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Students' Perception of Learning Environment: As-Is and Should-Be

Abstract

The school environment is most often analyzed from an adult viewpoint. This study shows various aspects of school life from students' perspectives in actual and preferred terms (teachers' perceptions have been excluded) and those who experience and face various situations in the school environment. The research was conducted among 1195 elementary school students from 4th to 8th grade. The research tool was the TROFLEI questionnaire (Technology-Rich Outcomes-Focused Learning Environment Inventory). The study has enabled the identification of aspects of everyday school reality that are of utmost importance to the students. The study results suggest a change of teaching methods and styles in Polish schools, dropping the schematic approach and paying attention to student's personal development and interpersonal relationships among students and teachers. All that constitutes a necessary condition to create a friendly atmosphere at school and determines the successful realization of its function.

Keywords: school, students, learning environment, school climate, school relationships.

Introduction

School is a space where students live and develop, where different experiences, events and situations positively or negatively impact development. However, as Day (1999) notes, it is a rare practice for schools to begin their improvement process by inviting students to talk about what makes the learning experi-

ence positive, what brings disappointment and what increases and decreases their motivation to learn.

In a report by UNICEF Poland (2019), out of 11 children's activities analyzed, being at school ranks last among the reasons for happiness in children and first among the reasons for unhappiness. The data presented in the report show that children associate school with unpleasant experiences, so research is needed in this area. Publications on this issue include an analysis of, among other things, the way the school functions as an institution, the quality of education, and educational problems (e. g. Jagieła 2023; Molinari and Grazia, 2023, Aldridge and Fraser, 2008; Closs et al., 2022; Afari et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2017; Khalil and Aldridge 2019; Rusticus et al., 2022; Brozmanová and Kosová, 2022; Piasecka, 2015; Szymański, 2014; Wysocka and Tomiczek, 2014).

The research on everyday life at school from the student's perspective presented in this paper is intended to provide grounds for a more in-depth reflection on the practice of the educational process and the functioning of students in school relationships. The research material presented in the following section and its interpretation will, hopefully, broaden the insight into the expectations, requirements, interpretation of events and the way students experience everyday school life.

Purpose of the study

The perspective of school environment analysis adopted in this study refers to students' assessment of everyday school life, which they describe in terms of their beliefs about how they function in daily school life (actual state) and how they would like to function (preferred state). The aim of the research presented in this article was to a) gain insight into the different aspects of school life from the student's perspective, b) explore the discrepancies between the actual and the preferred state, c) identify the students' needs regarding the functioning of the school and determine how they vary.

Materials and Methods

Research Sample

The study included 1195 students in grades 4–8 (primary school). Students completed an online questionnaire in class, under the supervision of their teachers, on smartphones or computers, using a link provided to them. The study was conducted in 2022. The characteristics of the study group are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Composition of the research sample

Grade	Number of students		Sex			
	N	%	F		M	
			N	%	N	%
4	198	17%	108	9%	90	8%
5	216	18%	113	9%	103	9%
6	259	22%	134	11%	125	10%
7	264	22%	139	12%	125	10%
8	258	22%	136	11%	122	10%
Total	1195	100%	630	53%	565	47%

Tools and Procedures

The study used the Technology-Rich Outcomes-Focused Learning Environment Inventory (TROFLEI) questionnaire (Aldridge et al., 2004). The questionnaire was translated into Polish and adapted for this study, with the original structure and parameters preserved. The TROFLEI tool examines the school environment: student cohesiveness, teacher support, student involvement, task orientation, Investigation, cooperation, equity, Differentiation, computer usage, and young adult ethos. 8 indicators define each of these 10 dimensions.

Table 2 presents the characteristics of the analyzed areas of daily school life in connection with their assignment to the following 3 dimensions: relationships (R), personal development (P), system maintenance and system change (S). The R dimension measures the nature and intensity of interpersonal relationships in the school environment and the extent to which individuals are involved in this environment and support and help each other. The P dimension is concerned with the basic directions of development and self-improvement. The S dimension includes the extent to which the school environment is organized regarding precise requirements, maintaining control and responding to change (Dorman and Fraser, 2009).

Table 2
The analyzed areas of daily school life and their indicators

Analyzed area	Description	Dimension
Student cohesiveness	Determines the extent to which students know, help and support each other	R
Teacher support	The extent to which the teacher helps, befriends, trusts and is interested in students.	R

Table 2 (cont.)

Analyzed area	Description	Dimension
Student involvement	Students' level of attentiveness, participation in discussions, performance of extra work and enjoyment of activities	R
Task orientation	The extent to which it is important to fulfil responsibilities and comply with requirements, complete planned activities, and comply with the content	P
Investigation	Extent and methods of developing problem-solving skills and utilizing them	P
Cooperation	The extent to which students work together instead of competing on educational tasks	P
Equity	The extent to which students are treated equally by the teacher	S
Differentiation	The extent to which teachers treat students as individuals, taking into account their abilities, achievements and interests	S
Computer usage	The extent to which students use their phones and computers as a tool to communicate with others and access information	S
Young adult ethos	The extent to which teachers require students to take responsibility and treat them as young adults	P

Note: Based on Dorman and Fraser, 2009.

Data Analysis

Students were asked how often the situation presented occurs in the classroom (actual state) and how often the same situation should occur (preferred state) using a 5-point Likert scale (almost always, often, sometimes, rarely, hardly ever). The results were analyzed using the arithmetic mean of the answers provided by the students in the questionnaire and the mode and the standard deviation.

Results

The primary school students who took part in the survey rated everyday school reality by assigning to each of the 8 indicators a numerical value ranging from 1 to 5 to indicate the actual state and then to indicate, in their opinion, the preferred state for these indicators. The results obtained from the students' responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Actual state of school environment and state preferred by the surveyed students

Environment scale	Actual			Preferred		
	M	Mo	SD	M	Mo	SD
Student cohesiveness	3.42	4	1.02	4.24	5	1.01
Teacher support	3.23	4	1.12	3.96	4	1.00
Student involvement	3.16	3	1.13	4.00	4	1.22
Task orientation	3.47	4	1.28	4.00	5	1.24
Investigation	3.37	3	0.90	4.02	4	1.06
Cooperation	3.12	3	1.14	4.21	4	0.93
Equity	3.66	4	1.25	4.39	4	0.73
Differentiation	2.27	1	1.44	2.56	1	1.36
Computer usage	3.42	3	1.17	3.90	4	1.06
Young adult ethos	3.50	3	1.10	4.12	4	0.81

Based on the survey results presented in Table 3, it can be seen that *equity* is the most important among the analyzed areas of school reality for primary school students. The results obtained in the survey on the preferred state are $M=4.39$, which may mean that students pay special attention to fair treatment at school. Primary school respondents most frequently indicated a 4 ($Mo=4$) value with a small response variability ($SD=0.73$). Indicators defining the area of equity were phrased in terms of equal treatment of students in the classroom by the teacher, including support, praise, responding to student responses, helping, listening, asking and answering questions and motivating. Hence, it follows that these aspects of everyday school life require more attention from the teacher and that acting relatively towards students should be a priority of school reality.

Primary school students also attribute high importance to student cohesiveness ($M=4.24$). The indicators defining this area were related to mutual familiarity, kindness, making friends, cooperation, providing and receiving help and being liked. Results show that classroom atmosphere and mutual relations are essential for the students surveyed. It is also confirmed by the results obtained in the area of *Cooperation* ($M=4.21$), which testifies to the need to perform tasks

or class projects together, work in a group, and learn from each other without competing. Primary school students want to be treated as young adults ($M=4.12$). It means that young people generally want to be treated as responsible, trustworthy, independent thinkers who do not need control.

The results presented in Table 3 show that the primary school respondents also attach great importance to *Student involvement* ($M=4.0$), *Task orientation* ($M=4.0$), *Investigation*, i.e. inquiring, analyzing, reflecting, searching and finding answers, problem-solving ($M=4.02$).

Analyzing the actual and preferred states also made it possible to identify those least important to students among the surveyed areas of daily school life. The lowest values were obtained in the area of *Differentiation* ($M=2.27$ for the actual state and $M=2.56$ for the preferred state). Students' responses varied the most when the area of *Differentiation* for the actual state ($SD=1.44$) and for the preferred state ($SD=1.36$), with being the most frequently indicated value ($M_o=1$).

It is also worth analyzing the differences between the obtained research results concerning the actual and the preferred state of the investigated areas of school reality experienced by students. The differences observed in this case are shown in Figure 1.

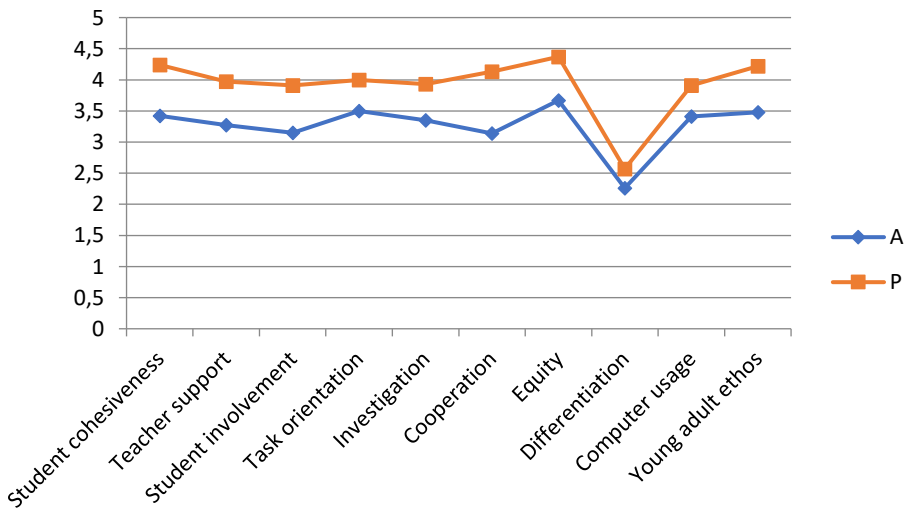


Fig. 1

Comparison of actual and preferred state of the analyzed areas of a school environment

Lines A (actual state) and P (preferred state) illustrate the results obtained for the analyzed categories of school reality. Figure 1 clearly shows that in each analyzed area, higher scores were obtained for the preferred state than for the

actual one, which confirms the reasonably obvious assumption that students would like to improve the current state of school reality. In one category, *Differentiation*, the results are lower than those obtained in the other categories and have a similar value in the actual and preferred state.

It is also possible to notice a similar distance between the lines for most pairs of dots representing each category. However, a more precise analysis of the differences between the results obtained for the actual and the preferred state is possible when the numerical values of these differences are identified, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Differences between the results of analyses for the actual state and the preferred state of the school environment

Environment scale	Actual	Preferred	Difference
	M	M	
Student cohesiveness	3.42	4.24	0.82
Teacher support	3.23	3.96	0.73
Student involvement	3.16	4.00	0.84
Task orientation	3.47	4.00	0.53
Investigation	3.37	4.02	0.65
Cooperation	3.12	4.21	1.09
Equity	3.66	4.39	0.73
Differentiation	2.27	2.56	0.29
Computer usage	3.42	3.90	0.48
Young adult ethos	3.50	4.12	0.62

Based on the data in Table 4, it can be concluded that the most significant difference between the preferred and the actual state of school reality is observed in *Cooperation* (1.09). Students predominantly lack joint activities, assignments, projects, and cooperation. Another high score for differences between the actual and the preferred state was obtained in *Student Cohesiveness* (0.84), which confirms the need to pay attention to mutual relations, cooperation and the integration of students. There is also an apparent deficit in *Teacher Support* (0.73). Students expect the teacher to be involved to go beyond routine duties to help them learn, engage them in conversation, take the student's feelings into account, take an interest in the students and their problems, and ask questions in such a way as to enable them to understand the issue.

There is also a clear need for improvement in *Student Involvement* (the difference between the actual and the preferred state is 0.84) and in the area of *Investigation* (0.65). The numerical values of the differences in the results be-

tween the actual and the preferred state of the category defined as *Young Adult Ethos* (0.63) testify to the fact that treating the student as a responsible, reliable, independent person who does not require excessive control is another deficit in the school reality of students.

Discussion

The study provides an exciting insight into students' experiences, perceptions, and judgements about their functioning in school reality. It enables the identification of needs and deficiencies in various areas of school life, considering their perspectives. The findings show that for primary school students, fairness, which includes various aspects of equal treatment of students in the classroom by the teacher, is the most essential area of everyday school life (Table 3).

The authors of the TROFLEI questionnaire used in this study included *equity* in the dimension defined as system maintenance and system change **S** (Table 2), which involves a clearly defined scope of requirements, means of control and response to change. Of significant importance to the respondents in this study is the integration of students in the classroom, including in the **R** relationship dimension (Table 2), which defines the nature and intensity of interpersonal relationships in the classroom environment and the extent of involvement in this environment, support and mutual assistance. Another area critical to the students surveyed is *Cooperation* (Tables 3 and 4), i.e. the extent to which students cooperate rather than compete with each other when completing educational tasks, included in the **P** personal development dimension (Table 2), which deals with basic directions of development and self-improvement. Students attribute high importance to being treated like adults – responsible, trustworthy, independent-thinking, and not requiring too much control, which is becoming increasingly important as they age (Table 3). *Young adult ethos* is included in dimension **P** (Table 2). The study also found that *Student involvement* (**R** dimension), *Task Orientation* (**P** dimension) and *Investigation*, i.e. involvement in the life of the classroom, complying with responsibilities and requirements, inquiring, analyzing, reflecting, seeking and finding answers and solving problems (**P** dimension) are essential for primary school students.

The study also made it possible to determine the scope of differences between the actual and the preferred state of the analyzed aspects of daily school life (Figure 1 and Table 4), making it possible to identify areas of need and deficiency. Among the students surveyed, the most significant differences were found in the areas of *Cooperation* (**P** dimension), *Student Cohesiveness* of integration in class (**R** dimension), *Teacher support* (**R** dimension), and *Young Adult Ethos* (**P** dimension). Primary school students need more classroom involvement

(*Student involvement* – dimension **R**) and *Investigation* – for inquiring, analyzing, searching, and solving problems (dimension **P**).

The surveyed students indicated the areas of daily school life that matter most to them and, by assessing the actual and the preferred state, the areas with the most significant differences between the indications.

Limitations and future directions

The present study has several limitations. Firstly, our analyses are natural sample-specific, and these profiles may not be found in other samples. Secondly, this study assessed select aspects of the school environment using a validated research tool. However, due to the contextual nature of our data, our capacity to establish causal interpretations of the results is restricted. The results apply to a particular study group; they may differ if carried out with other groups of students from other schools. Alternatively, they could be carried out separately for different types of schools, e.g. primary and secondary, or longitudinal studies could be carried out on selected groups of pupils. It would also be interesting to use the same instrument to survey pupils and teachers in classrooms and to implement solutions to improve the classroom climate. It will ensure that future researchers conduct the same survey with different criteria for selecting respondents to explore differences in perceptions of the school environment from a different perspective. Future studies should attempt to replicate the present findings to determine whether the results are similar or different. We were also unable to draw any in-depth conclusions as to why there are differences between perceptions of the current state of the school environment and the preferred state.

Further qualitative research could be considered for a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of these issues. Thus, the findings of this study suggest several directions for future research and practical implications. Further research in this area can contribute to developing and implementing methods to improve classroom climate, pupils' sense of acceptance and quality of school life, and prevent exclusion. Our findings also have important practical implications for academics in the Faculty of Education who teach and co-ordinate different courses and teacher preparation programmes and supervise students. It suggests that teachers should be aware of the types of classroom support important for pupils' development, social skills, self-esteem, and openness to the world.

Conclusions

The findings do not provide a complete picture of school reality, as it is more complex than the surveyed aspects. However, they allow for capturing some

critical phenomena from a student's perspective, contributing to the classroom climate and determining the student's functioning. They identify specific areas of importance to students and areas that need to be improved. Educational institutions are obligated to influence the individual in a way that supports his or her development and ability to adapt to the changing socio-cultural situation, build relationships with others, and develop and use talents and skills. The study revealed deficiencies in interpersonal relations between students, between teachers and students and in conditions conducive to personal development. Serious problems concerning the climate of the Polish school, especially in the dimension of relations, have also been shown by the PISA (OECD, 2013) study, in which the results of indicators concerning teacher-student relations rank Poland last among the 34 OECD countries analyzed. International research has also shown that Polish students have a low sense of belonging at school. In a study conducted in 2018, Poland ranked 66th from the bottom out of 75 OECD countries surveyed (OECD, 2019), with Polish students' low sense of belonging at school also demonstrated by earlier PISA studies.

However, there is a lack of systematic approaches to promoting psychosocial skills and respect for others, and it is up to each school to determine the appropriate measures to cultivate interpersonal skills, empathy and values of tolerance, diversity and kindness. Schools provide an ideal setting for the acquisition of social and emotional competencies. According to the OECD (2023), there is increasing recognition of the importance of developing social and emotional skills, considered as essential as academic skills. Nevertheless, the former are often evaluated less than the latter. In many schools, the instruction of social and emotional skills is a by-product of educational practice rather than a central focus. Contemporary schools are geared towards formal learning objectives, primarily the passing of tests and examinations by students at their respective educational stages. Much less attention is paid to the student's integral development, preparing him or her for life and functioning in a changing social and cultural environment. There is a lack of attention to what kind of person the school graduate will be, how he or she will act and how he or she will deal with various difficulties, barriers and challenges. Studies indicate that teachers' focus on students' academic performance rather than on their development is a risk factor for behavioural problems and mental health (Jagięta 2009; Welsh, 2000), whereas teaching staff's focus on meeting students' needs and aspirations and on their personal development are favourable conditions for creating a proper social climate at the school, determining the possibility of performing its functions, including formal ones (e. g. Przewłocka 2015; Kulesza 2011; Ostaszewski 2012; Thapa et al., 2013; Dorina, 2013; Zullig et al. 2011; Tubbs and Garner, 2008; Lombardi et al., 2019; Sattler et al., 2022). Therefore, many school problems could be solved and avoided if the students' subjective perception of

school reality was also considered instead of merely considering the objective reality in which teachers and students function.

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Środowisko edukacyjne w percepcji uczniów – jak jest i jak powinno być

Streszczenie

Środowisko szkolne jest najczęściej analizowane z punktu widzenia dorosłych. Niniejsze badanie ukazuje różne aspekty życia szkolnego z perspektywy uczniów w ujęciu aktualnym i preferowanym (pominięto percepcję nauczycieli), którzy stykają się z różnymi sytuacjami występującymi w środowisku szkolnym. Badanie przeprowadzono wśród 1195 uczniów uczęszczających do szkoły podstawowej – od 4 do 8 klasy. Narzędziem badawczym był kwestionariusz TROFLEI (Technology-Rich Outcomes-Focused Learning Environment Inventory). Badanie pozwoliło na identyfikację tych aspektów szkolnej codzienności, które są dla uczniów najważniejsze. Wyniki badania sugerują zmianę metod i stylów nauczania w polskiej szkole, a także odejście od schematycznego podejścia, zwrócenie uwagi na rozwój osobisty ucznia i relacje interpersonalne między uczniami oraz między uczniami a nauczycielami. Wszystko to stanowi niezbędny warunek tworzenia przyjaznej atmosfery w szkole i warunkuje pomyślną realizację jej funkcji.

Słowa kluczowe: szkoła, uczniowie, środowisko uczenia się, klimat szkoły, relacje w szkole.