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## Student visual narratives giving voice to positive learning experiences—A contribution to educational reform

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore students' positive experiences of their learning through the use of visual narratives, observation, and field notes in two secondary school classes in Sweden. Four themes were found: (1) knowing the needs of mind and body, (2) embracing each other in mutual support, (3) learning in a facilitating environment, and (4) using a variety of learning modalities. Students wished to have a voice in setting the curriculum, favored a variety of assignments, and sought to expand their learning environment beyond the classroom. Finally, challenges for teachers and school leaders are discussed.

Keywords: educational reform, narrative methods, phenomenology, student and teacher experiences, student voice

### Introduction

#### *Alternatives to the Measuring Agenda*

Over the last decade education has been subject to large-scale reforms, standardization, testing, and external inspections, as Hargreaves (2009) summarizes. While especially evident in the United Kingdom and the United States, this approach has spread to other countries of Europe and Scandinavia (Gustafsson, 2008; Tiller, 2010). In Sweden, for example, the political debate about reforming the school system has been influenced by national and international surveys. These evaluations concern themselves with quantifiable and measurable data. They look for such “hard evidence” as factual subject knowledge in mathematics, science, and reading. However, in basing assessments solely on standardized tests, certain types of knowledge and social skills, like cooperation, communication, critical thinking, and ethical attitudes are not acknowledged (Elvstrand, 2009).

Such a one-dimensional perspective has been criticized by educational researchers, teachers, and parents (Cook-Sather, 2009; Hargreaves, 2009; Scherp, 2004; Tiller, 2010). One objection has been the difficulty of measuring a student's knowledge and ability through surveys. Others have charged that evidence is prioritized while experience is neglected. “Hard data have pushed aside soft intuition and judgment” (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 94). Educators must find ways other than surveys to assess knowledge and abilities. One must, however, consider how the diversity of outcomes achieved through education can be measured. An assessment that takes into account “soft” values and qualities of students and teachers might

give a holistic picture of learning processes. Testing, surveys, and external reviews are insufficient and need to be complemented with qualitative data based on experiences from within schools. In 2009 Hargreaves declared, “Experience and evidence need to be discussed in dialogue together without privileging one over the other. Data do not always give us the answer” (p. 95). Cook-Sather (2009) proposes including other voices in the processes of bringing change about in schools. These would introduce new perspectives and stimulate educational reform. Yonezawa and Jones (2007) argue that student voice can “augment standardized test scores” (p. 681), by letting different sources inform researchers, teachers, and policymakers in the process of deciding on possible avenues for change in schools and classroom practices. The researchers explain that students’ perspectives help teachers and administrators in schools better understand why a certain reform worked or not, by listening to student feedback. Including student experiences in school improvement processes and the overall educational debate can enable understanding how learning is constituted from the perspective of different students or groups of students, as well as giving students an active role in educational reform (Rudduck, 2007).

### *Student Voice*

Student voices have rarely been taken into account in education reforms, and to some extent this is still the case (Cook-Sather, 2009; Levin, 2000), although interest in including them has increased over the past two decades (Hopkins, 2010; Mitra, 2005; Oldfather, 1995). The importance of exploring the school experiences of students and the way they learn has been stressed in policy documents and by international researchers (Hopkins; 2010; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). Letting students be heard is now regarded by some as a valuable contribution to school improvement in general, and especially with regard to students’ learning and achievement (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2011a; Duffield, et al., 2000).

Student voice can be interpreted as a form of “consultation,” that is, listening to the opinions of students on matters concerning them (Roberts & Nash, 2009). However, it can also be viewed as “participation” (Cook-Sather, 2006). The notion includes adults listening to students and students taking an active role in their learning in order to effect change in their schools (Roberts & Nash, 2009). Levin (2000) underlines that students have a unique viewpoint that neither teachers nor other adults in a school can surmise. According to Mitra (2004), it goes beyond receiving input from students: when youth have opportunities to participate in making school decisions it will affect their lives in a profound way. Listening to student feedback is a way to engage students in the wider school community and increase their ownership of their schools. On a basic level, student voice allows young people to share their opinions on school issues with administrators and faculty. Youth may even assume leadership roles in efforts to bring about change (Mitra, 2005).

However, when “giving voice” to a group of human beings in a research study, one runs the risk of over-generalization in presenting experiences collectively (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Cook-Sather (2006) also sees the potential danger of considering different student voices in a single, unified way. Nevertheless, finding common threads amid the diversity of student voices can form the basis for educational reform.

Identifying problems in schools and trying to resolve them represents a traditional approach to education reform (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2011b; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). A problem-based methodology can foster individual development, but can also be a restrictive starting point (Magnusson, 2008). In presenting an alternative way of reforming education and researching educational practices, we suggest an alternative to the widespread emphasis on deficiencies. Exploring positive student experiences through research, reframes

existing situations in ways that can identify opportunities for change (Ghaye, 2008). Studying what works well and discerning the root causes of success is fundamental. It is more productive to elucidate strengths in organizations through investigative research, than letting deficiencies set the agenda.

Other studies have addressed issues of positive learning experiences and the most favorable conditions for learning from a student's point of view (cf. Hopkins, 2010; McCallum et al., 2000; Rudduck, 2007; Wilson & Corbett, 2007). McCallum et al. (2000) explain that students described fundamental learning conditions referring "to a learner's physical state, frame of mind, attitude, age and ability" (p. 279). Classroom conditions were also related to the learning process, as they "included references to teaching strategies and learning climate" (p. 279). In the Hopkins study (2010), students stated that teacher quality was essential for their learning. They referred to such attributes as respect, appreciation, fairness, and providing support—all of which describe relational aspects of learning. The importance of the teacher is underlined by Rudduck (2007) who found that students characterized a good teacher as respectful and sensitive to their needs, positive in attitude, skilled in their teaching, and expert in their subject. Wilson and Corbett (2007) find that students consider a good teacher to be one who encourages them to complete their assignments, maintains order in the classroom, and tries to understand them. The students in the study by McCallum et al. (2000) cited the importance of receiving help and support from teachers and having the opportunity to learn in a quiet and peaceful environment. The authors emphasize that students articulated their preference for learning through different methods. They appreciated engaging and practical activities in school (Hopkins, 2010). These findings are also supported by Rudduck (2007), who learned that students wished to have a say in their education, talk about their progress, work at their own pace, and study topics based on their interests.

The studies mentioned above employed a variety of empirical methods, such as cards with four fixed statements and one open card (McCallum et al., 2000), fishbone tool supporting group interviews and a card sorting exercise (Hopkins, 2010), interviews (Rudduck, 2007), and open-ended interviews and observations (Wilson & Corbett, 2007).

Although some research on positive learning experiences exists, further exploration is needed, especially students voicing their own lived experiences in combination with an open and pluralistic research approach (which, in our case, include digital photos, oral presentations, and student writings). The aim of this paper is to investigate and extend the study of students' positive experiences of their learning processes.

## **Methodology**

### *Context of the Study*

The present study is part of a larger research project that examines experiences of psychosocial well-being and learning in school. The overall project focuses on different prerequisites for creating positive learning communities from a student's perspective. According to Swedish law on ethical conduct (SFS 2008:192), participation in a research study is voluntary and participants are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. The law also stipulates confidentiality to ensure that unauthorized persons may not obtain access to empirical data. Oral and written information about the study was given to prospective student participants and their parents, and informed consent was obtained. The study was approved by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Sweden (Dnr 45-2009).

### *Ontological and Epistemological Framework*

The ontological and epistemological basis of this study is the phenomenology of the life-world. As a philosophical term, “life-world” refers to the everyday world that humans share, take for granted, and in which they live their lives. Central to this concept is the notion of *back to the things themselves* and *adjustment to the things* (Bengtsson, 2005; Husserl, 1995; Willis, 2001, 2004). The first phrase emphasizes the significance of investigating reality as it shows itself. A researcher cannot formulate principles a priori and then attempt to make the real world conform to them. Phenomena in the world must live their own lives (Bengtsson, 2001). The second implies flexibility, humility, and openness to the things in one’s surroundings. Participants in a study can be considered as “the things”. Openness can be applied in both educational settings and in educational research. As researchers, openness for us has included carefully listening to student voices by choosing appropriate methods for creating, analyzing, and presenting data. Every study involving human interaction, as van Manen (1997), asserts, must begin in lived experience. To get a deeper understanding of such experiences, life-world phenomenological research explores situations in which humans are naturally engaged in that realm. Bengtsson (2005) stresses that researchers have to regionalize ontology by choosing parts of the life-world to study—in this case, positive learning experiences. The focus is accordingly on students’ actual lived experiences, and not on imaginative or wished for experiences. We have chosen empirical methods for data creation and data analysis in our study based on our ontological and epistemological assumptions.

### *Data Creation*

Visual narrative (digital photographs and written texts), observation, and field notes have been utilized, since different empirical methods may provide researchers with rich descriptions of a phenomenon. The scientific term for this, according to Bengtsson (2005), is methodological creativity. By combining modes, a message can “say the same thing in different ways” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20). Using a number of modes or “languages” to grasp lived experiences may contribute to a more profound understanding of their meaning. Languages can be considered spoken or written words, body language, and visual images. Just as people choose diverse ways of expressing themselves, so researchers seek to draw forth information the use of various empirical methods, some of which may facilitate subjects expressing and sharing experiences in their own way.

One sixth grade and one seventh grade class in two schools in Northern Sweden were given the following assignment: *Tell us about a situation during class that has been positive for you in your learning. Take digital photographs of something that symbolizes that positive experience.* Two classroom teachers collaborated with us in formulating the exercise. Students worked in small groups of two to four persons. First they shared their own personal experiences with the rest of the group, followed by a decision within the group on what positive experiences to present. Using digital cameras, the students took photographs symbolizing their chosen issues. They created Power Point presentations that depicted their reflections both visually and in writing. The visual narratives were presented to the class in Power Point with students explaining why these experiences were positive for their education. Their classmates were invited to comment, ask questions, and offer their interpretation of the photographs and narratives. We observed and documented the student dialogues by taking notes. The basic assumption of the exercise was that inviting students to reflect on their schooling and participate in school activities, as well as the research processes, was of value to them. Two levels of student voice—sharing opinions of school and collaborating with adults to address problems—were embodied, echoing Mitra (2005). In our study, however,

students were invited to concentrate on positive learning experiences, rather than on problems.

The student responses were written down in Swedish and later translated into English. All data were analyzed in their original version in order to reduce the risk of misinterpretation. In order to minimize any loss of meaning in translation, we carried out extensive conversations with linguistic reviewers about how to interpret the transcripts. After the data was collected, it was subject to the analysis described in the following section.

### *Data Analysis*

In the phenomenological tradition, analysis can take several methodological forms. Bengtsson (2001) argues that it need not follow pre-determined rules or stages, but should be founded upon openness toward participants and adjustment to them. In addition, how a researcher's presuppositions affects the analysis should be considered.

A life-world phenomenological analysis based on van Manen (1997) was used in this study. It focused on description and interpretation in seeking to understand a phenomenon and elucidate themes. In order to obtain a general picture of students' lived experience, we first viewed students' Power Point presentations, including their verbal and figurative expressions, and the oral explanations used in their presentations. Then, so that we could identify similarities and differences, we made a collective mind-map grouping the students' experiences. Following that we used the mind-map and earlier steps in the analysis process to formulate themes based on the meaning of the phenomena we observed. In the last step we reflected on our interpretation of student responses and related the findings to phenomenological concepts. In our attempt to understand positive learning experiences, we found it is crucial to go beyond individual experiences and focus on the collective representation of the research topic. Thus, the analytical process, although collecting examples of subjective experiences, strove for a holistic understanding of student responses.

### **Findings**

Our findings after surveying the positive experiences of students when they reflected on their learning processes consisted of four themes: (1) knowing the needs of mind and body, (2) embracing each other in mutual support, (3) learning in a facilitating environment, and (4) using a variety of learning modalities. Not all individual student responses may be represented in all four themes, but together they create a holistic understanding of the phenomena we investigated. The themes will be considered according to the phenomenology of the life-world, without any order of precedence, using digital photos and quotations to exemplify their different aspects.

#### *Knowing the Needs of Mind and Body*

The first theme, knowing the needs of mind and body, included being in good mental and physical health. Students described how a positive attitude helps the learning process. Being happy made them more alert and able to concentrate well. One group of students wrote: "When you are alert and happy you work well!" (Figure 1).



Figure 1. When you are alert and happy you work well!

Being in good spirits depended on a number of things, including good friends and positive teachers. One group showing pictures of their classmates, explained: “Friends get you in a good mood and then we work better.” Students also said that a friendly and happy teacher increased their willingness to learn: “A good teacher makes you happy . . . . We work at our best when we have a positive teacher.” According to students, happiness is contagious. One student commented, “A teacher can tell a joke, and even if the teacher is the only one laughing it is still good because it makes the teacher happy and that means a better teacher.”

Students described what being in physical balance means to them by sharing experiences of getting enough sleep and being able to rest when tired. One student group noted that “It’s also about rest and sleep and eating and drinking.” Time was a factor students liked to have control over. For example, they valued being able to eat when they were hungry, take additional breaks when needed, and have enough time to complete a task. Physical balance was described by some students as taking good care of themselves. Concern for oneself was considered essential during classes and breaks. Being allowed to move around during class and having a voice in their assignments also helped their motivation to learn.

Recess was prized because students used it to visit the bathroom, get fresh air, or burn up excess energy through physical activity. Some students played basketball or took a walk with friends, which they said positively influenced their ability to learn (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Students being physically active

One group of students explained, “When you work hard and then take a break you can work better afterwards.” Although the breaks involved activities, students sometimes choose to be inactive, making themselves comfortable in a quiet corner and reading a book or lying down on the sofa at the back of the classroom to rest (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Lying down on a sofa to rest during recess

Students spoke of getting adequate nourishment as the key to being in good physical and mental health. They claimed that eating some fruit or drinking water during recess added to their ability to learn. One group of students illustrated the value of what they called a “fruit break” with a picture of a girl holding a fruit bowl. Another announced, “If there is good food in school, we eat more and then we can think better for the rest of the day.” They explained that eating well gave them more energy, greater alertness, and better endurance (Figure 4). Yet another group photographed a student eating fruit while holding up a sign saying “MVG+” (i.e. “A+”). They explained, “If you have eaten well you work better and then you get better grades.”



Figure 4. Eating well to get good grades. (Sign means “A+”)

### *Phenomenological Reflection*

The student-lived experiences in this theme elucidated self-awareness of how corporal needs affect learning processes. Their presentations confirmed that they viewed mind and body as intimately entwined (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Hunger and fatigue affected the learning process negatively, students declared, while they believed that meeting their physical needs improved learning. They connected physical well-being and positive mental attitude to enhanced academic achievement, suggesting these can be self-regulated. We found no signs of victimization; on the contrary, the students claimed the power to influence their school situation by eating well, resting when tired, being physically active, and taking inspiration from the positive attitude of others. Here, several dimensions coalesced in a common

humanity: we are our bodies, our emotions, our thoughts, and our experiences (Husserl, 1995; Merleau-Ponty, 1996).

### *Embracing Each Other in Mutual Support*

The second theme that emerged from our investigation involved students giving and receiving support. Students told of how important teachers and friends were in their learning processes because they helped them with their assignments. Good teachers, as noted earlier, were portrayed as happy, funny, supportive, positive, and encouraging, which had positive effects on the ability of students to do a satisfactory job (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A happy teacher supports student learning

Teachers were supportive in a number of ways, such as explaining an assignment in a helpful manner. Students also appreciated a teacher's ability to create a feeling of security and safety, especially in potential bullying situations. One student said, "A grown up should be close by when the big ninth graders pass by." Another added, "The sixth graders are good role models," explaining how the older students helped the younger ones feel safe during recess when ninth graders, who frightened the younger children, came out to the schoolyard. Feelings of being scared and alone subsided when others were there to provide support (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Teacher supporting students

The students considered their friends as both "study pals" and "playfellows". By cooperating in different ways, friends made schoolwork more enjoyable, which the students claimed increased their ability to learn. As one group explained, "If you work together with a

friend, you learn new things.” Another group wrote, “Helping each other is good . . . and you need to practice cooperation to be good at it” (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Students cooperate and support each other

Good friends were described as kind, helpful, humorous, and encouraging, not only with schoolwork, but also with personal matters. Students said they learned more when in a reciprocal relationship, supportive of one another, working on assignments together, and teaching each other, in contrast to studying on one’s own.

### *Phenomenological Reflection*

In this theme the lived experiences of students showed relationships to be catalysts for learning processes, illustrating that the life-world all humans share is constituted by encounters and relationships. Lévinas (1969) elaborates on the notion of *being-for-the-world*, which characterizes not only relationships and mutual impact, but also the responsibility for others. The same is true of educational settings, where behavior toward others also plays a significant role. The students described interconnectedness between students and teachers as well as between students. Their experiences of positive learning in school reflect the phenomenological view of the life-world that claims all things as parts of an integrated whole. Experiences in the life-world mutually affect each other, as when two people meet and interact, both being influenced by each other (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Students emphasized the building of positive, respectful relationships between themselves and their teachers, and describing a bond that exemplifies closeness to others. Lévinas’s definition of such relationships is *proximity*; it signifies an ethical attitude toward others (Peperzak, 1993). Proximity can be understood in two ways: either as physical, visual, and spatial closeness, or as the emotional closeness in a relationship (i.e., between students and teachers). A bond with another is created through nearness, and is based on personal involvement rather than conventions or rules (Lévinas, 1998). According to the students, a well-functioning social community within a school can offer them support and security, increasing their ability to learn and develop.

### *Learning in a Facilitating Environment*

The third theme we found referred the impact a facilitating environment has on learning. Students pointed out a number of areas they felt influenced the school environment, indoors as well as out. They cited the access to a comfortable classroom seat and a sofa on which to relax during recess as improving their ability to learn. Students also considered a neat, clean

school, including the classrooms, hallways, and cafeteria, a facilitating environment. They mentioned the importance of having all their school supplies such as pens, pencils, rulers, computers, and books (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Appropriate school materials support student learning

Having books, material, and equipment available enhanced their learning and, in the long run, improved their grades. A facilitating outdoor environment was described as a schoolyard where students could play, had access to sports equipment like basketballs, hockey sticks, a soccer field, and plenty of space to move around. Good weather increased the willingness to learn. One student explained, “When it is sunny outside I’m happy”. However, sunshine could also bring about the opposite effect, as expressed by another student: “When it is sunny I just want to stay home.”

Utilizing the outdoor area as a resource for the school program was described as a good idea, as it facilitates learning (Figure 9). When being outdoors, students claimed: “We spread out and it feels more peaceful then.”



Figure 9. Students outdoors, breathing fresh air, in a facilitating environment

A social atmosphere enhancing student learning included a number of different aspects. Certain people were identified by students as central to a facilitating environment. Being in the company of congenial adults and fellow students, and one’s best friend, was considered vital. As one student explained, “It is important to have friends around you all the time. Otherwise you can feel insecure during classes.” According to students, peace and quiet in the classroom was also a positive factor in learning (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Peace and quiet in the classroom

The students said that a classroom did not have to be absolutely silent. As one student explained, “Quiet is number 2 on a scale from 1 to 10.” Working in an environment where everybody was engaged and making very little noise helped students feel calm and work better. Students found it very important for their studies that, while they were part of a group sharing the same space, they also showed respect for each other. One of the students spoke of how they tried to make as little noise as possible in the classroom, “We whisper to each other . . . using small letters.” One group asked if there were a way they might practice being quiet. “Maybe we could have a homework assignment that would make us think about keeping the noise level down?” Listening to music while working helped some students concentrate and was a way of distancing themselves from the rest of the class. Not fooling around, even though the teacher was not watching, was another prerequisite to ensuring a facilitating environment.

### *Phenomenological Reflection*

The lived experiences of students in this theme described a facilitating school environment in both physical and social terms. The physical learning environment can be characterized in its material, aesthetic, and functional aspects, and its relation to human beings (Alerby & Hörnqvist, 2003). A physical environment that affects young people and student learning is not only created *in* the physical environment, but also *by* it (David & Weinstein, 1987; Skanze, 1989). The experiences of students suggest that physical space is an important component in their learning processes. Foran and Olsen (2008) discuss the impact a school’s space can have on student learning. They argue for appropriate places for learning that meet the needs of students: “Going outside can enable curious and adventurous teachers to seek places for their students to learn best . . . . The places we learn in influence more than just the curricular outcomes in that they shape who we are and how we relate to one another” (Foran & Olsen, 2008, p. 46).

According to the students, a facilitating environment was also related to social aspects. Their voices imply a personal connection between themselves and their teachers, reflecting the impact of social relations when forming a learning community. Consequently, human actions and behavior influence how people experience the world as well as their possibilities of development.

The factors making up a facilitating environment cited by students suggest a diverse milieu where individual and group preferences sometimes correlate and sometimes clash.

### *Using a Variety of Learning Modalities*

The fourth theme concerned students using a variety of learning modalities. It was related to having the opportunity to exert one's influence, which could range from affecting school organization and lesson planning to establishing an individual study plan of one's own. Students were able to exercise many choices, which helped to make their schoolwork enjoyable. For example, being able to influence lesson planning or help decide what activity to do in PE class made students more willing to learn and that made learning more fun. Other examples of choices that enhanced learning included voting on whether classes should be shorter or longer, determining whether it would be good to have "flex-time", and agreeing on when to start and end the school day. Having a voice in such matters was experienced as positive for student learning (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Students being able to influence when to do tasks and for how long

Students explained that working democratically was a prerequisite to being able to influence others, so they had to work out creative ways of accomplishing that. According to one student, "Everybody must have the right to their own opinion and should be able to speak their mind." Another student said, "If you have different ideas you can throw dice or argue [for your ideas]", to which another student commented, "Or you include everybody's ideas."

Students also suggested ways in which teachers could vary their lessons. They proposed teachers give instructions and then let students work individually or in small groups. Other preferred different kinds of assignments, "so you don't have to listen to the teacher talking all the time." Using different learning modalities, including input from sight, hearing, and touch, makes it easier to learn. Students found they learned more when teachers mixed theoretical and practical tasks. They also found working with their hands enjoyable and relaxing. One group wrote, "Practical work is recreational" (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Students find working with their hands enjoyable and relaxing

Other methods of learning described by students were playing games, creating dramatic sketches, working outdoors (Figure 13), and presenting an assignment before the rest of the class. They suggested additional classroom activities, such as reading aloud to the class or watching films in conjunction with what they were studying.



Figure 13. Students using the outdoors as a resource for learning

Students agreed that the computers were helpful when writing essays because they provided linguistic support. Using the computer to do homework, search for information, play games, or make Power Point presentations was also depicted as positive. One group of students wrote, “You can use the computer for many good things . . . . It’s a valuable aid . . . It’s fun to work with” (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Students collaborating in using a computer

### *Phenomenological Reflection*

The lived experiences of students in this theme indicated many ways learning can take place. According to Merleau-Ponty (1996), knowledge is in the body—both corporally and practically—and humans express themselves through it. It is this corporal totality that the students articulated when they described using a variety of learning modalities in conjunction with caring for and using their bodies. In addition, students valued computers and digital media as tools for learning. The students’ voices we gathered address what constitutes learning and the space in which learning takes place. The multitude of learning modalities they described as helpful can be used to organize lessons. The power of agency is underlined by those students who argued for the opportunity to have a say in choosing when to learn, with whom to learn, and what tools to use. The range of student views implies that they wish their school to be flexible and open to variation.

## Discussion

According to our findings, positive experiences of student learning processes took place through the body as well as by means of human relationships and interactions. In addition, being in a congenial physical and social space, learning through participation, and influencing their school's program enhanced the students' achievements. Our findings can be supported by previous research, stressing that a learner's physical state, frame of mind and attitude affect learning outcomes. Teacher quality, both on an instructional and a personal level, is also essential for productive student learning (cf. Hopkins, 2010; McCallum et al., 2000; Rudduck, 2007; Wilson & Corbett, 2007). The importance of students being able to influence education, work at own pace, pursue their interests, and use different learning styles was repeatedly heard. Help and support from both other students and teachers were also of significance for the learning process.

When turning to student voice in research, there is a risk that researchers will elicit shallow answers due to students' inability to make their voices heard (Pekrul & Levin, 2007). Such an outcome may be contingent on a school's ability to foster an atmosphere in which students are encouraged to reflect on their studies and especially on positive learning experiences. Nevertheless, we found considerable evidence that physical and mental factors, affected the learning of the students in our study in positive ways. Although the positive correlation between physical fitness and academic achievement is well-represented in the literature (Chomitz et al., 2009; Ericsson, 2003; Novello, Degraw & Kleinman, 1992; Rothon et al., 2009; Taras, 2005), the students in this study made the wholeness of mind and body evident. Their holistic Power Point presentations suggested that they acknowledged the balance of body, mind, and emotions as a prerequisite for learning. They emphasized their preference for learning through the whole body when they described their favor for a variety of assignments and learning modalities. Our phenomenological analysis of the data indicated this corporeality in the learning process. The students in this study described a school where a diversity of learning methods brings considerable flexibility into the classroom.

The attempt to measure student achievement through testing and external inspections has been sufficiently criticized without offering much in its place. What we have sought to do is explore the advantages of listening to students' experiences of learning in their own voices and use that information to complement surveys of "hard data", such as math scores or language tests. Exploring qualitative values in schools creates an opportunity to go deeper into the lives of students and uncover aspects difficult to capture in large-scale surveys. The students in this study contributed personal insights into what they regard as positive learning experiences and their preferences in conjunction with the learning process. Through their voices we found that learning is an embodied, relational, and spatial experience. Students wished to have a voice in determining their own curriculum; they favored a variety of teaching modalities; and they sought to expand their learning space beyond the classroom walls. The school they envisioned was one of diversity and flexibility.

When reforming education, school leaders and teachers must be informed by a number of sources. They should consult policy and managerial documents, large-scale surveys, but also students' experiences and views, as we have tried to show. Our students' understanding of positive learning experiences may challenge the way education is generally organized, and how curricula are developed inside and outside of Sweden. The present challenge, as we see it, is to include student feedback in the process of reforming education. We concur with Cook-Sather in emphasizing that the voices of students should be heard. It "must be seen as a work in progress, another step in an ongoing struggle to find meeting places for teachers and students and for researchers and students from which to effect cultural shifts that support a repositioning of students" (2006, p. 361).

Giving student voices a role in influencing educational reform in a profound way must be carried out as “more than a passing fashion” (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p. 229). A shift in school reform and further educational research is needed in order to integrate student experience in planning the curriculum of the future. It is our conclusion that what is needed is to create an even more “student voice”-friendly climate in schools and research, so that students will be encouraged to reflect on their learning experiences and take increasing ownership of their education. Researchers must also adopt methods that stimulate students to voice their experiences creatively and become active participants in research involving them. Finally, we hope to inspire school administrators, teachers, and teacher educators to embrace the challenge to critically reflect on how optimum learning conditions may be achieved while also meeting school goals—something which may also involve questioning social norms and traditional structures in education.

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