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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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Improving the School Environment from a Student Perspective: Tensions and opportunities

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Abstract

Managerial documents for the national school system in Sweden have emphasised taking students' voices as a starting point in forming education, and several previous studies have indicated the benefits of giving students opportunities to participate in school. This study aimed to explore students' reflections on what they would do if they were to decide how to make school the best place for learning. A total of 200 students aged 11 to 15 years from four schools (rural and urban) in two municipalities in the northern part of Sweden participated. The empirical data consisted of the students' written reflections. The findings fall within four themes: (i) influencing educational settings; (ii) striving for reciprocity; (iii) managing time struggles; and (iv) satisfying well-being needs. Tensions between the students' previous experiences and future visions appeared. The findings can offer direction regarding aspects of the learning environment in school that could be improved.

Keywords: learning; student voice; well-being; qualitative methods; school environment

Introduction

Psychosocial and physical dimensions of a learning environment in school

A school environment may be constituted by several dimensions such as psychosocial and physical aspects which, in turn, affect students' achievements and personal experiences of learning. Research shows that positive learning environments signified, for example, by respectful relations, well-being and appreciation enhance students' abilities to achieve goals set in schools (Bergmark, 2009; DeWit et al., 2000; Grosin, 2003; Perdue et al., 2009). Decker, Dona and Christenson (2007) emphasise the significance of positive social relations, for example between teachers and students, which are important for students' achievements in school. Dewey (1991) stresses that students do not distinguish between a teacher's personality and the subject. According to Alerby (2003), teachers as persons therefore become essential to students' experiences of a particular subject. Haapasalo, Valimaa and Kannas (2010) argue that there is a correlation between students' perceptions of their school engagement and their perceptions of teacher-student relations. They describe the students in their study

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who reported high levels of school engagement as being more likely to report good or very good perceived school performance (*ibid.*).

A physical environment, such as a school building, can be seen from many perspectives, with the environment's material qualities perhaps being the most prominent perspective. However, understanding a physical environment only in terms of its material qualities will not provide an encompassing view. It can also be comprehended in its aesthetic and functional aspects, as well as its relation to human beings. David and Weinstein (1987) claim that a physical environment affects young people both directly and symbolically. Skantze (1989) argues that students' learning is created not only *in* the physical environment, but also *by* the physical environment. According to Hertting and Alerby (2009), the relationship between students and the school environment is interdependent, which leads to a view of students being active participants in school.

As elaborated above, we emphasise that the psychosocial and physical environments of a school affect students' opportunities to learn. It is thus worthwhile further exploring the root causes and clarifying how the environment affects student learning. Wenger (1998) believes learning can be viewed as intertwined individual and social processes of making meaning. Similarly, our research focused on the students' subjective social and emotional processes and how they contribute to learning and not primarily on objective academic achievement.

Student participation for school improvement

The managerial documents for the national school system in Sweden stress the importance of taking students' voices and experiences as a starting point in educational settings, with the aim of increasing educational achievement (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). Research findings from Sweden show that giving students a voice and the space to participate in school matters that concern them can contribute to school improvement (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009). Ahlström (2010) presents a Swedish study in which schools with a high level of perceived participation seem to have higher grades and less bullying than schools with a low level of participation. Also internationally there are researchers who emphasise the benefits of student participation. Cook-Sather (2006) argues that creating opportunities for students to be engaged in their education affects not only their participation in school but their engagement as citizens as well. Lickona and Davidson (2005) add that allowing students to voice their thoughts and opinions in school can improve engagement.

The willingness of students to become involved and to give voice to their thoughts can indeed be facilitated by teachers (Vinterek, 2010), but we hold that students' experiences and reflections could also be given serious consideration to the advantage of school improvement processes and educational research. A recent study by Gillander-Gådin, Weiner and Ahlgren (2009) emphasises the competence of students when given the opportunity to participate. They found that students in grades 1 to 6 can participate in health education interventions and that students suggested health-

promoting changes similar to what members of the health committee had proposed. According to researchers in both Sweden and around the world, students' abilities and their participation should not be underestimated (Alerby et al., 2008).

Thus, the importance of the student voice is widely known and argued for and our position is that creating a deeper understanding of the contributions students can make involves inviting them to participate in their own process of learning, as well as in educational research (Bergmark & Alerby, 2008; Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009; Kostenius & Öhring, 2008a).

Against the background of previous research, it is interesting to give voice to students, in order to understand their perspective on what constitutes a positive learning environment in school. The aim of this study was to explore students' reflections on what they would do if they were to decide how to make school the best place for learning.

Theoretical framework and data collection

The students' reflections about school, based on their previous experiences of both negative and positive kinds, were the source and object in this study. The experiences of students can be considered part of their *life-world*, a central concept in the phenomenological movement inspired, for example, by Merleau-Ponty (1996). Such research involves reflection, and is, according to van Manen (1997), both retrospective and recollective.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1996), former, present, and future experiences can be bridged together into what he calls the *intentional bow arch*. The subject's earlier experiences give direction and meaning to present and future actions. By that we argue that students' reflections on a positive school environment can be considered as emanating from their earlier experiences.

In this study, 200 students, aged 11 to 15 year, from four schools (rural and urban) in two municipalities in the northern part of Sweden, participated. The empirical data were, collected during 2009 and, consisted of the students' written reflections. While designing the data collection, the research team utilised an inclusive perspective in formulating a writing task in common terms and in giving every student in the participating classes an opportunity to accomplish the writing task. The students were given the task to continue an open letter with a starting sentence in Swedish, corresponding to the following English sentence: "If I were to decide how to make school the best place for learning, I would like to..." As researchers, we introduced the task and collected the students' responses during ordinary school activities.

Quotations of the students' responses in Swedish were then translated into English to illustrate and mediate the interpretation of the student voices. The translation may itself cause some challenge, because there is a risk that some of the original meaning in Swedish may be lost. To minimise the risk of misinterpretation we had extensive conversations with linguistic reviewers on how to translate the students' statements.

One reason for choosing written reflection as a method in this study is that a writer can remember and reflect on past experiences, which can help in formulating wished-for experiences. Dysthe (1993) argues that because writing is a much slower process than talking the writer has an opportunity to mediate, and, according to Vygotskij (1978), writing is the highest form of symbolic thinking. Applebee (1984) stresses that written reflections describe thoughts and experience, which can be analysed explicitly. Van Manen (1997) emphasises that the process of writing represents a way of making personal and internal experiences more public and explicit.

According to Swedish law concerning the ethical conduct code (SFS 2008), participation in a research study is voluntary and the participants are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. The law also involves confidentiality, which means that unauthorised persons have no access to the empirical data. Information about the study was given to the students and their parents, orally and in writing, and informed consent was obtained. The research study was approved by the Regional Ethics Review Board (Dnr 45-2009) in Sweden.

Data analysis

The data analysis aimed to explore the meaning of the students' reflections. To obtain an overview of all of the participants' written reflections, they were first read individually by all authors in the research team. The general interpretations of the data were then discussed in the team to create a first shared understanding by addressing the question, "What does this say about the students' reflections?" Similarities as well as differences were noted. During the continuing process the reflections were analysed repeatedly and thoroughly by all members of the research team. We had discussions with a focus on individual sections, as well as the entirety of the students' texts, in order to better understand patterns of meaning. Eventually different patterns emerged, which were then combined into four themes based on the central and common characteristics of the patterns. To enhance credibility, quotations were identified and used when describing the results. The themes reflect a great variety in the students' reflections. To depict the different themes we present typical and characteristic examples of the students' written reflections that we consider illustrate this great variation, as well as several important aspects of the themes.

The analysing process should not be regarded as governed by certain predetermined rules – it is not a rule-bound process. Rather, the analysis involves attempting to allow the phenomenon to appear precisely as it is, *a free act of seeing* as van Manen (1997) puts it. The phenomenon in this case is *students' reflections on what they would do if they were to decide how to make school the best place for learning*. However, it is important to note that the students' reflections might have been affected by their beliefs about our expectations as researchers, by their different interpretations of the specific writing task, or by their varying abilities to express their considerations in

writing. This is important to bear in mind while considering the results of the study. Nevertheless, against the background of our methodological considerations, we have found it likely that the students' written reflections often correspond quite well to their considerations about what they would do if they were to decide how to make school the best place for learning.

Findings

The findings of the analytical process resulted in four themes: (i) influencing educational settings; (ii) striving for reciprocity; (iii) managing time struggles; and (iv) satisfying well-being needs. The themes describe the students' reflections on what they would do if they were to decide how to make school the best place for learning, and they will be presented without any order of preference. Before presenting the themes, we want to emphasise that the students raised both tensions and opportunities in their reflections on the potential to develop a positive learning environment in school. Some students considered negative experiences or hypothetical situations and concluded that the best place for learning would exclude such situations. Some took already existing positive aspects of their school environment as their point of departure and argued that these positive aspects should apply to a greater number of educational settings. Hence, the themes do not automatically highlight deficiencies in the participating schools. On the contrary, the students also mentioned positive aspects they want to sustain in their schools.

Influencing educational settings

In this theme, the emphasis was on freedom against control in connection with work forms, structure for learning, and teacher competence. The students reflected on working structures in ordinary school lessons and content in educational situations. They underlined variation, regarding both the content and the forms. For instance, the students put forward their preferences for a variation between practical and theoretical work. They preferred more practical schoolwork, for example, music lessons, and their reflections included learning in different ways, for instance with cooperation and valuation exercises. Moreover, the students appreciated effective lessons possibly resulting in the students' being able to learn something new in every course. Preferences regarding working structures included the following comment:

[It would be good if we] did as in Special Education...small groups and one teacher for each group... I understand that there are not enough resources for many teachers and small groups of students but it would be good if there was a limit for a maximum number of students in every school class, maybe 13–15 would be appropriate?

In addition, the students expressed an interest in freedom of choice in school, regarding both the form and content of the learning practices. One consideration concerning the structure of classroom management was expressed in the following way: "When

we work in groups we should be able to choose groups ourselves”. Hence, this student considered the choice of whom to work with during school assignments as being important. In addition, some students emphasised the possibility of choosing the content on school assignments. This was described like this: “I should be allowed to plan a whole schedule by myself” and “When we are allowed to choose by ourselves what to do it is very good, it feels a little more enjoyable to do something when I have been allowed to choose for myself”.

The students focused on having more excursions and educational visits during school time, as well as having lessons outside school, for instance going to theatres. Further, some emphasis was put on days for open-air activities. One student explained an interest in having lessons outside the classroom, and underlined that having outdoor activities would have a positive impact on the learning process:

I would also prefer that we were outside more during class. For example, doing more treasure hunts, taking walks outdoors, and stopping for questions, like educational trails instead of sitting inside in the classroom, but of course the teachers might not be able to keep track of what everyone does as well as they can in the classroom but I still think that we students would learn more if we were allowed to be out and experience things.

Another student wrote that it would be more fun to go to school if the education included more excursion, etc. According to another student, educational visits outside school, rather than constantly working with school assignments based on school books, were considered relevant for relating the subject matter to ordinary life:

We would instead go for educational visits related to the subject, visit places, watch movies, this would make a totally different class. Relate to the subject in everyday life. Using both practical and theoretical lessons in class and of varying kinds. Then it gets more interesting and one gets more focused and learns better ... focus the teaching in a way that each student thinks that it is interesting.

The students also pointed out how important the teacher’s pedagogical competence is for their learning processes. According to the students, teachers should be capable of motivating the student, by explaining things better, and they should be positive and do a lot to help the students understand better. Hence, one important characteristic of teachers, according to these students, is the ability to explain the subject matter thoroughly and have a genuine interest in their learning. One student expressed a general preference for better instruction, while another described the more specific request that “... Maths teachers should stop saying the answers to the Maths exercises one wants to have help with” [underlining by the student]. Some students also appreciated the teachers’ ability to keep track of students’ educational progress. In summary, the students brought up issues in learning processes, including freedom and control, the teachers’ pedagogical skills, theory and practice, and learning in the school building and in the surrounding community.

Striving for reciprocity

The students made critical remarks about encounters in school and offered practical examples of how schools can work to improve the psychosocial culture. According to the students, to be the best place for learning, schools must offer an environment of mutual understanding and respect. They emphasised the importance of having the opportunity to be heard and listened to. One student wrote: “If one wants to say something, the others should listen”. Mutual understanding could be understood in relation to both classmates and teachers. Another student expressed this in the following way: “I want people to listen and react. Not just talk a lot of crap and then go home, take a cup of coffee and think: ‘The children thought about interesting things, but I’ll get into it later...’”. This student most likely had the experience of people, probably adults, inviting them to have a say in things that matter to them. That promise, however, was not fulfilled in practical actions, which led this particular student to experience a sense of disappointment.

The students underlined the importance of keeping promises and listening actively to students’ views, with the arguments of students allowed to affect the organisation of the school. Mutual understanding and respect are related to friendship and kindness. The students wanted others at school to treat them kindly. One student stated: “The teacher and the students should be nice because that creates a good atmosphere and everybody feels well and you learn more”. This student linked behaviour of others to well-being and learning, and suggested that a schools’ psychosocial culture has an impact on possibilities to grasp new knowledge.

The students emphasised caring and understanding as important aspects of the teachers’ role. They expressed how a good teacher acts, for example: “If the teachers were nicer and taught everything that we will have on the tests” and, “That the teachers should not be annoyed because then I get annoyed and irritated”. One student wrote about the significance of “teachers who understand youth and don’t think that we lived 20 years ago”, while another student illustrated a preference for fairness: “All teachers should be fair and give fair grades”.

To be kind and respectful can also involve issues of language in a school, a viewpoint one student described in the following way:

There would be a better atmosphere in the class if certain people stopped swearing so much. Perhaps everybody curses sometimes, but those who curse a lot can try to tone down the cursing. It would also be better if certain people stopped commenting when other people speak.

This student highlighted the importance of speaking to each other in a kind and respectful way. This involved ending both the use of swearwords and the projection of negative comments onto others. These two kinds of behaviour toward each other reduced the possibility of creating a respectful and positive psychosocial culture in classes. The students also gave examples of practical activities that could be performed

to create a respectful and positive psychosocial culture in school. One suggestion is having what the students call “girls- and boys-talk” – discussing different topics in homogeneous groups of boys and girls:

I think that all classes and schools should have girls- and boys-talk. I think that would be nice because you solve problems there and make everybody be friends with each other. It makes the school a better place for all.

Another student gave an example of showing appreciation to others: “You can give each other compliments in several ways, for example, you can take paper plates with the name of all students written on each of the plates. Then you pass the plates around and write compliments on them”. A third example of activities in the classroom the students proposed is that of cooperative games. One student explained: “I think it would be good to do many cooperative games at the beginning of a year in order to get to know each other in the class”. They also expressed that conversation, in small groups, about things that matter to them represents one way of preventing bullying and increasing the well-being of the students. Cooperative games elucidate the importance of collaboration and teamwork when shaping a class culture. These different examples of activities the students discussed signify preferences for working towards building kind and respectful relations with each other.

The students’ reflections accentuate the importance of different psychosocial aspects in a school environment. Their striving for reciprocity reveals tensions between different kinds of relationships – student-student, student-teacher, and an individual student-school community.

Managing time struggles

The students exemplified a number of different time struggles in school, concerning both the form of structural aspects and the actual content of the time spent. They wrote about how the school is organised, for example, when the school day begins and ends. They also pointed out the inadequate structure of time within the framework of a school day. This could, for instance, concern the timing of the lunch break and whether there are free periods during the day.

The students expressed dissatisfaction regarding the structure of time in school and offered suggestions on how to manage them on a personal as well as a classroom level. They wrote, for example, about the length of the school day; according to the students, the school day is too long and starts too early in the morning. Some students put forward a preference for having mornings off. In contrast to the emphasis on sleeping in, some students stressed the value of ending the school day early, to “skip all mornings off so we can end earlier”, as one student put it. Similar to the contrast between emphasising the possibility of sleeping a little longer in the morning and that of ending the school day earlier, there is a contrast between those who stressed the value of having free periods and those who wanted to skip all of them. On one hand,

some students clearly expressed their wanting to avoid all free periods during school days in order to finish earlier; on the other hand, other students want to have more of them because it is during these that they can relax and be together with friends. One student paid attention to this clash of opinions – to have free periods or not, to start later or to end earlier – and recommended flexibility, as expressed in the following:

I think that one should work like six hours a day and that one should be able to choose when to start and when to end. If one for example is really tired, [one should be able to] come to school at half past eight instead of at eight just to be alert.

Concerning the question of how the time is actually used, the students emphasised the importance of using the time for meaningful activities in accordance with the content. For instance, the students expressed a preference for doing their homework during the school day, instead of doing it after school at home, even though that would result in longer school days. The most important aspect in connection with this reasoning was the possibility of having more free time after school – to really feel free to choose what to do after school. One student stated:

I would choose to stay later at school and then not have to do homework like Maths, writing tasks etc. Then I would get more spare time when I come home. All the homework we have today prevents me from spending time with friends and family.

The students also stressed that the lessons should be shorter and there should be more breaks since it is during breaks that contemplation and reflection can occur. One student put this as follows: “shorter lessons and more breaks since then one has time to recover and process everything that one has learned from [the lesson] before, plus one has time to prepare oneself for the next [lesson]”. In summary, the students acknowledged aspects of time, concerning both the structure and the content, as an important quality of the school experience. They put forward different, and sometimes opposing, views with both tensions and opportunities being shown in their written reflections. The students did not limit their considerations of time in school to a concern with managing school work and social life at school; they also connected the structures of time in school to the effect such structures have on their leisure time.

Satisfying well-being needs

The students expressed the importance of having well-being needs met in order for school to be the best place for learning. These include the physical, mental and environmental aspects of well-being. Concerning nutrition, the students mentioned the quality of the food and the level of enjoyment from consuming it. They described their disappointment over the food served at school (in Sweden all students get free lunches at school). One student pointed out that “... the food at school needs to be better because [now] it is disgusting”. The students also asked for a greater choice

regarding the food offered: “I would also like to have two dishes to choose from at lunch”. Bringing fruit or snacks to school was another suggestion for the purpose of getting enough nutrition to last the day.

The need for their bodies to be active was emphasised. One student wrote: “I would like more sports”. In the following comment, another student described how physical activity has positive effects for learning: “I would like to play hockey during school time, and then I would feel like I have exerted myself to the max with my learning ... in everything, Maths and English ... I think I develop best this way”. Another student adds to this by claiming that a sense of well-being is increased by moving one’s body and that this physical activity adds to the possibility of learning: “If we hockey players had ice time at school we would be in a better mood, being happy. It is much easier to work with Maths when you are happy”.

Another well-being need put forward by the students is sleep. The way school is organised can affect the possibility of getting enough sleep. One student wrote: “I would like it that school starts later and ends later so I can sleep in more”. In the following comment, another student connects sleeping in with educational attainment:

I would like mornings off ... Then I would not be as tired at school in the morning and it would be easier to work because then I would not sit and be half asleep at the school desk the first half hour.

The students suggested relaxation as another way of learning more effectively, explained by one student as follows: “... all classes should have 20 minutes every day for reading or writing because then one does not have to think all the time ... letting go for a while”. Taking breaks was another idea to satisfy students’ well-being, with one student putting it like this: “... we need to take breaks so we don’t get totally exhausted”.

To increase the students’ well-being it was considered important to improve the environment of the school, both indoors and outdoors. Several places were mentioned, such as the bathrooms, classrooms, schoolyard and corridors. The students wrote that they wanted the bathrooms to be repainted to create a more pleasant environment. They described how they wanted cleaner corridors and more material in the schoolyard for activities, for instance an improved basketball court.

One student argued that the classrooms should be nicer and cosier, with calming colours, because “... it would make students feel satisfied and be more comfortable in the classrooms and thereby maybe learn better too”. Other students noted their preferences for a higher temperature in the classrooms so they would feel comfortable. One student wrote, “All the classrooms would be warm so that one wouldn’t have to sit and freeze, when one freezes and is cold one can’t concentrate very well”. Some students explained they wanted better material circumstances, for example, an improvement of the quality and comfort of the classroom chairs.

The chairs should be comfortable!! It might be considered a small matter but we actually sit down on hard chairs the majority of our time at school. When I don't feel comfortable then it is hard to concentrate. Everyone might not agree, but I'm convinced that I'm not alone with this opinion. When I have pointed out that the chairs are uncomfortable teachers often say: But it is good if they are a little cold and hard then your brain is clearer and more focused! You would maybe fall asleep in a comfortable chair, they say and laugh jokingly. It might be that one is a little bit more "awake" if the chairs are not very comfortable, I don't know. But really, I don't require any armchairs. I understand that also price and durability matter. But still I think that there are possibilities to get new, more comfortable chairs with cushions for our backs and behinds.

In this theme, the students identify well-being needs, including the physical, mental and environmental dimensions, that are important to satisfy in order to feel good and learn more at school.

Discussion and conclusion

The students emphasised different, and sometimes opposing, views of what kind of structures, content, actions and attitudes may have a positive impact on the learning environment in school. The variety of reflections provided by the students is represented in the four different themes: (i) influencing educational settings; (ii) striving for reciprocity; (iii) managing time struggles; and (iv) satisfying well-being needs.

The fact that the students wanted to influence their education in certain respects, for example, in deciding when, how and where to do tasks in their school is not unexpected, but nevertheless should be addressed. To develop or maintain a positive learning environment in school, student participation seems highly important, something that is confirmed by Ahlström (2010). Cook-Sather (2006) urges teachers to listen to students, not only because learning and relationships would improve but also because a contribution to educational change can be achieved. Processes that improve schools and result in educational change can encompass the strengthening of a student's commitment to learning, and help to develop interpersonal relationships through mutual respect and trust (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). In addition, it is possible to change a school's organisation by taking account of the views not only of adults but of students as well (Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

It is hoped that the judgments and opinions of students can be taken into consideration and regarded as a relevant part of future school improvement, resulting in us, as adults, supporting them in their role of being so-called "leaders of their own learning" (Stoll, 2009:122). If students are listened to and given the opportunity to participate and affect their learning environment, their voices could lead the way forward to educational change and improvement.

Although we indeed found the students to be trustworthy, capable and competent in both the present study and previous studies (Bergmark, 2008; Bergmark & Alerby, 2008; Kostenius & Öhring, 2006, 2008b), it is also important to note that the stu-

dents themselves provided different, and sometimes opposing and incompatible, views. They shed light on the tensions and difficulties in making school a positive learning environment. Kostenius (2011) argues for building reciprocal relationships in a school environment where students are co-drivers of educational change, adopting what she calls “an empowered child perspective” (2011:16). In this case, that would mean teachers and school leaders would invite students to discuss conflicts of, for instance, freedom of choice and control of structures for learning. Indeed, students have less information about the financial limits of the school and of education than they do of personal matters, but it is still important not to forget that students can be considered experts about their own environmental preferences, making it highly relevant to listen to their opinions and understand their views, even if it might not be possible to satisfy their preferences without compromising them.

While it is important to take students’ perspectives into consideration, teachers’ views provide key aspects when improving schools. Indeed, this perspective on student participation does not imply that students are working by themselves with improvement processes. Students, teachers and other adults work together, often striving for the same goals (c.f. Andersson & Carlström, 2005; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). It is crucial for us to give a voice to all participants in a school improvement process. Similarly, Peacock (2006) holds that school improvement “...underpinned by the ethic of everybody, trust and co-agency demands that the whole community is given a voice and that dialogue takes place enabling progress that is both positive and enabling” (2006:257).

Besides the emphasis on educational settings and the opportunity to influence them, the students expressed the view that meeting other kinds of needs is important as well. These wishes include having nice and appreciative friendships, belonging to a group, and being understood. This echoes Decker, Dona and Christenson (2007) who stress the significance of good relations between students and teachers, and that such relations are important for student outcomes at school. Moreover, Haapasalo, Valimaa and Kannas (2010) studied the relationship between students’ different school perceptions; according to their study, the strongest correlation between the students’ different school perceptions was found between teacher-student relations and school engagement. According to Dewey (1991), students do not separate the teacher’s personality from the subject and do not even distinguish between the two. Instead, the teacher and the subject are intimately intertwined within the students’ experience of a subject. As a consequence, the teacher as a person becomes very important for the students’ experience of the subject and, from a broader perspective, even for their experience of school in its entirety (Alerby, 2003).

The students elaborated on time aspects in relation to flexibility in educational settings and they sometimes expressed opposing views with regard to time aspects. Some students emphasised the value of being able to sleep longer in the mornings, but equally others stressed the value of ending the school day early. Flexibility with regard to time is also expressed by the students as having the possibility to do their homework at school

and thereby enjoying the opportunity to use the time after school as they wish. These students reflected on the power to manage their own time more efficiently within the structure and content of time as it is incorporated in today's educational settings. Not having the possibility to influence time could in turn be one of the aspects that contributes to stress and ill health. According to Puskar and Bernardo (2007) and Ronthon et al. (2009), stress can be considered a limiting factor in academic achievement.

The students' reflections also revealed the importance of meeting basic needs for well-being, such as food, rest, warmth, air and movement, in school. Other studies have also drawn attention to the fact that poorer physical and psychological health among school children is negatively related to educational attainment (Chomitz et al., 2009; Fröjd et al., 2008). The students in our study also emphasised the value of outdoor activities and connected them to greater learning opportunities. These results are consistent with studies that stress the significance of nature and outdoor activities for health and learning conditions for students in preschool and school as well as for elderly people (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kellert, 2002; Szczepanski, 2007).

As mentioned above, the students took both negative and positive school situations as points of departure in their reflections. Merleau-Ponty terms the ability to bridge former, present and future experiences as the intentional bow arch (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). That is, the subject's earlier experiences give direction and meaning to present and future actions. Expressed another way, the past, present and future are bridged by the intentional bow arch. To connect this reasoning to this study, we emphasise that the students' reflections may be considered as emanating from their earlier positive or negative experiences of schooling.

If considered this way, the students' reflections can be seen as containing serious criticism of several aspects of the present learning environment in school, such as the insufficient opportunity to influence educational settings; the difficulties of the teachers in contributing to a positive atmosphere constituted by reciprocity, kindness and respect; the present inability of the school to construct adjustable time structures to suit different students' preferences and needs; and the school's current incapability to satisfy different bodily wants and needs that contribute to the students' well-being. Hence, the students' responses can reveal perceived tensions between their experienced learning environment in school and their perspective of the school as the best place for learning. However, it is relevant to note that the students also emphasise positive characteristics of the present learning environment in school. These positive characteristics were then considered as avenues for the future improvement of school, in the direction of achieving even greater success.

Irrespective of whether the students emphasised positive or negative situations as starting points in their reflections, they did provide their views on the school as "the best place for learning" and suggestions for improvement. The students presented different and sometimes opposing opinions. Indeed, some of these wants and needs might be difficult or even impossible to satisfy with the resources at a school's or

teacher's disposal. However, it is important to pay attention to the different views that appear in studies that focus on the students' perspective, whether positive or negative. Several areas of tensions between previous experience and future visions, as well as between different students' views and perspectives, have appeared in this study and they can stimulate discussion and help give direction concerning aspects of the learning environment in school that could be improved.

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