости: дискурс школы как ненадежной инвестиции, дискурс маргинализации школы, дискурс незаинтересованности учеников, дискурс незаинтересованности преподавателей и дискурс „школьный успех не имеет альтернативы“. В заключительной части рассматриваются импликации исследования на социальное положение учеников в отношениях власти в образовании.

*Ключевые слова:* неуспеваемость, анализ дискурса, фокусные группы.