

Even the Best Have Difficulties- A Study of Finnish Straight-A Graduates' Coping Strategies

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Abstract. Background of the Research: Upper secondary education is an important phase in adolescents' lives. The Finnish general upper secondary education is a continuum of the syllabus of basic education and lasts for three years. Studies end with the matriculation examination which is a nation-wide final exam held twice a year and it includes at least four separate tests in the Finnish language and literature and in three optional school subjects, each evaluated separately. Students can also take additional tests in subjects they prefer.

The matriculation examination is scored with the following grades (from highest to lowest): laudatur (L), eximia cum laude approbatur (E), magna cum laude approbatur (M), cum laude approbatur (C), lubenter approbatur (B), and approbatur (A), and improbatur (I) which means fail. Every year about 30,000 students graduate from general upper secondary education, and 40–104 of them scores at least six subjects with laudatur yearly. The successful passing of the exam provides eligibility to higher education studies.

The Purpose and Methods of the Research: The smoothness of the study path predicts a successful transition to and studies in higher education. The purpose of this study is to describe Finnish general upper secondary education graduates' study paths, and especially the difficulties and adversities they have faced.

In this study, the concept of straight-A student refers to a student who has gotten at least six laudatur grades from the matriculation examination. They represent a minority of their age group and thus, form a special group among Finnish graduates. However, no one can avoid hardships and difficulties in their study paths, not even this group of straight-A graduates. Therefore, positive coping methods appear especially interesting among these students who aim at high level performances at school.

The research questions are the following: How do they accept and tolerate difficulties? How do they perceive adversities and how do they conquer them in their pursuit for laudatur in the Matriculation Examination?

The study employed the narrative research approach. The data collection started in summer 2012 by sending by mail a request to write an essay to straight-A graduates: 14 graduates (11 women, 3 men) replied by sending their written narratives. The written data were complemented by narrative interviews (N=7, 4 women, 3 men). Narrative data analyzing methods were employed in the data analyses.

The Results and Conclusions of the Research

The results showed that the nature and number of difficulties varied by graduate the most commonly mentioned being difficulties related to peer-relationships and worry about one's failure. The most important coping method seemed to be optimistic attitude, and various

means of enhancing positive emotions and thoughts. Action-oriented methods included for example hobbies and concrete problem-solving methods.

General upper secondary education is a demanding and time-consuming education level during which every student face various difficulties. To promote the smoothness of study paths, it seems important to support students' personal choices and goals but also help them find and recognize their strengths and resources, social skills and peer relationships. Ability to cope with and overcome difficulties also helps tolerance to future, unforeseeable events and challenges in life. The ability can manifest itself as actual skills, more profound knowledge, or better and wider social network. Teachers and other important people in students' lives can foster optimism and positive emotions in students with the smallest everyday acts. Constructive guidance has an important positive effect on school paths.