

## THE FACTORS OF WELL-BEING IN SCHOOLS AS A LIVING ENVIRONMENT ACCORDING TO STUDENTS' EVALUATION

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### Abstract

*How do students describe their quality of school life, based on their views about what is pleasant and unpleasant about the school? How is students' welfare related to education for sustainability? Theories of the quality of school life and authentic identity constitute the theoretical background of the present study. The school experiences of 185 Estonian and 161 Finnish students of different school types were studied by a semi-structured open questionnaire. The answers were analysed by a qualitative phenomenological method. The research findings reveal that the quality of school life of the students is diminished by the routine hierarchical working system and bad relations. It is supported by a cooperation-orientated atmosphere and meaningful learning experiences. The meaningfulness of school is sensed to be the most important factor in the students' evaluation of their school experiences.*

**Key words:** school experiences, pedagogical well-being, the meaning of school, ipse-identity

### Introduction

The idea of sustainability in post-materialistic societies relies heavily on the quality of life of the human beings. The earlier worries about making a living have been replaced in welfare societies by the problem of self-fulfilment, sufficiency of emotional experiences and the quality of feelings – the importance of which cannot be reduced even by economic setbacks. The discourse of happiness and the quality of human life has emerged as an object of research in social and educational sciences. Because an important part of people's lives is spent in different institutions, their impact on the quality of life and satisfaction and their feeling of fulfilment and joy has been raised as an important issue in relation to the conditions set in these institutions.

Happiness and life can be observed from several perspectives. The social perspective has to do with the standards of generally accepted welfare and happiness. The individual perspective deals with the subjective understanding of welfare and happiness. The philosophical-anthropological perspective treats welfare and happiness from the viewpoint

of general meaning and meaningfulness of the human existence. There has been a dispute about the relationship between the objective and the subjective approach to human life. There remains the question about the universal criteria of a successful human life at different ages and in different cultures, about what is universally bad and at which point the subjective factor has to be considered.

There is evidence that happy people are more active in society, more interested in other people, do not want to divorce, they live longer, work better and mostly act in a generally accepted way (Diener, 2000). Therefore, it is possible to find a direct link between the discourses of happiness and sustainability. In other words, if we first care for people, they will themselves take care of the rest.

The consumer society based on new-liberal values has put children into a contradictory reality. They form a measurable resource and as a resource they are obliged to serve school and society in the traditional manner. On the other hand, children and their feelings are more valued and their internal dependence on school has decreased (Ziehe, 1996). Competition between schools and the triumph of the client-based ideology give a reason to talk about the condition of the children at school and their satisfaction with school. Exertion and pain in the present for the sake of future happiness is giving a way to valuing the children's present: they are not preparing for life, but are already living it in the present.

The balance between pedagogy and the quality of human life has been an eternal question (*paedagogica perennis*) insofar as the essence of pedagogy has been the responsibility for society's future and for the life of a growing human being.

The dimension of hope is an integral part of pedagogy itself as it wishes to bring up future generations who will be able to create a better life and a better world. In other words, pedagogy, influenced by the spirit of modernism, essentially serves sustainability.

But what kind of pedagogy is sustainable? Mandolini (2007) argues that only spiritual and ethical education, as well as the anthropological values related to them – adequacy, respect for humanity – could connect sustainability and human development. Everybody is actively involved in self-transformation and life-plan configurations, and this determines subjective, internal sustainability. The external has to be subordinated to the subjective (Mandolini, 2007). In other words, the usual emphasis has shifted from acquiring knowledge about the external world to making one's personality qualities the priority. One's own authentic identity is the human being's personal guarantee for sustainability, and his/her selfness (*ipse*) can act genuinely. The *ipse*-identity is known from the hermeneutic approach and defined as the self which is connected with the mode of the self and the life path. The content of *ipse*-identity is made up of questions related to the self: what kind of a person one is (evaluative identity), which activity orientations are chosen (practical identity) and what approach to life as a whole is (biographic identity) (Laitinen, 2009). The main premise of a happy life is considered to be identity authenticity, which gives confidence about the real existence of the self and security without external frames (Taylor, 2000). Authenticity – finding one's own story – has today been considered the central imperative of personal goals in life. It means that one's being is domesticated and recognised as one's own and that life is trusted. In connection with identity authenticity, the existential qualities of being human are being emphasised, like autonomy, ethics,

responsibility, courage, vitality, spirituality, meaningfulness of life (Webster, 2005; Taylor, 2000; Laitinen, 2007; Mason, 2001; Ferrara, 2002; Saastamoinen, 2006).

A person's happiness is authentic if a personality's values are informed and independent. If one's happiness is based on manipulation or socially generated desires, it is not authentic (Bognar, 2010).

### **Pedagogical preconditions of the quality of a human being's life**

What kind of pedagogy is needed to fulfil the task of developing the authentic identity? A human being cannot develop into an authentic person with repressive pedagogy, when being under the will of an external authority and dealing with it constitutes the core of the experience. According to Skinnari (2004), students do not feel well at school if they are aided with ever more effective methods that convert them into tools for obtaining something, if performance-ideology dominates and a person faces the duty of making himself/herself into a saleable product. Moreover, as Skinnari (2004) acknowledges, making a product of oneself is not a very lofty aim, and seeing education as a medium for acquiring something is often also related to nonsensical experience. Socialisation into the existing reality cannot serve sustainability if there are too many signs of unsustainable development in this reality.

The concept of pedagogical love, defined by Skinnari (2004) as an unselfish relationship, helpful procedure, awakening of human potential and higher self-awareness, has come to life again. Loving attitude respects what already is in the child and does not define the final result: I know what kind of a person you should be. Pedagogical love should oppose the tendencies of making a human being into a thing and reducing his/her originality to being seen as an animal, as a product of the environment (Skinnari, 2004).

Noddings (2003) writes about the pedagogy of happiness and argues that happiness should be the main goal in life and education. She (Noddings, 2003) recognises that people learn best when they are happy and that happy people are seldom violent and cruel.

Education could be interpreted as caring for an emerging human being in the present, which is, at the same time, future-oriented as the present should help to form resources for a full life in future as well.

A newer concept is the concept of pedagogical well-being. Well-being at school is a precondition for meaningful learning, which, in its turn, makes such changes possible in human life that will actually help create well-being (Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2008). The school's successful fulfilment of its tasks depends crucially on what kind of learning environment the school can create. The concept of pedagogical well-being can be interpreted as pedagogy with positive emotional experiences, supported learning processes and encouraged integrated development of a human being (Meriläinen, Lappalainen, & Kuitinen, 2008). Nowadays, the school is expected not only to share knowledge, but also to acknowledge the different needs of students, as well as discover and develop their strengths. It could be a breakthrough in conventional attitudes that have so far concentrated on students' faults and mistakes and dealt with fixing them. In the name of a successful human life or, to put it differently, in the name of subjective sustainability, the theorists of

educational sciences have worked out the concept of socio-emotional competency as a necessary characteristic to be developed (Lappalainen, Hotulainen, Kuorelahti, & Thuneberg, 2008). The concept includes the development of cooperation skills, ability to observe one's activities, set one's goals and find protective internal mechanisms in complicated situations. A person who possesses such competencies is able to create and keep friendship relations, evaluate different factors determining his/her happiness and unhappiness and overcome depression and distress. Hosen, Solovey-Hosen and Stern (2002) acknowledge that socialisation is the question of developing emotional self-regulation. Students tend to learn what is related to their well-being and avoid the unpleasant and mistakes.

However, some steps have been taken to humanise school not only in Finland, but also in Estonia. Signals their respective societies receive from their schools show that schools are still a place of children's ill-being. For instance, The Estonian Human Development Report of 2009 points out that among 25 European countries, Estonia stands out with regards to school unpleasantness, the low subjective feeling of well-being of students and high frequency of experienced school violence. Studying is neither fun nor interesting (Estonian Human Development Report, 2009). Does it mean that school is a bad place to be in or have the standards of students' subjective well-being changed? Achievement and well-being values that students hold can be determinants, as well as outcomes of the conflict experiences (Hofer, Kilian, & Kuhnle, 2010).

Pedagogical well-being is created by environmental conditions, the nature of situations and also by internal emotional experiences. Though the conditions of the external situation are reflected in a person's internal experiences, the internal dimension does not depend entirely on the external one. Former mental horizons and self-regulating mechanisms start functioning when a person experiences bad external conditions. These mechanisms influence whether the bad conditions are viewed as a challenge or as something against which one is powerless. Unreal wishes and expectations can make a human being feel unhappy also in objectively good circumstances (Diener, 2000).

The characteristics of pedagogical well-being essentially remind one of the main universal conditions of one's successful life, which have been expressed in the works of many thinkers. Pietarinen, Soini and Pyhältö (2008) refer to the following features: 1) experience of meaningfulness that is born by the satisfaction of certain basic needs; 2) relations with social communities along with the possibility to be independent and free; 3) opportunity to pursue one's intentions; 4) secure and benevolent social environment with moderate risks; 5) realistic goals through one's own experiences; 6) nature of the pedagogical relation.

The concept of an active subject has here an emphasised meaning whereby mere subsistence differs from an active operating capability (Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2008). The latter is linked to the subject's self-realisation, an opportunity to influence the environment and one's existence in it. Pedagogical well-being is decreased by a great work load, the necessity to constantly protect oneself from problematic situations, compulsory performance – issues common in everyday school practice. Their continuous presence leads to destitute operation strategies when the individual's scope of the world narrows and

deteriorates instead of being broadened and enriched, inasmuch as the meaningfulness of the activities disappears.

Notwithstanding the background of hedonistic values in the post-modern consumer society, the identity of pedagogical work should still prevail, bearing in mind the original task of pedagogy – to awaken the intention to develop, guide to making an effort and expanding consciousness and skills and becoming responsible for one's own life, as well as wider entities. All this cannot happen only through the experience of well-being. Diener (2000) expresses a worry that too many ways of obtaining satisfaction leave people unmotivated and existing in the low state of a mere enjoyer. Speaking of well-being, one should ask a question: *What kind of well-being does stimulate development?* Seligman and Csikszentmihaly (2000) raise the question of what kind of childhood building bricks are good for later happiness. It is necessary to differentiate between simply pleasant experiences and those positive experiences which inspire a person to overcome limits, stimulate personal growth and encourage him/her to face the challenges of life. Negative emotions also reflect immediate problems and objective dangers, make people stop their adverse actions and promote adeptness. The human beings tend to be blind to values related to the preservation of positive emotions, but cultures which pay attention to creativity, virtues and high life quality are stable, peaceful and prosperous (Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, 2000). Culture is defined here as the set of shared meanings, shared beliefs and shared assumptions of the members of the community (Van Houtte, 2005).

## Research problem, methodology and method

Analysing the reflections of Estonian and Finnish school children on what constitutes a good school for them, the following question was distinguished: *What do the students' evaluations of school pleasantness tell us about their quality of life in school?* When comparing the school evaluations of the Finnish and the Estonian students, it was decided to interpret the students' reflections from the point of view of pedagogical well-being.

Veenhoven (2000) differentiates the notions of life quality, well-being, happiness and welfare. They all depend on subjective evaluation. Well-being is described as the adaptive potential of a person. Life quality – in which classically the objective and subjective dimension is marked – is different from the pure satisfaction with life. The latter is rather relative, anchored more in social construction than in human nature. It is the reflection of wishes at some point and shows satisfaction of needs. Life quality has a more constant nature and refers, at the same time, to the quality of society from the point of view of its citizens' happiness, as well as to the life quality of an individual human life (Veenhoven, 2000, 2005).

Pedagogical well-being and love are more connected with the notion of life satisfaction, because life quality links the outward conditions to the individual's inner reflections, emphasising their relation. The future is also a dimension of pedagogical work – the present actions should have a good impact on building up the future. However, the things done by the teacher might not necessarily cause the immediate state of satisfaction in a child, since the good in the teacher's deeds can be directed to the future. The pedagogical

task is a concern with the unique (Van Manen, 2002). At the same time, the future good should not be realised at the expense of the present moment as the pressure experienced in the present has also its side effects on the future. The meaning of the momentous event unites the outer and the inner for the participant: one is ready to suffer and labour for the sake of something valuable. If achieving something valuable is not the result of the pressure by outer forces but an outcome of personal recognition, then the efforts can be considered authentic. However, constant dissatisfaction can create a negative tuning in relation to life in general.

Veenhoven (2000) created a matrix containing several dimensions to assess the quality of life. According to this matrix, the authors interpreted the students' reflections on what is pleasant and unpleasant about the school.

The matrix includes both external and internal qualities. The external qualities refer to the factors of life that are outside the person encountering them while the internal qualities exist as the inner experience itself. In addition to that, Veenhoven (2000) differentiates the potential and the actual: the chances and the results of good life. Not every result that outwardly seems to be useful coincides with the inner feeling of happiness. The experience becomes subjectively valuable if one perceives its meaning for one's own existence.

A comparative study was carried out on the experiences of Estonian and Finnish students in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> forms in different types of schools. Interpretations of the self in school experiences were gathered by using semi-structured written answers from 161 Finnish and 185 Estonian students. The Finnish and Estonian students' self-perception in school reality was studied in 5 different schools in Finland and 5 different schools in Estonia and in different age groups (the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> form students). The data was collected in 2006–2008. The students came from different types of schools: from a basic school, a general secondary school, a private school, a Waldorf school and a Freinet school. Schools in towns and in the countryside were both represented. The present study seeks to find out whether and how the type of school influences the experience of well-being.

Data triangulation was used to increase the validity of the present study. Data triangulation refers to collecting data from different sources and at different points in time and space (Laherand, 2008). The frequency of similar answers (saturation) indicates that similar meanings exist among different groups under study. It substantiates the fact that a certain phenomenon occurs on a more general level. Such common meanings were also found in the present study. A trusting relationship with the students was developed, explaining them the aims of the present study and assuring them that the authors of written texts would remain known only to the researchers. The students had also the option to write a fake name on their questionnaire. Sufficient time was provided for the students to describe their experiences and perceptions by writing these in their own manner (no form was prescribed), and they could ask the researchers for further explanations.

The collected texts were analysed using qualitative content analysis and methods of phenomenological experience studies. The texts were categorised according to the different meanings they contained, based on the participants' realm of experiences.

The texts were coded according to the schools and the students' age and sex. To increase the reliability of the study, the researchers categorised the texts, based on their recurrent themes separately. To develop common categories, the researchers invited a

neutral research expert to assist while having continuous mutual discussions about the interpretation processes. Prior to the interpretation process, the researchers established their attitudes regarding school-related well-being and by explaining these to each other tried to neutralise their impact on the outcome of interpretations. To increase reliability, excerpts from texts were added to each argument. These excerpts serve as examples of typical views and experiences as expressed and described by the students repeatedly. The opinions voiced only by a few students or views that differ from the rest were highlighted. The researchers adjusted the categories established through the analysis of their content to the model of well-being by Veenhoven (2000).

The structure of the text below follows the same model. The researchers analysed the open answers given to two questions: 1) write down 3 or 4 reasons why school is a nice and pleasant place; 2) write down 3 or 4 reasons why you dislike school.

The researchers were interested in what the students considered worth pointing out as good about the school and how it relates to the students themselves and the school as a place in their life.

The well-being and ill-being of what experience level are we dealing with? What do the students' reflections about pleasantness/unpleasantness of school tell us? What meaning do the reflections acquire from the perspective of authentic identity as a developmental benefit? What is missing concerning the students' development and how do they notice it? Some most typical text samples are provided in the present study, as well as those quite unique.

### **Students' assessment of their school and their life in them on the scale of pleasantness/unpleasantness**

#### *School is good and interesting*

Analysing the essence of the answers which describe the school, it was possible to differentiate the following categories: present dimension and future-oriented dimension. In the analysis of the present dimension, the following categories emerged: people, school environment, school processes, states of mind.

Future-targeted dimensions were: knowledge, education and wisdom, aspect of self-development, preparation for life. According to Veenhoven's (2000) classification, it is possible to interpret the present dimension as the results of life (it is so now) and the future dimension as the chances of life (it is good for the future).

As for present dimension or what good school life has to offer, the students mention first and foremost the people who are differentiated by roles: students and teachers. The most indicative and summarising text samples are provided below. Mentioning peers – acquaintances, friends, new people – dominates the meanings describing a good day at school.

*Can meet friends; interesting and different people; can talk to classmates; meeting new people; possibility to be among people in general; can speak about one's problems; encircled by good people at school; fun to spend time with friends; strong bond with other schoolmates (Estonia – 168 meanings).*

*Get new mates and meet friends; no need to work alone; if something goes wrong, the mates support you, you can exchange thoughts with them; school is a social environment; can learn new important knowledge with classmates; friends to experience a special bond with (Finland – 155 meanings).*

The main and strongest meaning is meeting mates, relations with them, the feeling of belonging. The Finnish students also mentioned the spirit of cooperation and learning together, which was missing in the statements of the young Estonians. Peers were important for the students of both the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> form.

The number of meanings given to teachers was significantly smaller, in some schools only one or two.

*Some teachers are cool; most teachers are nice; teachers are pleasant and understanding; funny teachers; in case I don't understand, I can turn to them; school is pleasant, when I can socialise with teachers as equals; if the relation is not that of a master and a slave (Estonia – 22 meanings).*

*Teachers are nice, understanding, competent, humorous, good; treat everyone equally; they give encouraging and constructive feedback; they use various teaching methods, they can do things; you dare to ask them questions (Finland – 23 meanings).*

While in the Estonian schools words of appraisal for teachers were said in every school and class, the students in three Finnish schools could not say anything good about them. The teachers of the Estonian Waldorf school were especially praised by their students. A similar praise was given to the teachers in the Freinet school in Finland. Kindness, understanding, being helpful, equality and humour help teachers to improve the young people's quality of life at school.

Processes at school in which pupils could feel like doers, feelers, learners, could be divided into three groups by the meanings given by the students: 1) interesting studies; 2) hobbies and other events; 3) recreation. Large differences in liking the studies occurred here between the Finnish and Estonian young people. More than half of the Finnish students found something to praise their lessons for, whereas among the Estonians less than every sixth student made a positive remark. The Estonian students pointed out hobbies, events and activities, which was different from the Finnish young people. School as a place for just spending time was mentioned twice as often by the young Estonians than their Finnish peers.

The emotionally rich and diverse learning process as a factor of life quality has been emphasised more by the Finnish young people than the Estonian students.



Text samples:

*Interesting tests and research; sometimes you get to know something new and exciting; sometimes exciting things can be done even in classes; sometimes there are very interesting topics; we learn new and interesting things; we put our knowledge to use; there are also exciting classes; are given possibilities to develop our creative side (Estonia – 27 meanings).*

*Variable teaching; subjects are easy; you learn to do different things; the teaching of our school is high-level; I like the feeling of studying when I succeed in tests; I know I can do things; studying materials are interesting; it is great to be able to do new things; classes are challenging; I like to do different things; possibilities to show what you can do; sometimes you can get compliments for your contribution (Finland – 90 meanings).*

In Estonia the pleasantness of extracurricular activities highly exceeds that of the studies.

*Hobby group and choir, can travel with school, common outings are fun, a lot of different fascinating events take place, can take part in interesting undertakings, nice class parties.*

Some Finnish students (7) mentioned nature studies hobby group, nature hikes, music, dancing, high school prom, class excursions.

But students of both countries saw the school similarly as a way of passing the time which is accompanied by the common worry: what would I do with my days if there was no school?

*Can spend time; here's something to do; can play ping-pong; the company does not let you get bored; don't have to be at home; would be boring without school; that is a certain activity linked now to my life; if there was no school, I don't know what I would do all day long during these years; do not have to be bored at home; I couldn't think of anything better to do; a nice place to spend time, live our private lives in school (Estonia – 43 meanings).*

*Every day something new happens; time passes nicely; can spend the day usefully; I get the life rhythm thanks to school; it's safe to know what happens next; fun to pass time; the school keeps my time schedule under control (Finland – 22 meanings).*

While the Finns are satisfied that the school structures their day, the fear of an empty space filled by school seems to underlie the answers of many Estonians.

The school environment as a term involves first and foremost the characteristics of the school's physical environment for pupils of both countries: free milk, beautiful surroundings, fine-looking warm schoolhouse, good food, comfortable and homelike, large garden, possibility to be outside during the recess, possibility to run a lot. Those characteristics were recognised by pupils from all the Estonian schools and all the Finnish

schools but one. Only a few people mentioned the spiritual atmosphere: *friendly environment; good learning environment, not tedious; it is good to be here; I feel secure.*

The opinions expressed by the students of the 11<sup>th</sup> form of the Estonian Waldorf school were completely different from all said above: *one can express one's thoughts in school; good ideas spread here; you can listen to the peers' opinions in school; school provides a possibility to study to those who have learning difficulties.* One Finnish student of the Freinet school also said: *I can be myself and express my opinions.* These reflections demonstrate the exceptional perception of school as a space for intellectual work, a community where 'myself' can find its place and the development takes place in an informal way too.

The states of mind, feelings evoked by being at school were more frequently mentioned by the Estonian students. Unfortunately, only one state of mind was identified by 35 Estonian young people there: *fun, entertaining; it is often funny; we laugh and enjoy ourselves; we become smarter together with fun.*

Two students from senior classes of an elite school received emotional well-being from the results of one's studies: *fun to learn new things; nice feeling when you get a good mark.* Three people among Finnish students had fun in school. For the Estonian students humour seems to be of utmost importance, it makes the life worth living and sometimes plays a compensating role.

The future benefit which determines the life chances as important skills, knowledge and abilities emerged within the future dimension of the school pleasantness. The school experience is perceived as future-oriented and students are aware of it and consider it good. Three groups of meanings were detected here: 1) knowledge, education and wisdom; 2) preparation for life; 3) personality qualities.

Knowledge, education and wisdom mean important opportunities of life that are offered by schools to the young people in both countries. The students perceive the broadening of horizons through new and important knowledge. While the Estonians found education and wisdom necessary for their own sake, for the Finnish students these were associated with the future benefit.

Education was important for all the young people in both countries. Some text samples are provided below.

*Get necessary wisdom; get education; get new knowledge from both life and textbook; learn new things; become clever; get new interesting information; can get wisdom in school; an important place because you can gain knowledge (Estonia – 82 meanings) .*

*Studies for the future; important because of general education; school teaches things that will be useful later; get ready to become adults; study a lot of new things, and it is rewarded at the end of the school year with good marks; study important things; become educated; study new things (Finland – 62 meanings).*

The young Finns clearly see the pragmatic aspect of the studies and connect the acquired knowledge and skills with practical life. While the Estonians repeated the notion clever, the Finns never did this, pointing out that the studied material was new.

Preparation for life was equally significant for the students in both countries, while the Estonian students emphasised the readiness for abstract life in general (preparation for real life; to climb the life ladder; basics for life; abilities to manage in life; to get the basis for the rest of one's life; friends for a lifetime). Beside the necessary teaching and knowledge for life, the Finnish students also strongly emphasised their future employment, which was mentioned by the Estonian students only a couple of times. That probably shows an idealistic attitude of young people and certainly a greater realistic perception of the Finns.

### *Personal qualities*

These were mentioned particularly by the students of the elite schools in both countries, whereas much more by the Estonians (31 meanings compared to 10 of the Finnish students). Social skills develop thanks to friends and communication, which was especially emphasised by the Finnish young people; whereas for the Estonians social skills took the concrete form of socialising and the skill to consider other people. The students from an Estonian elite school developed courage, activity, identity, cooperation, contacts, behaviour, thinking, horizons. A student of an alternative teaching school said that it teaches to become a grown up. Multi-faceted self-development as a pleasant part of school was especially valued by the students of the 11<sup>th</sup> form in the Waldorf school: *learn what you are good at, what you are bad at; knowledge that develops my personality; possible to research other people's behaviour; teaches to deal with something tedious*. Two Finnish students learn how to study and get an overview of their strong and weak points.

### *School is tormenting and pointless*

By analysing the students' written answers, it was possible to define, with certain reservations, the same major categories as in their descriptions of school pleasantness: people, learning process, school as environment, states of mind. Future dimension – possibilities for life – did not evolve here. The unpleasant qualities of school are the result of something constantly happening.

### *People in school*

Teachers' different qualities come in the forefront here, whereas the role of the peers diminishes. The teachers' qualities, attitudes and their actions and mood make the students resentful. According to the Estonian students' opinions, teachers are *bullying; strange; unjust; stuck-up; unfair; ironic; bad; strict; too old; selfish; difficult to understand; awful; dumb; nasty; rigid; not human-centred; not competent*. Observing their actions and attitude it occurs that they *don't teach understandably; rate by face; do not show understanding; do*

*not care; don't admit their faults; shout; take their personal problems out on students; only think of their own subject; tell off; command; are choosy; assess too strictly and unfairly; find faults; have indifferent attitude; call names; insult; are unjust; cannot explain; discriminate; behave incompetently; don't care for their subject; think that their subject is the only one to learn; can't teach; give too much homework; expect miracles; make us nervous. As for the temper, they are always in a bad mood; evil; angry* (Estonia – in 91 cases).

The Finnish young people (in 53 cases) think that teachers are *dishonest; boring; old; nasty; bad; difficult; not suitable to work as teachers; constrictive; pathetic; childish*. The Finnish young people *don't like their style*. Observing their actions and attitude it occurs that they *do wrong to those who are weak; are annoying; give boring classes; are displeased; can't teach; only like good pupils; they think their subject is the most important; don't appreciate decent pupils; have their favourites who suck up; can't handle people; don't realise that people learn differently; create more tension*. Moreover, *sometimes it happens that the teacher has a bad day and takes it out on us* [pupils].

The Finnish young people were somewhat less critical towards teachers, at the same time, they cared more than the Estonians about the teachers' professional abilities – their skill to teach. The students of both countries criticised the teachers for being unfair when dealing with students and having a critical-demanding attitude as the students perceived it.

Students and all the bad things connected with them were mentioned significantly less and mostly in the same way. The most disturbing factor was their behaviour and attitude towards their mates.

Schoolmates are *unpleasant; ignorant; leaders and outcasts; arrogant; nasty to each other; not nice*. In their relations and behaviour they are *stuck-up; use drugs; bully; laugh at others; do not integrate with others; disturb the lessons; insult; mock; beat; nag; do not let to study; do not understand others; produce waste; get on one's nerves*. A student of an alternative teaching school: *if you're not rich, you are nobody* (Estonia – 30 cases).

Schoolmates are *unfriendly; unpleasant; nasty; boring*. In relations and behaviour they *damage school; bully; steal; make noise; disturb; shout like monkeys or bulls; become hated enemies; get on nerves*. Most of the negative meanings quoted here (11) came from the 8<sup>th</sup> form of a city school (Finland – 41 cases).

The students of the 8<sup>th</sup> form suffered most because of their mates in both countries. The Finnish students mentioned substantially more bullying and school violence. Though it is also a big problem in the Estonian schools (Estonian Human Development Report, 2009), it was not especially emphasised, evidently because it is considered as a part of the normal school life. As it becomes clear, the teachers seem to be a greater problem than the peers for the Estonian students, while it is the other way round for the Finnish students.

Learning process called forth massive criticism from both the Estonian and Finnish students. The students pointed out boring classes, long and tiring schooldays, large amounts of homework, heavy workloads and the meaninglessness of the studied material.

Students said mostly that

*lessons are boring and monotonous; have to do uninteresting and tedious tasks; have to study things that do not interest you; no optional subjects; depressingly boring; have to write very much; fear to go to the lesson; quick tempo; superficial; very much cramming; few projects and little group work; don't like the topic; no challenges; little development-stimulating activities; routine and revision; same rubbish every day; the bottom is tired of sitting; relatively tedious; long boring sitting; the lessons are done according to norms written down by politicians who are far away from education Estonia (mentioned 254 times).*

The reiterated meanings are boredom, routine, tediousness. The students of the 8<sup>th</sup> form of the private paid school were especially dissatisfied with the lessons.

The large work load and the length of a school day were mentioned all in all 107 times. The school day lasts long, exhausts and takes up all the time:

*long tiresome day; little time is left for other things; one has to be there so long and to go there so early; time passes slowly; starts too early; finishes too late; very tiring; too intense curriculum; no time to recover from the quick tempo; there's too much strain; they demand more than you are able to do.*

The students of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> form of the elite school especially complained about the work load, whereas the students from the Waldorf and Freinet schools complained the least. Too much home work was mentioned 53 times:

*they give us to study at home more than a human being can do; tedious and pointless home work; we are given piles of materials to study at the weekend; home work does not give you much; can't go out with my friends; do not like to do day tasks in the evening.*

The students of the elite school's 8<sup>th</sup> form were especially resentful about the big amount of home tasks.

The school lessons are most certainly not a quality time for the Estonian students. Time becomes a problem when the lesson is not engaging and seems to be exhausting. The meaninglessness of the lesson was mentioned 28 times and the compulsion associated with it:

*have to study things that are uninteresting and useless; we're studying senseless things; have to study against one's will; learning by heart of a certain subject seems to be pointless as I do not need it; studying the things we forget; has to be a possibility to choose subjects; why should we sit one fourth of our lives in the same building; school does not focus on helping the individual but produces 'grey mass'. There were doubts about the sense of the marks: it is pointless to measure a person's intelligence in numbers; marks are more important here than knowledge.*

Finland was mentioned 141 times. There is a particularly strong dissatisfaction with home tasks and tests (50) which are followed by the heavy work load and the general difficulty of being together (18): *hate home tasks; several tests on the same day; tests create stress; difficult subjects; doing home work takes too much time; long hard schooldays; sometimes it seems I could do something better than this.* Lessons were also criticised for boredom, though substantially less compared to the Estonians (11):

*some lessons are boring; hard to concentrate; sometimes it's very boring; some lessons are nasty and distressing; don't like the subjects I am bad at; too big challenges in some subjects; eurhythmics' is terrible; don't like that one has to be good at all things; no freedom of activity; only stress and coercion; non-variable ways of teaching.*

The students also mentioned that there is much compulsion and one should be paid for doing the unpleasant things: *have to accept the things I don't like; school makes a student into a thing; we're forced to come to school but we're not paid; the monetary salary paid for the marks would increase motivation.*

The motive of pointless and questionable studies was repeated several times (6): *senseless lessons and rules; some of the subjects are useless for the majority; school is too old-fashioned; wouldn't go there if I could choose; I have other business to do; have to study useless subjects.*

The students of the Finnish Waldorf school were especially critical about the learning process.

School as environment brought forth resentment in mostly two issues: the school rules and the physical environment. The most unpleasant thing for the Finnish (52) and the Estonian (45) students was the early rising: *hard to get up in the morning; lessons start early; do not get enough sleep.* The school regulations gave rise to little dissatisfaction, 27 times from the Estonian students (*school uniform in a private school; going to school every day; locked doors; little freedom; ban on listening to a player; prohibition to leave the school territory*) and 11 from the Finnish students (*being late; mobile phone ringing in the lesson; can't romp; it's hell the whole day long; stupid rules; no freedom; only a feeling of hatred; school is imposing; compulsory attendance*).

The physical environment in school and especially school food aroused dissatisfaction in 25 cases among the Estonian students and in 32 cases among the Finnish students. While the Finns had much to reproach the school food for, the Estonians complained more about crowdedness, temperature conditions, absence of a sports ground and a school cafe. Crowdedness and noise were mentioned by the students of the 8<sup>th</sup> form in a Finnish city school. Some Estonian youngsters also criticised the small number of events and absence of activities during breaks. The Finnish students of the Waldorf school were more resentful than the others about their school environment.

School is a place with strict rules. The most thorny issues are connected with the lessons because of their little cognitive value, short time and a large amount of studying, accompanied by the teachers' expressively unpleasant behaviour. This proved especially true for the Estonian children.

### *States of mind*

Feelings and states of mind, connected with unpleasant school aspects, were also described. The main ones mentioned by the Estonian students (41) were *tiredness, stress, boredom, routine, strain*. And those emphasised by the Finns (43) were *stress*, but also *tiredness, boredom, hardship, loneliness, sleepiness, feeling that one's freedom is restricted*. These are the states of mind associated with pressure, lost energy, one's unused resources.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

What do the student answers about their schools' pleasantness/unpleasantness tell us about their quality of life?

On the basis of the Veenhoven's (2000) chart, the authors looked at how the liveability of the environment is evaluated by the students from the viewpoint of both life chances and results and how the life-ability and the appreciation of life reveals itself in their written answers.

Formal studies and everything related to people in school, including teachers and students, have to be taken into account when assessing the environment's liveability.

- The young people in both countries are extensively occupied by formal studies, and it generates ill-being, stress, tiredness and criticism as internal states (life-ability). The learning process (and strain associated with it) is not, in most cases, experienced as a meaningful challenge. Instead, it is viewed as pressure forced on them by an external will, which robs them of their living time.
- Talking about the good aspects of the environment, the learning process is perceived to be cognitively engaging and challenging, which is appreciated more by the Finnish young people. Everything that happens outside of the formal learning process is cognitively important for the Estonians, who, differently from their Finnish peers, do not see the learning process as quality time.
- Teachers are seen as the reason of the described ill-being because they are coercers and representatives of the institution. Only some students consider them to be so-called 'teachers of life' who lead and help the young. In their positive opinions, the Finnish students see the teacher as somebody who transmits wisdom and they value the teacher's professionalism, whereas the Estonians value the teachers' general attitude and how they treat them. In other words, our findings support earlier studies – relationship problems greatly outweigh the problems of study content in Estonian schools (Orn, 1997).

The aforementioned could be put into the category of life results according to the Veenhoven's (2000) system. Making jokes can be considered an internal life-asserting experience valued by youngsters. Other feelings or states of mind were not even mentioned. Paradoxically, a joke follows the long harassment and fasting and signifies enjoyment and

getting free. On the other hand, it can also be the humour born in the joy of getting together, which in any case indicates vitality.

The side of life chances emerges only when children speak about school positively. The importance of school is strongly perceived in the sense of acquiring different important things – knowledge, education and wisdom, preparation for adult life, personality qualities. It is believed that it is an investment for future. The community of peers in both lands offers important experiences which compensate for the pressure of the institution and seems to be the main environmental factor that makes life liveable. Secondly, there is an assurance that all that is going on contributes to their welfare – students create their so-called life chances. The Finnish students link them more with the practical side of life, while the Estonians associate them with the knowledge and education needed for an abstract life.

The knowledge of one's weaknesses and strengths, of being a carrier of certain qualities, a doer, a creator and a counterpart was experienced as a life chance by only few youths in the context of school's pleasantness. The negative and energy-reducing side was emphasised in the subjective emotional experience.

School is sensed as a physical environment rather than a place offering a possibility for mental development. Only a few young people perceived the school's environment as a place for intellectual work and mentioned things related to its spiritual atmosphere. At the same time, school rules are not sensed anymore as harassing, limiting freedom or reducing life quality, the main discipline factor being the heavy study load.

These signs indicate that pedagogical well-being as described by theoreticians is more attainable by the Finnish students than by their Estonian peers; however, it still remains more of an ideal than reality for young people in both countries. Schools expect their students to fulfil their demands rather than experience the ability to act according to their individual intentions.

One has to question once again the price and side-effects on personality of the experiences lived through for the sake of the opportunities offered by school – knowledge, education, personality qualities, preparation for life (and for what life?). The main reason for ill-being, as pointed out by the young people, is the studying itself, subjectively perceived as joyless, burdening and carrying little meaning, being guarded by the teachers. The school has often been compared to a prison or a hospital (Alhanen, 2007). Once again, one is reminded – via the students' meanings given to the schools – of the notion of a jail, which literally and figuratively imprisons people by denying them access to their own self. The way to one's authentic identity is encumbered, and the nature of the pedagogical relationship is anything but loving. The school, which is first and foremost experienced as a compulsory institution, may try to improve certain conditions in order to understand its students–prisoners, to force them to study and to bring them up against their will, but the strife is doomed to failure at the very start. If studying is mostly perceived as a duty forced on them by external will and is not inwardly considered to be one's own, it is impossible to speak about vitality or engaging and pleasant time, but only about emotionless existence. If basic needs are not satisfied, the human being focuses on their satisfaction, unable to strive for values that are more persistent and on a higher emotional level. A few words about the relationship between school and authentic identity are worthwhile. Human beings define themselves in a process they can identify with or feel alienated from. Liimets (2009) views



the human being as a road leading home, and she asks what and where home is. When going to school, a person is on his/her way, the school way. It is a part of one's life route, which leads to the future and should be pleasant and meaningful, containing enough challenges and moderate risks. Young people are possibly united by the same common difficulties experienced in a similar way. It integrates them into a community, whose members are joined by an aspiration to freedom and independence. It could be said that philosophically the school exists for a person only if it has been domesticated as a way home and the person himself/herself has become the way and an integral part of the school via active processes and the contribution to it. This is possible only if the teachers walk the way together with the students as companions, if they break out from their role of a jailor or a product manufacturer and change the prison-like school into home. Otherwise we can only speak about a 'non-school', which exists only as an edifice, without actually being there. Thus, the school should be important, safe and interesting.

However, what could the school – the real school – mean for a young person on his/her way of self-creation? The English word 'important' suggests that the school way should have something that one would want to 'import' into one's self, thus opening up the borders and letting the self go to school, at the same time allowing the school into the self and becoming the school. Therefore, it is possible to state that a studying human being is the school way himself/herself, and he/she studies if he/she has domesticated the school, has merged its processes into his/her life's entirety, has interpreted them as his/her own. The school has to be domesticated, has to be made home. In this case, studying at school would not be an outward process, but the school would be a part of the human being and would become the road to walk inside his/her own self towards his/her future identity.

The necessary socio-emotional competences are acquired in the company of classmates and nice teachers. By interpreting the evaluations given by the students, one can say that school teaches them primarily to succeed in dealing with the school itself – the process whose by-products might also be desired personal qualities – or their absence, opportunism and dependency. At the background of hedonistic values, pedagogical activity should offer situations and challenges which awaken and feed internal sustainability, meaningful efforts, a feeling of responsibility and initiative.

Self-realisation, meaningfulness of activities, aims that are perceived to be one's own. The active ability to operate and overcome limits as categories of pedagogical well-being are an issue needing pedagogical solutions both in the good country of Finland and in Estonia, which is still carrying the signs of the past, because these categories have not yet become actual life values. As researchers, we are also on our way, the school way, which we should build up together with the students. And then this way will actually exist.

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