

# 'I just sit there': shyness as an emotional and behavioural problem in school

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**Shyness is not unlike many psychological constructs in that it connotes a rich cluster of behaviours, cognitions, feelings and bodily reactions. But when adolescents' shyness creates keen sensitivity to cues of being rejected, preventing them from speaking up for their rights and expressing their own opinions, thereby encouraging self-consciousness and excessive preoccupation with their emotions, it becomes a problem for both these adolescents and their surroundings. This paper presents 10 adolescents' experiences of being shy in a school context to such a degree that it is regarded as being a behavioural and emotional problem. In light of elements from an existential-phenomenological understanding, challenges and remedial measures for these adolescents as well as their peers and teachers are discussed. Finally, focus will be placed on how teachers can promote good relationships and working environments and in this manner prevent shyness from becoming a behavioural and emotional problem in school.**

## Introduction

Our personality is complex and exciting, as is our behaviour, something that is a consequence of many factors: our environment, cultural background, heredity, physical and mental health as well as our social and academic skills. In addition, all the people, situations and stories we encounter during our lives affect our personality. There are many different terms used when we are discussing, describing and explaining *shy behaviour*, including introversion, withdrawn behaviour, depression, behavioural inhibition and social anxiety (Fonagy & Target, 1996; Greco & Morris, 2001; Lazarus, 1991; Rutter, 1997; Van Ameringen, Mancini & Oakman, 1998; Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). Shy behaviour is not unlike many psychological constructs in that it connotes a rich cluster of behaviours, cognitions, feelings and bodily reactions. It is possible to describe it as a *subjective experience* (Buss, 1980; Zimbardo, 1977), as a *psychological syndrome* including both the subjective social anxiety and inhibited social behaviour (Jones & Carpenter, 1987), as a *genetic component* (Kagen, Reznick & Gibbons, 1989; Rutter, 1997), as a *temperamental disposition* (Eysenck, 1947, 1981) or as shy behaviour seen

from a *situational* and/or *social* point of view (Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-LaForce & Burgess, 2006; Younger & Daniels, 1992).

In this paper, I aim to present the stories of 10 girls exhibiting emotional and behavioural problems associated with shyness at school. In light of elements from an existential-phenomenological understanding, I will describe, discuss and present the results of these 10 girls' stories of being shy at school as an emotional and behavioural problem. It is interesting and challenging to attempt making the presentation of the life-world at school of shy adolescents who often go unnoticed in the noise made by the others around them.

## Shy behaviour as an emotional and behavioural problem in school

School is a very important area for adolescents, whether they enjoy being there or not. It is the context in which friendships are made, and there are several social and academic challenges (Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999). School has also become an important place for preparing them for adult working life. In addition to knowledge imparted by traditional education, current jobs increasingly require both technical and communicative skills (Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-LaForce & Burgess, 2006; Rutter, 1997). Teachers and the evaluation system in schools encourage adolescents to be active, talkative, initiative talkers. Moreover, classes should be discussion-oriented and students willing to participate. It is not difficult to understand that all these expectations comprise a great challenge for shy adolescents (Paulsen, Bru & Murberg, 2006; Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). Additionally, school culture is itself at times complex and difficult to understand. An ideal student is considered to be the following: quiet, well-behaved; responsive but not assertive; bright but not precocious, and physically attractive. It is important for the adolescent 'to read' all the codes (declared and undeclared rules and expectations) and act in a 'proper' way (Henderson & Zimbardo, 2001) in response to them.

There is no doubt that children and adolescents described as being shy, socially shy and socially isolated (and who therefore exhibit shy behaviour) represent a relatively neglected group in our schools (Henderson & Zimbardo,

2001; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). There may be many reasons and explanations linked to adults' avoidance of these students, and one of them might be that adults do not perceive these students as having any problem (Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). They just sit there and do not disturb anyone and, if there are any difficulties, we expect them to ask for help.

Another important element in the exploration of shy behaviour as an emotional and behavioural problem is the 'normal' aspect of this behaviour. Most of us experience some degree of shy behaviour in certain situations. Zimbardo and Radl (1999, p. 10) discuss this occurrence and emphasise the fact that it is considered to be 'normal shyness':

*'Shyness is the natural reticence, is most intense and pervasive in young children simply because so many situations are new, and so many people are strangers to them.'*

Shyness is described above as being a natural protective device, a sensible reserve that allows people to size up new experiences before rushing in to meet them. This point of view is important when we discuss if and when the shy behaviour becomes a problem and for whom it is a problem. It is important that we accept that certain adolescents are quieter than others. Even if school rewards, emphasises and encourages initiative, involvement and activity (Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman & Wells, 2004; Goldstein & Braswell, 1995; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000), we must remember that some children and adolescents are both quieter than others and feel comfortable being just the way they are.

But when shy behaviour is defined and experienced as an emotional and behavioural problem, it covers two areas in psychological explanations: the inner world of the adolescent (emotions) and the outer world of behaviour (Clough, 2005, p. 84). From a phenomenological perspective it is impossible to divide adolescents' behaviour into inner and outer explanations. Bengtsson (2005, p. 22) describes human beings' behaviour like this:

*'The subject is thrown into the world, and behaviour and understandings are made on this background. It is a casual circularity, not a partial causality between the subject and the world around.'*

Atkinson and Hammersley (1993, p. 9) underline this by stating:

*'Any account of human behaviour requires that we understand the social meanings that inform it. People interpret stimuli in terms of such meanings, they do not respond merely to the physical environment.'*

Shy behaviour as an emotional and behavioural problem must therefore be understood contextually. This is the reason why it is so important to ask questions of pupils

about their class culture, friendships and relationships with their teachers. Their explanations and definitions of the term 'shyness' as an emotional and behavioural problem in this context is my starting point for understanding their daily life-world at school.

#### *Shy behaviour in relation to peers*

We know that the time around puberty is a vulnerable period of life. It is generally a period when interpersonal relationships are in transition (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Rutter, 2000). Young adolescents usually acquire more independence from their parents. The asymmetric relationship characteristic of childhood is expected to change into a more cooperative one, and peers become more important as a reference group (Alsaker, 1995; Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999). In friendship you have the best opportunity of developing social skills and perspective-taking. From an existential and phenomenological perspective, existing is to co-exist. 'The presence of others in my existence implies that my being is a *being through others*' (Luijpen & Koren, 2003, pp. 145–146). No relationship can eliminate isolation. Each of us leads a solitary existence. Nonetheless, solitude can be shared in such a way that love compensates for the pain of isolation:

*'A great relationship breaches the barriers of a lofty solitude, subdues its strict law, and throws a bridge from self-being to self-being across the abyss of dread of the universe.'* (Buber, 1965, p. 175)

Furthermore, there is no doubt that friendships are positively associated with measures of self-esteem and feelings of general self-worth (Alsaker, 1995; Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Rutter, 1997). They are also considered as being an important source of social support, particularly during potentially stressful situations (Rubin et al., 2006), and friendship can protect children and adolescents from the negative externalising and internalising 'costs' associated with peer victimisation (Judd, Smith & Kidder, 1991; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). It has also been shown that children and adolescents who are without close peer relationships altogether, or those who have difficulties with their peers, often experience difficulties of the social and emotional kind as well (Rubin et al., 2006). There is a considerable amount of research demonstrating that shyness and social withdrawal are associated with significant psychosocial maladjustment and difficulties with peers (Rubin, Burgess, Kennedy & Stewart, 2003).

According to Younger, Gentile and Burgess (1993), there are two kinds of social shyness: passive shyness and active isolation (Hodges, Boivin, Viaro & Bukowsky, 1999). Passive shyness refers to the action where the adolescent actively withdraws from peers, even if he or she has the opportunity to participate in the social interaction taking place. Active isolation describes rejection from peers despite the rejected party's desire to participate. These adolescents are isolated from the others, and their social interaction is a result of their rejection from peers. Many researchers state that both passive shyness and active

isolation may appear as different kinds of poor social adjustment (Rubin & Mills, 1988; Younger, Gentile & Burgess, 1993).

With this information providing a background, the present study addresses three main questions as follows:

1. What is it like to be themselves at school (past, present, special events)?
2. How do they explain, describe and experience their relationship with peers?
3. How do they want their teacher to act in relation to them?

## Method

### *Life-world as a research object*

The life-world is both the source and the object of phenomenological research, and the object of phenomenological research is to 'borrow' other people's experiences. We gather other people's experiences because they allow us, in a vicarious sort of way, to become more experienced ourselves (van Manen, 1990).

Life-world research requires the undertaking of a qualitative approach, such as the in-depth interview (Bengtsson, 2005). Using the three above-mentioned questions as the starting point of my investigation, it is the adolescents' descriptions and explanations themselves that will guide the research process. In phenomenological human science, the interview primarily serves the very specific purpose of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, stories or anecdotes, which may thereafter serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding (van Manen, 1990). But there are many questions, challenges and possibilities that arise when one is attempting to do research on other people's life-worlds, particularly when we are focusing on a sensitive topic such as shy behaviour. Regarding shyness as an emotional and behavioural problem is a negative focus, but it is a part of many adolescents' everyday lives at school, and therefore important to focus upon (Asendorpf, 1986; Eisenberg, Fabes, Karbon, Murphy, Carlo & Wosinski, 2004; Paulsen, Bru & Murberg, 2006).

The foundation in phenomenological research is 'going back to the things themselves,' describing the phenomena as they show themselves through actual experience. Heidegger begins with the human being's pre-reflective, pre-ontological, lived understanding of the world. In the life-world concept, we researchers are always a part of others' life-world. I do not think it is possible to 'bracket' past knowledge about the phenomenon. My feelings, beliefs, values and response as researcher influence the research process (Bengtsson, 2005; Piercy & Sprenkle, 2005).

From a phenomenological point of view, it is important to be open to the complexity of the life-world, different dimensions, characteristics, meanings and regions as well as the complexity of man's cognitions, emotions and bodily awareness (Bengtsson, 2005). Because it is in this very complexity – in the meeting-point between my life-world

and the adolescents' life-world – new understanding and knowledge can arise.

The focus of this research is students' experiences of being shy in a school context. Furthermore, it is important to be aware that even if I just asked questions about their school experiences, other things in their life-worlds, such as home environment and leisure activities, influenced their answers. During the research process (research questions, attitude, analysis and conclusions), it was important to be aware of these aspects when trying to understand, describe and analyse shy behaviour from their perspective. 'Being' and 'world' constitute an indivisible whole. The individual (subject) is a part of the world and makes his or her choices and actions influenced by this, as a participant both in the world and in his or her own story and life (Bengtsson, 2005). From this perspective, it is interesting to ask questions about students' shy behaviour from their experience of 'being-in-the-world' at school. From their point of view, is their shy behaviour a consequence of something in the school context, or do they explain their shyness using other reasons?

### *Research questions*

The questions in phenomenological research are questions of meaning (van Manen, 1990) designed to help the researcher understand the actual life experiences of the participants. Therefore, my questions were broad and open-ended so that the adolescents involved would have the opportunity to express their viewpoints extensively. It was important for me to avoid questions that included such pre-determined categories as 'normal,' 'dysfunctional,' 'deviant' and so on, attempting instead to get the adolescents to define the phenomena themselves. Simply stated, I wanted to get their descriptions of their life-world.

As a volunteer in this project focusing on introverted behaviour as a problem, the phenomenon of 'shy behaviour' was already filled with connotations. But my focus was on their life-world meaning, of being themselves at school in relation to their teachers and classmates.

### *Sampling and selection procedures*

The existential-phenomenological approach requires in-depth descriptions of the experiences of each participant and lends itself to limited N-studies (Piercy & Sprenkle, 2005). I interviewed in-depth 10 girls between the ages of 14–18 years. I chose only girls because there has been relatively little research on this group connected to behavioural problems in school, while a higher level of interest and focus has been paid to boys' extroverted behavioural problems (Loeber & Farrington, 2001). Research confirms that girls report higher levels of anxiety, depression and distress while also underestimating their own academic skills, whereas boys show an opposite trend in adolescence (Cole, Martin, Peeke, Seroczynski & Fier, 1999; Henderson & Zimbardo, 2001; Locker & Cropley, 2004; Rutter, 1997). This is also a reason to carry out proportionately more research on girls in the context of school and acquire more knowledge about the consequences

of their behaviour. Although knowing that there may be a great difference between a 14-year-old girl and an 18-year-old girl, I still made this choice because I wanted to interview girls from the onset of lower secondary school to the end of college.

Adolescence is a period in the life cycle characterised by change and transition. Of particular interest are primary changes in the biological, cognitive and psychosocial domains. Compared to children, adolescents are more psychological in their self-descriptions, focusing on personal and interpersonal characteristics, beliefs and emotional states (Alsaker, 1995; Rutter, 1997, 2000). It is primarily for this reason that I chose this age level on which to conduct my research.

The main criterion for participating in my research project was that the adolescents perceived their introverted behaviour to be a problem in the context of school; it was not only defined by others as being a problem. Other criteria included age (14–18 years) and gender (girls).

I contacted six schools in the southern part of Norway and asked for their help in finding participants. I took part in a meeting where all the teachers participated and had an information session during which they could ask all kinds of questions. They were informed about the criteria for participation and the different aspects of shyness as an emotional and behavioural problem in school (social withdrawal, passivity in class, silence, wariness, loneliness). The teachers then talked with the adolescents they thought fitted into this group, sharing information about the research project with them and their parents and preparing the interview sessions at school.

#### *Data collection procedures*

I videotaped each interview and transcribed it the same day word-for-word as spoken by the adolescents in their everyday language. I believe that, in every way possible, this method allowed for the opportunity to retain the participants' words and experiences (Piercy & Sprenkle, 2005). This data collection process allowed the adolescents themselves to define phenomena, describing in turn the conditions, values and attitudes they believed were relevant. By using videotaping, I also had the opportunity to recall the interview situation later on, of the process, if necessary, in order to analyse body language and the participants' presentation in its entirety (Berg, 2007; Dallos & Vetere, 2005). This facilitated an immersion in the data (so crucial to the analysis) while simultaneously allowing the process of the interview, and thus the observations, to come forth in the text. Editing the non-verbal aspect of the interview back into the transcript provided a richer text for subsequent analysis (Dallos & Vetere, 2005). Educational researchers have long recognised the utility of videotaping (Berg, 2007). The tapes can frequently provide access to the interviews as they appear and also the opportunity to analyse both the verbal and non-verbal communication. The adolescents in the study could turn on and switch off the camera or decide on the camera angle. All but one turned the camera towards

themselves. Cameras could be too obtrusive in some cases, influencing the respondents' actions and comments as a result (Erlandson, 1993), but I was pleasantly surprised by how positively the adolescents responded to the videotaping. They subsequently received a DVD of their recorded interviews. It is also necessary to point out that the interview sessions were not ordinary ones even if they took place in their school context (Erlandson, 1993), because I, a stranger, was asking them to present a piece of their personal world to me. Of course, this factor influenced their answers, and therefore it is also important to be aware of this fact in relation to 'the daily life-world' aspect.

#### *Data analysis procedures*

The phenomenological analysis process developed by Giorgi (1997, 2004) was used as a framework for the analysis:

1. *Sense of whole.* Reading the entire written interviews, listening and looking at the DVDs several times in order to gain a general sense of the whole.
2. *Discrimination of meaning units within a psychological perspective and focus on the phenomenon being researched.* Reading, listening and looking at the DVDs with the specific aim of discriminating meaning units.
3. *Transformation of subjects' everyday expression into a psychological language that places emphasis on the phenomenon being investigated.* Going through all the meaning units and exploring their connection to shyness as a behavioural and emotional problem in school.
4. *Synthesis of transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of learning.* In this final step, I synthesised all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the adolescents' experiences.

In this kind of phenomenological inquiry, data analysis and data collection go hand in hand (Patton, 2002; Piercy & Sprenkle, 2005; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). This may involve checking with the adolescents at several points in the collection, analysis and reporting process, and allowing them to offer input into the meaning being constructed by me to see whether or not the interpretation is on target (Piercy & Sprenkle, 2005). In addition to the DVDs, I e-mailed the transcribed interviews and encouraged them to correct, delete or add comments of their own. Five of them chose to add more information, and three of them deleted two sentences. I was also in contact with them during the analysis process through e-mail, MSN and the telephone. By doing all these, I had the opportunity to present their life-world as 'truthfully' as possible. Subsequently, I presented my findings to the adolescents by e-mail. Seven of them responded and confirmed that the findings are in fact in accordance with their experiences, while the remainder did not answer.

NVivo software (Richards, 2002) was used to assist in the analysis and creation of three main categories deduced from my main questions (Patton, 2002; Piercy & Sprenkle, 2005; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). From these major

categories, I made several sub-topics and used terms from the interviews as sub-categories. By using the adolescents' language and experiences in this manner (also called 'in-vivo codes') (Berg, 2007, p. 309; Strauss, 1990), I hope to preserve the essence of the phenomenon of shyness from the adolescents' point of view.

### Findings and discussion

There are most notably three issues which clearly appear after having interviewed these 10 girls in-depth: the adolescents' experience of being invisible to others; how they get by through adopting different coping strategies; and their expectations of their teachers.

#### *The invisible ones*

All 10 girls described different stories that underlined a feeling of being invisible to others. Kate (16) described her situation like this:

*Kate I was lonely at school and felt invisible. I told my teacher how I felt, that no one saw me in a way, like they [peers] just walk away, even if I asked if I could join them.*

*I What is it like to be invisible?*

*Kate No fun. It hurts.*

Another girl, Ann (14), presented the situation in this manner:

*Ann I'm just standing there, feeling like an outsider, looking down at the ground. No one invites me to join them. I'm just looking at my watch and waiting for the bell to ring.*

And another, Jenny (18), said:

*Jenny I'm sitting there on the bench beside them, listening to music, but not really together with anyone. But it is better than being alone, it looks like I'm a part of a group, and it prevents my being bullied.*

These statements from 10 adolescents give the essential meaning, descriptions of what it is like to feel invisible at school and unnoticed by others. We know that friendship may be seen as playing a general role in children's and adolescents' self-images (Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Jones & Carpenter, 1987; Rutter, 1997). They develop a notion of themselves through interaction with significant others, including friends (Aviles, Anderson & Davila, 2006). Therefore, when they have bad experiences, feel lonely and left out, it is understandable that their self-images are influenced. All the negative characteristics they used to describe themselves illustrate this point:

*Jenny (18) I'm a boring person to be with.*

*Kate (16) It's hard work trying to be like everyone else, and the worst part is I don't know how to do it.*

*Ann (14) No one notices me because I'm quiet and don't have anything to say.*

*Lisa (16) I'm an outsider, looking at the others.*  
*Catherine (14) Sometimes I think that everyone has bad ideas about me, and I say to myself: 'Shit, this is hopeless!'*

It is not easy to establish friendships with this self-image, nor is it easy to take the initiative or be active in interaction with others. Such insecurity and negative thoughts lead to shy behaviour. So despite their wish to participate, they cannot manage, without receiving help from others, to step forward according to their life-world. All of them really want to be invited to be part of the group and take part in small talk, thereby enjoying a feeling of belonging.

They all describe their shy behaviour as active isolation, not as passive shyness. Their experience is that the others are rejecting them in spite of their desire to participate. They think the others do not want to be with them, and they have the perception of their having low peer-group status:

*I If I had a camera in class and filmed all of you, what would I see?*

*Lisa (16) There is a lot of noise. Most of the students are talking, walking around and chatting with someone else. I'm just sitting there, drawing or just doing nothing. No one asks me if I would like to join them, or asks me questions because they don't care. I just follow them around all the time. I don't think they like me at all.*

They want the others to invite them, taking the initiative for contact and communication. A string of relevant questions for discussion is as follows: Is this passive withdrawal or active isolation? Who is in charge of the initiative? How many failures must you suffer before you give up and your behaviour becomes withdrawn? What can teachers and peers expect from an adolescent exhibiting withdrawn behaviour? And what can the adolescent with withdrawn and behavioural problems expect from peers and teachers? There are no easy answers to these questions. However, the shy adolescents, teachers and peers react and communicate from their understanding of who is the responsible party in each situation. From an existential-phenomenological point of view, there are no 'right' answers. Everyone is responsible for their actions (Malantschuk, Hong & Hong, 2003, p. 11; Yalom, 1980, p. 218) be they teachers, shy adolescents or peers. But there is no doubt that in relation to children and adolescents at school, the teacher has an extra responsibility (Zimbardo & Radl, 1981). One of the most important points of this approach is to teach children and adolescents perspective-taking and show them the choices they have (Heidegger, 2002; Van Deurzen, 1999). This is a great challenge in school when we also know that previous research confirms that adolescents with shy behaviour are less popular among their classmates than others (Rubin, Chen & Hymel, 1993), and they are likewise rejected more often than others in the school context (Rubin et al., 2006). They also have fewer friends than do their more extroverted peers, report less satisfaction with

the relationships they do have and feel greater loneliness (Asendorpf, 1986; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel & Williams, 1990; Coie, Dodge & Kupersmidt, 1990). This makes friendship and collaboration even more challenging for both these adolescents and their peers.

There are already many different programmes and intervention practices in schools focusing on relationships and social skills. Behavioural social skills training is a well known and widely utilised method in school, also with regard to adolescents with shyness as a behavioural problem (Greco & Morris, 2001; Henderson & Zimbardo, 2001). This training often takes place in small groups, and the challenge of this approach is how to include classmates (Ertesvåg, 2003) and how to extend this training into the adolescent's everyday life and natural school settings (Spence, 2003).

My research confirms this complexity and challenge. Six of the girls in my research project claimed having one friend or more at school, and the four (who reported being bullied) did not. But the six girls with friends also reported feeling lonely at school, which means that everyone in my research work confirmed feeling lonely even if they had friends. There may be several explanations for this occurrence. One may be that shy adolescents are less satisfied with their current friendships than are non-shy students. They report that they lack certain qualities in their friendships such as loyalty, intimacy and pleasurable companionship (Jones & Carpenter, 1987). Research also confirms that although shy adolescents are not without friends, they have fewer numbers of friendships and smaller social support networks (Asher, 1990; Rubin et al., 2006; Younger & Daniels, 1992). These adolescents lack some of the various kinds of interpersonal rewards or functions that relationships afford, and therefore easily become uncomfortable and uncertain regarding their existing friendships as well:

*Vigdis (15) Group work is the most terrible thing at school, even if my friend Christine is in my group. You have to cooperate and offer new ideas. This is my weakest point in class. If I have an idea, I don't dare to say it out loud. If I did, they would say: 'It's not good enough'. Then another person in the group would have a brainwave, and everyone would applaud and I would feel like a fool. The others would continue as if nothing had happened.*

#### *Different strategies*

Shy adolescents also describe how they get by through adopting different coping strategies. Silence and social withdrawal are what most of us associate with these adolescents (Rubin, LeMare & Lollis, 1990; Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). Moreover, the interviews confirm that this is a well-known and widely utilised strategy, especially in classroom situations when they feel uncertain. Everyone in my research work was conscious of their own silence and withdrawal. They explained, apologised for and elaborated on their behaviour in different ways:

1. Six of them said that their silence and social withdrawal were caused by bullying (social explanations).
2. Two of them explained it with: 'I have always been like this' (genetic explanations).
3. Two of them linked it to an insecure school environment (contextual explanations).

Several studies have shown that shy people speak for a smaller percentage of time, take longer to respond to others' conversational sallies, contribute more to conversational dysfluencies (e.g., allow uncomfortable silences to occur unbrokenly), and tend not to interrupt (Arkin, Lake & Baumgardner, 1987). Instead of speaking, shy adolescents can be safe and avoid the social limelight by engaging in 'back-channel response' such as murmuring, smiling, nodding or otherwise appearing attentive (Natale, Entin & Jaffe, 1979). They pretend that everything is all right or that they are occupied with doing something else:

*Marion (14) I sit in the classroom during breaks.  
I Why?  
Marion (14) It rains a lot, and it is better to read or do something else.*

Charlotte (15) described it this way:

*Charlotte I look down at my desk and hope that no one asks me. Sometimes I pretend that I'm busy with something, even if I'm not.*

It is better to sit alone than to risk various forms of rejection, such as a small hint letting you know that you are not wanted or completely uninteresting. Everyone in my research project described their inner conflict: 'I want to try and be a part of the group' versus 'I don't dare to take any step forward because I have bad experiences from trying to do so before.'

It is better to avoid someone than be rejected. It is better to be quiet than make a fool of oneself in front of everyone. Silence, social withdrawal and shy behaviour can be a *protective self-presentation style* (Henderson, 2002; Jones & Carpenter, 1987). When you are vulnerable to negative evaluations, you protect yourself with shy behaviour (Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). This behaviour may be perceived by others as a rejection as well as unhappy, awkward and difficult behaviour, and the result is loneliness and low self-esteem. The adolescents also risk facing the message from both adults and peers (through verbal and non-verbal communication) that the shy behaviour is self-inflicted. More importantly, nothing changes in the relationship with peers and teachers except the maintenance of a negative pattern, and the result is their feeling invisible.

#### *Challenge me!*

Regarding the question, 'If you were your teacher, what would you do to make your school day as great as possible for you?', the students had different solutions as to how to accomplish this:

*Lisa (17) Maybe we could make an agreement, my teacher and I. I could start by answering questions once a week.*

*Vigdis (15) I want the teacher to really ask me how I'm doing at school, but not in front of everyone. He [the teacher] could take me into another room where we could talk.*

It is interesting to note that all 10 girls want to be challenged by adults, to step forward, talk and participate in class and group sessions. They want to be more visible to others. It is easy to 'read' shy behaviour as 'leave me alone' behaviour for both peers and adults. But when we go behind our assumptions and interpretations and listen to what they have to say, the message is 'We want to be included and involved'.

Even if they feel invisible and have a self-image of being invisible, they want to break out of this image:

*Charlotte (15) If the teacher would notice me, too, not only the students who make noise. It would be scary but necessary for me that he asks me questions, even if I don't raise my hand in class. It is the students making noise who get his attention.*

Marion (14) explained her challenges in class like this:

*Marion I want to participate more, but I don't dare.*  
*I What do you think that you need from others to be able to do this?*  
*Marion It would help me to work together in small groups put together by our teacher, and I want him to ask me to participate in discussions.*  
*I But wouldn't that be scary in front of all the others?*  
*Marion Not if it's a teacher that knows me, then I could depend on his not asking me questions that I couldn't answer.*

#### Self-blame

The students blamed not only their teachers and peers but also themselves for their situations at school. They all wanted to participate more, but there were differences between who they thought have the responsibility for taking the first step. Seven of them placed focus on the teacher's responsibility and opportunity, whereas three of them also accepted the responsibility themselves:

*Elisabeth (15) No one else but me can do anything about my shy behaviour. I have to make a decision independent of others.*  
*Vigdis (15) The teachers can't do anything. I have to make the decision by myself. The problem is I don't know how to do it.*  
*Marion (14) I have to work harder and put pressure on myself. Maybe things would be different then.*

We know from research that many of these adolescents are very self-critical (Arkin, Lake & Baumgardner, 1987). Because negative affective states draw attention inward, they are likely to lead to the trait of private self-consciousness, which is simply the tendency to focus inward on one's thoughts and emotions. It is frequently associated with seeing the self as being responsible for external events (Henderson, 2002). It is obvious that adolescents who experience rejection and negative emotions in response to rejection will focus inwardly more frequently and be more attentive to these painful states (Jones & Carpenter, 1987). They begin to believe that they cause negative or undesirable events occurring around them. This process generates further negative thoughts, which in turn contribute to negative emotions and predictions in a dynamic reciprocal fashion. According to Henderson (2002), the tendency to view the self as inadequate is one of the most important difficulties of shy adolescents. Negative labels interfere with challenging distorted thinking about social situations and challenging assumptions about others' reactions.

#### Blaming others

Seven of the adolescents blamed the teachers for their avoidance, repudiation of liability and the inability to act:

*Lisa (17) I don't think my teachers care at all.*  
*Catherine (14) They can ask me to answer even if I don't raise my hand. If I give the right answer, they can then ask me again.*  
*I: Are you saying that you want your teachers to pressure you?*  
*Catherine (14) Yes, I do.*  
*Kate (16) It would be nice if the teacher would ask me how I am doing, and I would appreciate it if she would focus more on the bullying that goes on in class. She just ignores it and me, too.*  
*Ann (14) No one asked me, even if they saw my loneliness and the bullying.*  
*Jenny (18) I learned at the age of 11 that you can't depend on adults.*  
*Jeanette (17) There has never been anyone who has really cared about me at school. I don't think they give a damn.*

Five of the six girls (except Elisabeth, 15) who explained their shy behaviour by the fact that they have been bullied blamed their teachers for disregarding the problem. These five girls not only had negative thoughts about themselves but they also blamed their teachers for their bad feelings. It is not difficult to understand that bullying can result in an inward reaction like shyness, self-blame and other-blame. Previous research also confirms this idea (Henderson, 2002; Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). Through these students' stories about themselves, it is entirely appropriate to be critical of their adult contacts at school. I think it is a healthy sign that they pointed at others – and not just at themselves – in these situations. Given the fact that we know the tendency to view the self as being inadequate is one of the most important difficulties for adolescents with shy behaviour

(Henderson & Zimbardo, 2001; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Zimbardo & Radl, 1999), it is important that they also allow themselves to reflect on others' behaviour. The challenge for them is to express this feeling to their teachers, yet having a shy behaviour problem makes this a difficult thing to do. They are vulnerable and sensitive to rejection, and unsure whether or not they have the 'right' to want something from anyone. Their self-image is low, and the feeling of self-blame often wins in the war between self-assertion and the fear of being rejected and disregarded.

From an existential-phenomenological point of view, the adolescents have a choice to act, to raise their voice and define the context in which they find themselves. But choices and actions are influenced by the world-context and therefore set limits on their actions (Malantschuk, Hong & Hong, 2003). The teacher has a clear responsibility of being a leader in the classroom, accepting the adolescents' perspectives and making a cooperative environment between himself/herself and his/her students (Aviles et al., 2006; Goldstein & Braswell, 1995). On the other hand, the shy adolescent has the responsibility to transmit their message, even if it is a difficult act to perform. From an existential-phenomenological perspective, it is through these difficult choices and actions that possibilities arise for both the adolescents and their teachers.

### Final thoughts

This research emphasises the challenges faced by shy students at school, reinforced by their feelings of being invisible to both teachers and peers. However, despite their negative predictions, self-blame and shy behaviour, their message is very clear: They want to be challenged by their teachers.

### *The implications of the findings for future practice*

Success in social interactions is determined by many factors relating to the individual, the response of others and the social context. That is why it is important to create strategies and intervention practices on several levels, and the teacher is the key to accomplishing this task in the school context. Approaches in and of themselves do not make any difference, but teachers do. The approaches only support or hinder the process (Clough, 2005). First of all, it is crucial for teachers and other key persons in the school system to be aware of the adolescents who are exhibiting shy behaviour in school, and not just allow them to 'sit there' in their silence and withdrawal, merely because they do not make trouble for anyone but themselves. The next challenge is to communicate this awareness to the

adolescents involved so that they get a feeling of being included. This research demonstrates their vulnerability and need for a secure school environment where adults take the responsibility and prevent and stop bullying. It is impossible to expect the adolescent to step forward in an environment that includes mental and physical victimisation. In light of this, it is of great importance that teachers are willing to evaluate their own behaviour, including their methods, degree of flexibility and classroom routines as well as the adolescents' behaviour and challenges.

However, these aims will only be realised, when the sorts of approaches defined here are exercised with professional precision. Finally, only when the conditions have been prepared in the best possible manner can it be possible for these troubled adolescents to take the first step forward in creating a better life for themselves.

### Conclusion

This research underlines the need for more knowledge about and focus upon this particular group of adolescents in school. More empirical information about shyness as an emotional and behavioural problem is required to guide preventive strategies for reducing bullying, passivity and neglect. Further research should focus on the consequences of the educational and social development, and overall functioning for adolescents exhibiting shyness as an emotional and behavioural problem in the school context. In addition, factors more unique to this group (such as being victims of bullying and/or creating improved self-images) should be addressed. Shyness is a significant social and personal problem for these adolescents, one that presents a major problem in their lives. Some shy students are more vulnerable than others, but theirs is largely a learned experience that can be prevented by changing social structures and socialisation practices. This fact makes any further research both exciting and challenging, and gives hope and opportunities in relation to this group.

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