



CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF LONELINESS in cognitive, emotional and social dimensions

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation is to make visible how the primary school children experience loneliness by analysing their writings and pictures of loneliness.

Before the Professor of Psychology Steven R. Asher (et al.) published their influential study on loneliness during the childhood in 1984, the researchers thought that only adults can suffer from loneliness¹. Recent both Finnish and international results of the studies indicate that loneliness occurs in every age group. Especially the marginalization of adolescents including the emotional and social loneliness has extended the research field also to cover the loneliness of children and teenagers². This research is current considering loneliness' prominent affects in the society. On the basis of the recent investigations³ it is considered that the experience of loneliness has a dangerous impact on individual's overall health and even predicts the premature death. Loneliness itself is not an illness but it can cause damage both to the mind and the brains⁴. At worst the negative consequences of loneliness can arise from the childhood and burden throughout the lifespan⁵. According to the Associate Professor Niina Junntila (2015) one fifth of the children in Finland suffers from loneliness and for one tenth of them it remains as a permanent state.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because loneliness is a multidimensional phenomenon there have also been several theories in the research area of loneliness⁶. The theoretical understanding of this study is built on the Parkhurst's and Hopmeyer's definition of loneliness (2008) including three key elements:

1. **Cognitive element** > Individual's appraisal of one's situation relative to one's goals and interests.
2. **Affective element** > Emotional reaction to social deficits.
3. **Experience element** > The felt desires

and longings that characterize the experience of loneliness.

The main focus in this study is on child-centered approach which allows children themselves to relate their understanding of loneliness. By raising children's own voice at the center of the research brings a more variegated and differentiated picture of loneliness and its causes and effects⁷. Timely interventions help us to identify the lonely child in time and alleviate the distress caused by loneliness⁸.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How children perceive their own experiences of loneliness?
2. Which kind of forms the social and emotional loneliness take at children's experiences?

METHOD

This study was executed in 2016 among the third class primary school pupils (N=38) in Southern Finland. After a stimulating drama story of a friendship the pupils wrote and drew freely about their own experiences of loneliness. Most of the pupils (n=36) had some experiences of loneliness. This research data was analysed afterwards by Hymel's et.al *Qualitative Analysing model*⁹. Children perceived loneliness in terms of three distinct features as depicted in Figure 1.

- An affective dimension reflecting the emotional character of loneliness
- A cognitive dimension entailing children's appraisals of the availability of various relational provisions
- A set of interpersonal situations or contexts giving rise to loneliness

CONCLUSIONS

The present results suggest that loneliness

appears to be a very common experience among children. Children's experiences of loneliness are not confined only with peers but it reflects a broader social world in which children live. Both girls and boys perceived loneliness by referring it to emotion terms such as "sadness" or "fear" and with locution "feel" or "feeling". In the pictures pupils illustrated themselves in lonely positions away from others with a sad and despondent feature. Social loneliness was most associated with situations in which the child was excluded by his peers.

AFFECTIVE DIMENSION	COGNITIVE DIMENSION	INTERPERSONAL CONTEXTS
EMOTION TERMS	RELATION PROVISIONS	PHYSICAL SEPARATION
METAPHORICAL EXPRESSIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Companionship • Inclusion • Emotional Support • Affection • Reliable Alliance • Enhancement of Worth • Opportunities for Nurturance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss • Dislocation • Temporary Absence
	LONELINESS VS. BEING ALONE	PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCING
	ABSENCE OF (SPECIFIC) RELATIONSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict • Rejection • Broken Loyalties • Exclusion • Being Ignored

Figure 1: Qualitative Analysing model (Hymel et.al. 2008)

REFERENCES

- ¹ Rotenberg. 2008
- ² Cassidy&Berlin 2008
- ³ Holt-Lunstad et al. 2017
- ⁴ Müller&Lehtonen. 2016
- ⁵ Junntila. 2015
- ⁶ Sønderby. 2013
- ⁷ Hymel et al. 2008
- ⁸ Qualter et al. 2010
- ⁹ Hymel et al. 2008