



Schools for well-being? Critical discussions with schoolchildren

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International quantitative studies among children, such as the *Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children* and the *Programme for International Student Assessment* have revealed a gap between learning outcomes and children's subjective well-being across countries. The *Children's Worlds* international study showed that liking school decreases from the second to the sixth grade. Compared to other countries the decrease is one of the biggest among schoolchildren in Estonia. The aim of the study is to find in-depth evidence to explain the low level of satisfaction with school life and reasons for the decrease in children liking school in Estonia. The analysis is based on data from eight focus group interviews with 12-year-old children in rural and urban schools. The study showed that children develop negative feelings from various aspects of school life that leads to criticism and a dislike for school. Bullying among children and behavioural shortcomings of teachers (including coping with personal distress) are the key factors that decrease the well-being of many children and cause a dislike of school. An ideal school-for well-being would promote physical, social and mental well-being for both children and teachers.

Keywords: subjective well-being, school environment, school dislike, bullying, children's perspectives

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Introduction

In the World Happiness Report, Layard and Hagell (2015) raised the issue of children's mental health and well-being in school. They proposed the concept of 'schools-for-well-being' and argue that "...our schools should become as concerned with the well-being of children as they are with their academic performance" (p.108). Moreover, high-level discussions are taking place, about improving the European Educational

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Space, organized by the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood, at the European Parliament as well as in the International Positive Education Network, launched few years ago.

The shift in conceptualizing education to create a junction for two alternative approaches to children – the child as a ‘human-becoming’ and as a ‘human-being’ (see for example Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frønes, & Korbin, 2014; Qvortrup, 1991) – has led to the reconceptualization of education: the future-oriented goal of preparing children for future adulthood also aims to safeguard children’s well-being in school in the here-and-now. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development in its recent position paper (OECD, 2018) stresses the learner’s agency that “implies a sense of responsibility to participate in the world and, in so doing, to influence people, events and circumstances for the better” (p. 5). The position paper refers to the wider set of relationships between teachers, peers, families and communities and well-being as the aim of learning.

International quantitative studies with children, such as the Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children (HBSC) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have revealed a gap between school outcomes in terms of academic success and children’s subjective well-being across countries. There are countries where children demonstrate top learning outcomes and low subjective well-being (e.g., Estonia and Germany), and others where the opposite occurs with children having relatively modest academic outcomes but are satisfied with school life (e.g., Albania) (see Inchley et al., 2016; OECD, 2014). The Children’s Worlds international study (ISCWeB) also demonstrated that children’s assessments of sources of their subjective well-being in school vary from country to country: there are countries such as Algeria and Ethiopia where children are highly positive, and countries such as Germany and Estonia where children are very critical (Rees & Main, 2015).

The ‘crowding out’ from the group of very much liking school in four years (grade two compared to grade six) is highest in Estonia (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017). In the context of outstanding learning outcomes, the mental health of children is deteriorating in Estonia. Compared to 2010, the number of reports of mental health and behavioural problems in children has increased by more than three-times. According to children from the HBSC study, 40% of girls and 24% of boys in the age group 11-15 years have reported that they had depressive feelings in the last 12 months (Aasvee et al., 2016). Moreover, the OECD TALIS study with teachers and school principals has showed that teachers in Estonia are less satisfied with their work than the average of the OECD countries (Übius, Kall, Loogma, & Ümarik, 2014). This corpus of empirical evidence led us to a general research question: what are the circumstances endangering children’s subjective well-being in school?

The current paper presents explorations of children’s views about the sources of negative feelings that endanger their subjective well-being in school. We found support from a research protocol outlined by Fattore, Fegter and Hunner-Kreisel in 2014 (Fattore et al. 2018) developed for the multinational qualitative study ‘Children’s Understandings of Well-being in Global and Local Contexts’. The paper makes use of data from 55 12 year-old students collected from eight semi-structured focus group interviews in 2015 in rural and urban Estonia. We decided to invite 12 year-old students to our study because this age group held the

most critical attitudes concerning school compared to younger age groups in the ISCWeB study (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017; Rees & Main, 2015).

Framing the theoretical approach to the study

Children's well-being is a social phenomenon that researchers can conceptualize and operationalize in different ways, depending on the theoretical framework and methodological approach applied in relation to the specific purposes of the study. Ben-Arieh et al.'s (2014) argue that:

[T]he position of the concept in politics and research encourages discursive and ideological reflections on its meaning in various domains, illustrating that the well-being of individuals and their societies is related to personal as well as social frameworks and global as well as to the local perspectives. (p. 20)

Several authors look at children's well-being through the frame of children's rights (Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2006; Kosher & Ben-Arieh 2017; Kosher, Jiang, Ben-Arieh, & Huebner, 2014; Kutsar, Raid, & Soo, 2018; Kutsar et al., 2019). The children's rights perspective considers the child as a social actor and places a strong rights-based emphasis on children as humans who experience well-being in the here-and-now (OECD, 2009).

Many authors focus on the role of cultural factors influencing children's assessments of well-being. For instance, Urie Bronfenbrenner's approach (2005, c.f. Weisner 2014, p. 92) looks at the child as an individual person, engaged in complex developmental processes, growing within particular family and sociocultural and historical contexts, which are changing across both developmental and historical time. This statement can, on the one hand, serve as a key to an ecological perspective on children's well-being that views children as embedded in families, schools, communities and neighbourhoods, and social networks and may, on the other, contribute to understanding children's well-being in different cultural and political contexts. Lee and Yoo (2015) mention the need to examine children's assessments from a broader view. They argue that while children's subjective well-being is a composite of life experiences in many contexts and dimensions, there is significant country-specific variation in children's subjective well-being due to family, school, and community influences (Lee & Yoo, 2015).

Colby (2009, c.f. Weisner 2014, p. 90) considers the contemporary cultural study of well-being as understanding the self-world of individuals in context, a framework that encourages combining the personal/experiential with the cultural context. Colby (2009) assesses three domains that link a person's reports of happiness and well-being to context: the natural and cultural ecology perceived by a person – the material and biophysical situation; the social relational and interpersonal realm; and the symbolic realm of language categories, religious, and other beliefs. Children connect with their close environments – the family, school, neighbourhood and community but they also play a role in national and global settings (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014; Fattore et al. 2018). For instance, even in relatively secure societies and strong families, children express fears that global levels of war and terrorism create in them. They are witnesses of the wider

world through the internet, cinema, travelling, etc. Bhaskar (1998) distinguishes between three overlapping ontological domains: the empirical, the actual and the real. The empirical domain consists of what we experience, directly or indirectly. This domain is distinct from the actual domain where events happen whether we experience them or not, because what happens in the world is not the same as that which is observed. This domain in turn is different from the real domain, where we also find mechanisms that can produce events in the world. The working of these mechanisms is contextually contingent. Kraus (2015) looks at lifeworld and life conditions as separate but convergent terms. The lifeworld refers not only to the individual external circumstances of life, but also to the subjective perception of these circumstances. Accordingly, the life conditions describe a person's material and immaterial conditions, whereas the lifeworld describes the subjective perspective pertaining to these conditions.

There are different challenges that quantitative and qualitative approaches offer to a researcher. In both cases, the participants in the study provide their opinions and perceptions, hence a standardized survey, which is limited by the number of single items, reduces the richness of childhood as a social phenomenon to certain factors (e.g., Wilmes & Andresen, 2015). Moreover, the researchers (adults) determine the items following their conceptual and operational schemes. A qualitative study opens access to a broad variety of personal and contextual explorations of the participants and about what matters in their lives. For a researcher they can give answers to several why-questions that quantitative analyses cannot answer.

Quantitative approaches to different life domains have found confirmation in children's assessments about their well-being that do not follow the traditional normal distribution but divert to the positive side of the scale (e.g. Kutsar et al., 2018; Rees & Main, 2015). Hence, the negative pole of children's assessments may be left out of the researcher's interest as they represent 'too small' proportion of the respondents. Moreover, a pertinent question here is what are the circumstances that saliently affect children's experiences and form a part of the 'actual' world of children who are critical about school in Estonia. We admit that:

...children's assessments reflect their direct and indirect interactions with different levels of society as social ecological environmental settings, thus ontogenic-, micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-level impacts are merged in their opinions at the individual level drawn from affects, cognitions and actions. (Nahkur & Kutsar, 2019, p. 356)

However, we cannot capture the broad range of impacts that determine the views, explanations and meanings children give to their well-being in different contexts. Even focussing on one context (e.g. school or home) would not give a coherent picture about the 'jungle of influences', which nonetheless could expand understandings about children's lived experiences and expertise.

So we came to the conclusion to ask children directly about their sources of negative feelings in the school environment and to try not to construct narratives beyond those sources. We chose three theoretical and methodological launching points for our study. First is the core postulate of the 'new' childhood paradigm of the child as an active social agent in the 'here and 'now' (e.g. Qvortrup, 1991; Stoecklin, 2012) with their social competence according to their age and as experts of their life experiences (Ben-Arieh &

Frønes, 2011; Casas, Bello, Gonzalez, & Aligue, 2013; Mason & Danby, 2011). Secondly, children's subjective reality develops in social space (Bhaskar, 1998; Kraus, 2015) – they can share subjective perspectives of material and immaterial life conditions. Thirdly, the children's rights' framework can support our understanding of children's constructions of well-being (Kosher et al., 2014; Kutsar et al., 2018).

Methodology

We adapted the protocol of the multinational qualitative study 'Children's Understandings of Well-being in Global and Local Contexts' (Fattore et al., 2018) to the school context. The data comes from a qualitative study of 55 students (29 girls and 26 boys) from Grade 6 (average age 12 years) in both urban and rural schools in Estonia. Eight semi-structured focus group interviews (4 urban and 4 rural), mapping exercises of well-being sources in each school, and a magic wand method (what would the children like to change in school) were used in the data collection in 2015. The focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed into Estonian, with translated selections into English used for the present paper. In the focus groups we asked questions like: "What do you think children like about going to school?"; "What makes children feel good in school?"; "What do you think children don't like about going to school?"; "What makes them feel bad in school?"; "How can a bullied child help him-/herself?"; "How can you, classmates or other people in school help a bullied child?"

Participation of the children in the study was voluntary. The researcher contacted the schools' administration; received permission to carry out the study; and met students inviting them to participate in the study. Next, the researcher received passive informed consents from parents whose children expressed interest to participate in the study. In order to protect the identity of both the participants and the schools they attended, the participants were codified by: Gender - Girl (G)#1-29; Boy (B) #1-26 and Focus group (F) #1-8.

Findings

What is well-being according to children?

We started by asking children about their understanding of 'well-being'. They described well-being as a positive term meaning both the presence of 'good' (positive) and the non-presence of 'bad' (negative). The presence of good is related with positive personal feelings, such as good moods and happiness. Good places and people and inspiring activities in the context of a safe community, school and home environment determine good feelings. By contrast, experiencing bad feelings (especially fear) refers to risks, dangers and other difficulties in children's lived experiences.

We then asked about the meaning of 'well-being in school', which they again described in terms of the presence of good and non-presence of bad – in relationships with other people and with the physical environment. The main agents creating well-being in children are peers and teachers. Good teachers give choices and treat all parties equally. Children also see support personnel as a source of well-being – in the case of bullying or personal concerns, they are people who listen and help to restore feelings of security.

As sources of well-being in school, children spoke much about learning: they feel good when they get good marks. They like a learning environment which is peaceful, comfortable and adequate. Children who deemed well-being as ‘non-existent bad’ related this most often with security feelings: they feel good at school when they are not bullied and are not afraid. In summary, ‘well-being’ for children means feeling good and secure in a peaceful and quiet learning space where they can enjoy good relationships with teachers and other students.

What endangers feeling good at school?

Learning environment

Children are full of inspiration, curiosity and value learning. They like active involvement in the classroom, physical activities, computer classes with games, learning communication skills and classes that outreach from the school environment (e.g. study trips). The participants stressed the importance of play in the learning process and being mentors for younger children, and appreciated individual contacts with teachers, such as learning in small groups.

However, the participants recalled many bad feelings from their learning experiences. Firstly, they explored the fundamental issues of the education system, saying that they do not like the pressure to get high grades because teachers do not value an in-depth understanding of the subject matter. Focusing on grades only demotivates children, and they react by cheating.

G3F1: Some teachers just press you ‘You MUST learn it, or you will not receive good marks...’ actually, you should learn for your own use.

G6F1: ...some people spit on it because... you have to get a good score, and if not, it's like bad, something bad happens...”

G3F1: It's not at all like you said ... learning for yourself, this is not very much like that.

There were many other aspects in the learning environment that created bad feelings, such as unattractive teaching methods, the wrong learning tempo, very demanding requirements and very high load of homework. A fast learning tempo does not leave time for asking questions, thus children feel they are neglected, or the teachers assume they are ‘stupid and unskilled’. The participants believed that teachers connect their (students’) inability to follow the material in the classroom with their lack of ability and not the teachers’ methods of teaching or their personality. For example, some teachers set discipline requirements that were too high, causing feelings of being under-valued. The participants said that sometimes they were forced to rewrite their text just to write more neatly.

G2F7: She has a crazy discipline. She picks up our diaries, and booklets and she puts scores in the booklet for the neatness of our handwriting...

B2F7: And then you feel like a first year student

All participants in the group: YES!

[...]

G2F7: And then the teachers yell at us that we don't learn. But why don't we learn?

B3F7: Yeah, we fill the diaries!

The heavy homework is a problem for the children. The ISCWeB study showed that children in Estonia have the highest load of homework compared to other countries (Rees & Main, 2015). In the HBSC study, 48% of 13-year-old Estonian girls and 39% of boys reported feeling pressured by homework (Inchley et al., 2016). In our study, the participants suggested that homework took up a lot of their free time. Bad feelings come from situations when they had to give up their hobbies or did not have time to complete their homework.

G2F7: Why don't you like that I want to have spare time? I want to have fun, not just going home and continuing to learn 24/7.

B1F6: I don't like school, I just don't like it.

B3F3: Homework just blocks your hobbies. You just can't go there.

G5F1: For some people, it's very difficult, for example, when I have homework from all the classes, I do not get much time for myself.

Interviewer: What then, do you study or sleep less or how do you manage?

G5F1: Depends. When I cannot finish my homework then I leave the exercise booklet at home and say that I forgot to bring it.

The participants feel bad about homework that is set for weekends, because they cannot have spare time to rest and relax.

G2F2: [T]eachers aren't interested in your homework load.

B3F2: All they say 'Oh, I have told you many times that I cannot change this.'

G2F2: Yes, and or, 'My class is very important, you have to study this.'

Interestingly participants from rural schools were less critical about homework, because they have fewer opportunities for extra-curricular activities and their friends may not be around. In summary, the participants felt bad in those learning situations where they felt teachers did not ask their opinions and just follow educational requirements and execute their own plans.

Physical environment

The participants mentioned dining rooms as sources of good feelings in school, not only because of the food, but also because they are places for spending time together, having fun and making jokes with the kitchen personnel. However, if the rules restrict talking to each other or the food is not a favourite, or nobody asked children what they wanted to eat, or there is no choice, the dining room becomes a source of bad feelings. The lack of choice is the main reason for many of the participants preferring to buy food from the kiosks.

Sources that create bad feelings in school also include concerns about privacy and hygiene. One of the focus groups referred to the appearance and cleanliness of the toilets and suggested the toilets are not

only places for performing hygiene procedures but also spaces where they can play games. However, children complained about unpleasant smells, toilet paper on the floor and out of order units. The group argued that sometimes it is pupils themselves who cause these poor conditions.

G5F1: In my opinion, our school is wasting money on useless things. Because... they built a new computer class, we have three big computer classes already, they buy tablets... but they don't have the WC-s repaired where you can't lock the door.

The group proposed that safe and secure working toilets should become a priority for the school administration.

The lack of security in the physical environment is another source of not feeling good at school. The participants linked their lived experiences, such as the fear of being a victim of theft, with potential life-threatening hazards in the school environment: school shootings, bomb threats and terrorism. In the context of theft, the participants complained about an 'insecurity system': the absence of lockers where they can leave their belongings creates appropriate conditions for theft. In the context of the life-threatening hazards, easy access of strangers to schoolrooms was a cause of concern. Terrorist attacks elsewhere in Europe caused the participants to be concerned about their safety and that of their hometown.

B1F6: I certainly feel afraid. First of all in Paris, then in Brussels. Next can be our town, our school.

Social environment

School is a place not only for learning but also to develop relationships: to play, meet friends. Some participants disclosed that friends are their only sources of motivation and well-being in school.

Bullying among peers

Bullying constitutes one of the most important sources of feeling bad and fear in school. According to the participants, bullying is a widespread phenomenon and occurs almost every day. They felt that bullies were more likely to target boys, younger pupils and children in big schools. In most cases, bullying occurs between classmates, but sometimes occurs between children from different classes.

The participants listed various forms of bullying between peers, such as insulting, mocking, backbiting, threatening, pushing, beating, and breaking things. However, they mentioned the impact of mental rather than physically violent acts that have most negative psychological impact. Bullying spreads beyond the boundaries of the school to other places, like the bus stop or the way home, and the incidents sometimes occur without eyewitnesses.

The participants revealed several reasons for bullying. First, if the victim is 'different' in their peers' perceptions: smaller or bigger compared to the others or of a different ethnic background or being more (or less) successful or capable:

B1F6: "I was beaten up when I was in the fourth form. They envied my skills as a good football player; they assaulted and man-handled me..." The participants were worried about children with different ethnic backgrounds:

B1F6: Look, I heard that this week the first immigrant families will arrive. Interesting how their children will be accepted in schools.

G1F6: But they speak English, right?

B1F6: Yeah, but they are immigrants, they will be called names, like refugees, I'm sure, and some children will hit or start mocking (them)...when they arrive, I will feel sorry for them.

The following quote illustrates how bullying, for whatever reason, can make going to school unpleasant and lead to avoidance behaviour and absenteeism.

G4F1: I was mocked when I studied in the second, third and fourth grades because I was bigger than the others... it was just so scary. In principle, no day passed when no one mocked me and it was so frightening.

Interviewer: And how was it to come to school every morning?

G4F1: It was awful. Therefore, I said several times, 'Ah! I have a headache' and then I didn't have to come.

Interviewer: But you thought this up, you didn't really have a headache?

G4F1: Yeah, I didn't have. I just didn't want to come to school.

Children fear not only becoming a victim of bullying but also of disclosing the incident. According to the participants, bullies manipulate the victim to prevent them reporting the incident to anyone. Children tend to belittle the notion of notifying adults, including teachers, about what happened. They believe that disclosure is a sign of weakness and the informant may receive ratfink (complainer, tell-tale) as a nickname. Instead, they prefer to turn to their friends because these are those who listen, understand and help them to find a solution, while teachers often do not notice or pay attention. Having friends makes children feel more courageous and confident, thus friendship is an essential source of well-being. However, quite frequently the victims of bullying have no friends to whom to appeal:

G2F2: And it's usually so that this person who is bullied, he/she doesn't have much friends because nobody wants to become someone who would be bullied next.

Fear of teachers is another reason why children do not want to speak to teachers about their problems. The participants described how teachers who are often angry, irritable and have a temper cause negative feelings

and insecurity. The participants in F1 spoke about a teacher who when in a bad mood, even slaps the children:

Her mood changes all the time, one moment she is calm and smiling, and then another moment, oh my god, I just ran out of the class.

The participants explained that prevention of bullying and assisting victims is difficult for a number of reasons. Firstly, bullying often goes unnoticed particularly in larger schools where anonymity is greater and where there are places hidden from the teachers' supervision. However, in smaller schools, teachers can more easily monitor the children's activities during breaks. Moreover, children and teachers in small schools know each other and provide help if needed.

Most of the discussion groups agreed that generally those teachers who could help with bullying are not the ones on duty. While the participants gave examples of situations where the presence of teachers in the corridors prevented or stopped bullying from happening, some told that the presence of teachers did not always stop bullying. The participants said that some of the teachers prefer to talk to each other than keep order and provide safety, thus they do not always intervene in occurrences of bullying. The participants thought that such teachers do not have enough time either to listen to them or to delve into the situations happening between children at breaks:

B2F2: If there is some kind of fight or something, the teachers just say 'Ah, I'm rushing, I cannot [do anything] now' (laugh).

Another aspect of children not speaking about bullying to teachers concerns prior experiences of distrust with some teachers. The participants in F3 recalled an incident when the teacher did not believe the victim but the bully who falsely claimed that he was the victim. The participants disagreed whether or not teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to intervene in bullying. Indeed they were critical, saying that only in a few cases had students received assistance from teachers to the extent that the bullying had stopped:

B3F6: /.../ when some kids are fighting, they just come and say 'Stop it!', when they leave, the children will fight again.

G1F6: They don't care about children".

Distrust in one teacher may spread to other teachers and adults (e.g. social pedagogue) in school, especially after they leave the scene without helping. The participants said that due to the lack of care and attention, they now believe solving problems is their own concern.

G6F1: Once it was so that... X (a classmate) in the elementary school always twisted my finger. Once he sprained it, it was painful for many days... and then I talked to a teacher as well... and then

the teacher just did not do anything, listened and said that, ah, look, maybe next time he won't do, and recently I have just not been saying anything, I do not trust any teacher.

To conclude, bullying among children is a factor that decreases the well-being of many children and causes a dislike of school. Moreover, respondents experience fear, sense of helplessness, insecurity and feel trapped due to a lack of awareness and ineffective intervention methods by teachers. They expect teachers to be aware of situations at school and of children's concerns and to take an active interest in their well-being. The findings of Mark et al. (2015) are in-line with our findings: more than a half of the victims (59%) of bullying at school have spoken about their experiences to someone, mostly friends and parents, whereas approximately a third (37%) spoke to a teacher. Nearly a third said that the school staff did not, in the last year, react to any bullying incident.

When teachers lose professional ethics

The participants spoke about the ethical behaviour of teachers and brought up cases where teachers were not fair and blame one student or another without any real reason, or blame the wrong children. Unfair treatment by teachers was a hot topic in every focus group and seemed to be central to the participants' dislike for school.

G1F6: ...you don't say anything, you know, it's someone behind you who says something, and she [the teacher] just starts screaming at you.

G1F7: ...always when you go to the [X teacher's] class, then you start chewing your nails, you suffer every time when you go to [that teacher's] lesson, what's up next, what you will be blamed for.

B1F3: The teacher always mixes up these two children and then the one who's blamed is sad [...]

Interviewer: Have you spoken with [teacher X]?

G1F7: ...sometimes I tried to correct [the mixed identity] but [imitating the teacher's expressions] 'Oh my God, what's the difference who is which?' and, then I am like... ok, [I think] would you at least learn our names, you have seen us for almost a year, it's time to know us by name and not simply start screaming, right?

The participants complained about teachers who are not able to look at situations from the children's perspectives, such as asking what caused this situation? What made the child behave this way? What is going on with this child? The group discussions revealed that the participants, but especially the boys, were unhappy about the teachers' preconceived notions about boys being the first to misbehave, thus also to blame in bad situations.

G2F2: This happened in history class. Two girls behind my back were making a noise because they played 'Truth and Deed'.

B2F2: And then the teacher reacted to me "[name of Boy 2], What are you blaring about there!

In F3, the female participants expressed the opposite viewpoint saying that boys too often give grounds for teachers to be angry, and they can understand why the teachers are annoyed with the boys. This suggests that the apparent different treatment of boys and girls by teachers causes a dislike for school amongst the former. Some male participants see themselves as the objects of blame without any clear reason; boys also feel they receive worse grades and different punishments compared to girls:

B2F2: She is like, the boys complete the same exercise on the same level as the girls, then she gives the boys like 'I don't give very good grade' and then to girls 'Mmmm, excellent; excellent...'

[...]

B2F2: Oh yes, once we tested the teacher in the discussion group of history and look, she [a classmate] used dirty words, ok, just a small word, and the teacher did not react. Then he [another classmate] put the teacher to test and used the same dirty word and in the next moment the teacher reacted.

Gender stereotypes may cause unequal treatment by teachers: girls are supposed to be tidy and obedient; they may break rules once but this is considered as part of the boys' behaviour repertoire. According to the participants, teachers think that violations by boys have more serious consequences than one-time misbehaviour by girls. The participants also said that occasionally the teachers express their preferences quite openly when choosing favourite students, irrespective of whether they are boys or girls. Favourite students always receive more attention and better grades. The recent Study of Children's Rights and Parenting (Anniste et al., 2018) revealed that 36% of children from grades 4 to 11 knew or had witnessed a situation where a teacher had treated children unfairly.

The participants did not like overly strict discipline in the classroom, because excessive discipline created discomfort.

G1F7: In the class, when you sit like this (in profile) [the teacher says:] 'Sit straight!'

[...]

B3F7: Desks should be totally...

G1F7: in a straight row, in place, so you must move them straight. Look, we have strips on the floor. Look the strips are there, and in principle you take your chair and move it exactly to this strip.

B2F7: Everything must be crazily precise

B1F7: You should push the chair close to the table

G1F7: ...she [the teacher] is a tyrant. Yes, she is, one big tyrant (smiling).

However, a classmate who disturbs the learning process is also a source of negative feelings. The participants referred to situations when teachers were unable to manage children who are hyperactive or manifest other behavioural problems.

Finally, the participants described the effects of non-participation as sources of negative feelings at school. For example, teachers make their own decisions about the routes of field visits or excursions. The

participants felt the decisions made by teachers without their involvement is something ‘for students’, not ‘with them’, and thus creates a dislike for school.

A school-for-well-being – after the miracle

The researcher invited children to imagine what the school would be like if they had a ‘magic wand’ to change it and received a long list of recommendations. In summary, a school-for-well-being is a place where knowledge creation and academic achievement are equally valued as the well-being of children. The teaching methods are novel, inspiring and capture real life experiences. Teachers treat children equally and with dignity, consider the individuality of all children; and are able to cope with their own bad moods and distress. Teachers listen and take students’ initiatives seriously and they care about the students’ welfare. Teachers value children’s own time: give less homework, give none on weekends or no homework at all throughout the week, leaving time for hobbies and friends. In a school-for-well-being children enjoy school life, feel safe and motivated.

Discussion

The focus group was the central data collection method in the study, because it created conditions for collective meaning-making (Morgan, 2012) and promoted discussions on rarely dealt sensitive topics, such as bullying (Corsaro, 2005) or fairness. In our focus groups, the participants were open and trustful. They spoke openly about the negative aspects of school life and helped us to understand the circumstances of those students who differed from the main cohort in Estonia who score high on liking school in contrast to students in other countries in the ISCWEB study (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017; Rees & Main, 2015). The 6th grade students in Estonia face various changes in their school arrangement: instead of the class teacher and only a few other teachers (e.g., music, physical education teachers) they have several subject teachers while the class teacher takes a more backstage role and acts more as a mentor. The homework load increases compared to former years and children start receiving marks instead of qualitative assessments. In the 6th grade, children are also required to pass a standardized test. In 2015 when the present study took place, for the first time children were not informed about the subject matter that the test would cover and thus they could not prepare for it. Thus, there are several factors within the Estonian education system that help explain the crowding out tendency of children in the 6th grade from the group who very much like school. In addition, 12 year-old children are in the midst of a transitional stage of physical and psychological development, which also influences their perceptions of everyday experiences in school and encourages a more critical approach towards their school experience.

On the whole, the participants were positive about school, because it is important for them in many ways as a source of well-being. However, they also voiced serious criticism about their schools’ physical, social and learning environments. Firstly, they criticized the basics of education – receiving good grades as the highest aim, with little attention to the real understanding of the subject matter. Children also expressed their critical views about teaching methods, for instance the use of IT methods in the classroom, group work,

negotiating study trips with teachers or about going on study trips at all. In Estonia, the teaching staff is also ageing: the teaching profession is not popular among young people and many young teachers leave the profession after one or two years. While older teachers try to keep updated with modern teaching practices in education, this is not reflected in the students' perceptions.

The messages provided by children from this study are invaluable. If we had not let children speak openly about the sources of their negative feelings about school, we would have not known how fine-tuned and elaborate their understanding about fairness is. The participants in this study raised several cases of teachers' misbehavior that prompted us to think about the importance of social and emotional competence for teaching, alongside teachers' knowledge in their subject matter, as important to determine what happens in the school environment. Moreover, our findings demonstrate that the school as a source of well-being is not only important for children but also for teachers themselves. In Estonia teachers lack support services such as supervision or psychotherapy. Teachers have access to a number of refresher courses but rarely do they deal with topics on how to establish relationships with children and deal with their behaviour effectively. The latter gains special importance when students bully teachers (the topic is gaining weight in public discussions in media in 2019).

In F1, the participants created a complicated ethical dilemma for the interviewer. They complained about a teacher who is sometimes violent towards children – not only 'yelling' without reason but also hitting and pushing (Corporal punishment is prohibited in Estonia by the new Child Protection Law that came into force in 2016). After discussing the incident, it was evident that the participants expected to receive support and help from the interviewer in this regard. In addition, the interviewer felt a responsibility to inform to the school administration about this problem according to the Child Protection Law Act. The issue was how to communicate the evidence to the school administration without causing any harm to the participants in that focus group. As the school administration had warmly welcomed the study and asked for feedback, with the participants' active consent, the interviewer forwarded the complaint, maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Unfortunately, despite the activities of the offending teacher being known because children had made earlier complaints, the school administration reacted adversely, protecting the teacher and blaming the students. Nevertheless, we believe that the focus group method with its common meaning-making capacity, shared feelings and trust in the interviewer, helped bring this complaint to light.

Several authors (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1996; Punch, 2002) have stressed the beneficial effect of peer support to both relieve anxiety and fear and to motivate active participation in discussion groups. Our experience showed that the participants' own position among their peers and lived school experiences impacted on what and how was voiced during the focus group interviews. For instance, in one focus group, after a boy who appeared to be a bully had left the group, two previously silent girls spoke up. The presence or absence of a group participant thus affects the collective meaning making and the spirit of the data collection process.

Interviewing children is contextual. From a generational perspective, the child participants in the study and the adult researchers represent different generations, with childhoods belonging to different times and spaces. However, the new knowledge about children's well-being as a social phenomenon emerged in the 'here and now' interactional meaning-making process as co-produced knowledge of the child actors (the experts on their lives) and the adult researcher (owning the research knowledge and skills but also the personal touch for the field under study). The social and cultural contexts of the participants and the researcher converge during the interview and are embedded into the broader social and cultural context. Thus, the data produced in the process of qualitative data collection carry characteristics of space, time and the people involved. In our study, a young adult convened the data collection. While belonging to the adult generation, the age gap was not so large between the two parties to discourage the child participants from being open about their experiences, feelings and thoughts. Moreover, the researcher had graduated from one of the schools where the data collection took place and she shared common ground with the school and the children participating in the study.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to understand and explain the low level of satisfaction with school life amongst students in Estonia who, unlike their peers, did not exhibit a liking for school. The study showed that children develop negative feelings from various aspects of school life that leads to dislike for school. A school would become a better place, if its physical environment supported everyday school life, was innovative in inspiring and inviting cooperation and enabled various activities and offered appropriate privacy. The social environment of a 'perfect' school would secure the physical, social and mental well-being of both children and teachers. Teachers would have life skills and professional ethics to promote the well-being of children; they also have new and effective ways of taking care of themselves.

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