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To cite this article: Ulrika Bergmark & Catrine Kostenius (2017): Students' Experiences of Meaningful Situations in School, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: [10.1080/00313831.2016.1258670](https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2016.1258670)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2016.1258670>



Published online: 04 Jan 2017.



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# Students' Experiences of Meaningful Situations in School

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on school situations students experienced as meaningful and how these experiences can guide educational improvement. Participants included 15 students in grade 3 from a Swedish school. In this qualitative study, the data consisted of drawings, multimodal productions, interviews, and field notes. The analysis resulted in four themes: Having the opportunity to learn in different spaces; Being free and able to participate; Experiencing caring and sharing, and Recognizing one's own growth and achievement. The findings suggest that situations students find meaningful involve aspects of both learning and wellbeing. The practical implication for these results is that student-generated qualitative data can help indicate needs for educational improvement.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 December 2015

Accepted 29 August 2016

## KEYWORDS

Student voice; learning; wellbeing; meaningful school situations

## Introduction

This paper focuses on school situations that students experienced as meaningful and how these experiences can guide educational improvement. Meaningful school situations entail, for example, meetings and specific events that students value for their learning, development, and wellbeing. Such situations can make a valuable difference for the students involved.

The aim of this paper is to analyze meaningful situations in schools as portrayed in personal student narratives. In addition, the paper seeks to give implications for school practice, exploring how such experiences can guide educational improvement. The following research questions have been identified: (1) What meaningful school situations do students portray in personal narratives? (2) How are meaningful situations in schools characterized? (3) What differences and similarities can be found in the meaningful situations in schools?

## Large-Scale Reforms: Standardization and Quantitative Data

During the last decade, Swedish schools have been criticized with regards to deteriorating academic results and deficiencies in the learning environment (e.g., problems related to stress, bullying, and disciplinary problems) (Gustafsson et al., 2010). This negative view is based on national and international surveys and measurements (cf. Ahrén, 2010; Bremberg, 2006; OECD, 2014; Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2014; Westling Allodi, 2010). In recent years, educational change has focused on large-scale reforms, standardization, tests, measurements, and external inspections (Hargreaves, 2009). While especially evident in the UK and the USA, this approach has spread to other countries in Europe and Scandinavia (Gustafsson, 2008). In Sweden, for example, the political debate about

reforming the school system has been influenced by national and international surveys, evaluations with quantifiable and measurable data.

Such a one-dimensional perspective has been criticized by educational researchers, teachers, and parents due to the difficulty of measuring students' knowledge and abilities through surveys and that evidence is prioritized while experience is neglected (Cook-Sather, 2009a; Hargreaves, 2009). The challenge is to find additional methods to assess knowledge and abilities and consider how the diversity of outcomes achieved through education can be measured. With this said, we want to stress that both quantitative and qualitative studies have a place in educational research and that they are not to be seen as dichotomies, as they answer different questions.

### **Studying Qualitative School Data**

Testing, surveys, and external reviews need to be complemented with qualitative data based on experiences from within schools (Hargreaves, 2009). Cook-Sather (2009a) proposes including other voices, and especially those of the students, in the processes of bringing about change in schools. These voices would introduce new perspectives largely missing in research and governmental reports (Andersson, Nehlin, Muftee, & Becevic, 2010; Westling Allodi, 2002). Van Manen, McClelland, and Plihal (2007) acknowledge the benefit of exploring student experience as opposed to opinions, perceptions, and views. By that, van Manen et al. mean attending to "a fuller meaning of the notion of student experience" (p. 88). Students should be able to speak for themselves, in their own words. In addition, van Manen et al. claim that a researcher cannot fully understand an experience, but through written statements of experiences, a researcher can explore the texts, searching for a deeper understanding and meaning.

If researchers truly listen to students' experiences and invite them to actively participate in the research process, then students' voices in research can be closely linked to school improvement (Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Feedback from students goes beyond listening to students' views and opinions, it is also about inviting them to have an active role in their own education, from decision-making to taking on leadership roles (Mitra, 2004, 2005). Bergmark (2008) points at the importance of engaging students in dialogues of issues that matter to them, for example, on how they wish to be treated by peers and adults. This research highlighted the value of creating respectful relationships in school, which is also emphasized by Bragg (2007) when she argues that student voices challenge existing relationships and create new ones.

Giving feedback and being able to participate have an intrinsic value for students that relates to their wellbeing. If adults show respect for students and their competences and invite them to participate in educational improvement, the students feel valued for who they are and what they can contribute (Bergmark, 2008; Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009). Rudduck (2007) found in her studies that students became more motivated and committed, and accordingly engaged, in their learning when they were consulted on matters affecting them. This process also builds students' self-respect and a positive feeling of being respected by others.

Our study focuses on studying qualitative school data from a strength-based stance, in this case, meaningful school situations from students' perspectives. This perspective has connections to Seligman (1990) who emphasizes the importance of hope and positive thinking for human development. He argues that an optimistic mindset can increase health and wellbeing, for example, reducing stress. When studying qualitative data of meaningful situations it is essential to discern the root causes of why these experiences are perceived as meaningful (Reed, 2007).

### **Conceptual Framework: Meaningful School Situations**

Our interest in meaningful situations springs from a Swedish national campaign on meaningful encounters in healthcare settings, politics, school, entrepreneurship, and sports (Betydelsefulla möten, 2015). Catherina Ronsten, the journalist who was responsible for the campaigns, contacted

the first author with the wish that meaningful experiences in schools would be researched in order to learn from them in different contexts. In addition, a research group at Mälardalen University started their work on meaningful encounters in healthcare settings. One of the campaigns focused on meaningful encounters in healthcare, and the researchers were offered to research the data, which resulted in scientific publications (Gustafsson, Snellman, & Gustafsson, 2012; Snellman, Gustafsson, & Gustafsson, 2012). Ronsten's first campaign was "Meaningful Teachers," where students wrote narratives about former teachers who had made a difference for them in their life. The campaign resulted in one book (Ronsten, 2007). As this book focused on meaningful and significant teachers, we decided to expand the knowledge on meaningful experiences by asking students to reflect on meaningful situations in school. Our research has a broader frame than the concept of meaningful encounters, as it includes not only encounters but other meaningful experiences in school as well.

Characteristics of the most favorable conditions for learning have been studied (e.g., Cook-Sather, 2009b; Hopkins, 2010; Rudduck, 2007; Wilson & Corbett, 2007). This body of research stresses that a good teacher is characterized as respectful and sensitive to students' needs, positive in attitude, skilled in their teaching, and an expert in their subject. Teacher support – described as respect, appreciation, and fairness – was vital for students' learning. Favorable conditions for learning were also related to the opportunity to learn in a quiet and peaceful environment and learning through different methods. Cook-Sather (2009b) has collected powerful quotes from students that reflect meaningful experiences they have had and wished for. The relational aspects of respect and caring were highlighted: "If you have a relationship with your students, they're gonna trust you more and they're gonna respect you more and then they'll be nicer to you" (p. 24) and "One of my teachers really pushes kids to do work. She is the most caring teacher. She really wants you to do work" (p. 25). The students also reflected on learning styles and educational needs: "Everyone has their own learning needs and in the true ideology of education everyone would get those needs addressed" (p. 28).

Our own studies (Backman et al., 2012a, 2012b; Bergmark & Kostenius, 2011, 2012) have emphasized students' positive experiences of a learning environment, such as support and encouragement from teachers, being able to choose what and whom to work with, using a variation of working forms and learning approaches, discussions in an open manner in the classroom, successes in learning processes, excursions and outdoor experiences, friendship with peers, reciprocity in relationships between teachers and students, happiness and a good mood, and fulfillment of primary needs (e.g., food, physical activity, sleep, relaxation, and temperature in classrooms). Our findings highlight what the World Health Organization refers to as physical, mental and social wellbeing and health: "... a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities" (WHO, 1986, p. 1).

The concept of *meaningful encounters* has mainly been used in healthcare studies and needs further exploration in school contexts. Therefore, we decided to draw upon research from both the healthcare and school contexts and adding the aspect of meaningful situations. There are similarities between these contexts as both entail meetings between people and interpersonal relationships; also, both teachers and healthcare staff are to support the health and wellbeing of patients and students. Some differences between healthcare contexts and schools can also be noted. Teachers have a pronounced mission to facilitate learning, while healthcare staff do not (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). In addition, there can be an age difference between patients and students, as the former were adults and in our case young children. It may be easier to recognize the meaningfulness and value of a situation when being an adult due to maturity. Nevertheless, children are able to express their views on meaningful situations, even if their experiences may differ from adult's experiences.

Gustafsson et al. (2012) studied meaningful encounters experienced by patients and next of kin. Their findings show that meaningful encounters can be signified as "sharing, a nourishing fellowship, common responsibility and coming together, experienced as safety and warmth, that gives, by extension, life-changing moments, a healing force and dissipated insight" (Gustafsson et al.,

2012, p. 363). In another study, Snellman et al. (2012) compared patients' and caregivers' written narratives of meaningful encounters, resulting in both similarities and differences in characteristics of a meaningful encounter. The patients' narratives emphasized the importance of caregivers being kind-hearted, thoughtful, mutually oriented, and helpful. The caregivers stressed their ability to be humane, using physical contact in caring, communicating in a nurturing way, facilitating joy, laughter, and mutuality between themselves and their patients.

The term meaningful encounters can be associated with caring encounters, explored in, for example, Westin and Danielson (2006, 2007). Such encounters exist in healthcare contexts and can be regarded as caregivers' concern for, interest in, providing for, or looking after their patients. Westin and Danielson's studies show that the caring encounters can affect the patients' psychosocial wellbeing positively or negatively. Here one can note a difference between meaningful and caring encounters since the former focuses on meetings that contribute to a making a positive difference in life.

In a study by Hemming (2011), two English primary schools that facilitated positive and meaningful encounters between children of different religious backgrounds were researched. The findings show that meaningful encounters gave opportunities for the students of different backgrounds and religions to be friends, create social networks, play, and work together in school. Other educational studies can be linked to the field of meaningful encounters. However, they do not explicitly use the words "meaningful encounters" but favorable conditions for learning, positive experiences, and meaningful situations. This paper builds on previous referred areas but intends to bring previous research in educational settings on meaningful situations, as well as favorable conditions for learning in dialogue with insights from healthcare research on meaningful encounters, to add new perspectives and understandings to these discussions.

## Methods

### *Personal Narratives Capture Students' Lived Experiences of Meaningful Situations*

In this study, we used students' narratives as a way to grasp their experiences of meaningful situations. A narrative is often based on life experiences and through telling, writing, and/or listening to stories there is an opportunity for learning about oneself and about each other (Clandinin et al., 2006; Estola, 2003; Stroobants, 2005). In addition, narration is an important tool in change processes. Personal narratives based on lived experiences deal with emotions and have the potential to elucidate transformative events in people's lives. Narratives create a link between the particular and the generic (Bruner, 1990). For the storyteller, the narration becomes a tool for self-reflection, a way to utilize thoughts and experiences to a level of awareness that create opportunities for sharing to other people. To listen to or read narratives may enable understanding for other people's personal experiences as well as comparison to and identification with their own experiences (Bruner, 1990).

In our case, narratives are used in a broad sense, including oral narration, in writing, with drawings and pictures as well as role-plays. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), by combining modes, the same message can be portrayed in many ways. They explain that using a number of modes to tell a narrative may contribute to a more profound understanding of its meaning. Just as people choose diverse ways of expressing themselves, we as researchers sought to facilitate narration through the use of various empirical methods, promoting students to express and share experiences in their own way.

### *Participants and Data Collection*

Sixteen students in grade 3 (10 years of age) in a small town in northern Sweden were invited to partake in the study; 15 agreed to participate. Informed consent was obtained by all parents of the students. All participants were informed that they had the right to terminate participation in

the study without giving reasons and that the empirical data was to be handled confidentially. The research was subject for ethical vetting and approved by the Regional Ethics Review Board (2013), record number 2013-26-31Ö.

Empirical data was collected over one year and consisted of drawings, multimodal productions (digital narratives, posters, and role plays), interviews, and field notes by the researchers. The first author was responsible for the data collection and met the students in their classroom to explain the purpose of the study and about research in schools in general. All activities aimed to elucidate and reflect on meaningful situations, using different methods. To facilitate students' understanding of the topic of the study, we discussed the meaning of the words "meaningful situations." The students gave synonyms like "important" and "care about" (field notes). They also defined the words by explaining the opposite: "don't care" and "ignore something or someone" (field notes). At this initial stage, they gave examples of meaningful aspects in school: "friendship," "having fun," "scoring a goal in soccer," "playground," and "completing the math book" (field notes). After that first discussion, the students were given the following task:

- Work in pairs. Try to remember some meaningful situations in school. What happened? Who was involved? Why do you think you remember it? Did you learn something, if so, what? How did you feel? Tell each other.
- Draw pictures of the situation.

All students discussed meaningful situations with their friends and then individually made drawings to illustrate the experiences. The first author and the classroom teacher supported the students in their drawing process, asking open questions such as "Can you remember an important situation where somebody cared for you?", "Who were you with?", and "How did you feel at that time?"

The next step occurred two weeks later. The students were asked to create a multimodal production to depict meaningful situations in school. They could work with the same experience that they drew in the previous step or they could choose a new one if they preferred. They could choose from the following methods: digital narrative, photo exhibit, movie, song, poem, dance, skit, or poster. The students worked in groups of 2–4 students and decided to create digital narratives, role-plays, and posters.

While the students were working with their multimodal productions, the first author interviewed all students individually in a room adjacent to their ordinary classroom. The drawings functioned as the starting point for the interview and follow-up questions were posed: "Can you explain what you have drawn?", "Where were you, what did you do, who were there?", "Why do you think you remember this situation?", "How did you feel at this time", and "What do you think you learnt?". The interviews lasted between 2 and 13 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis draws on all empirical data in the study: drawings, multimodal production (digital narratives, posters, and role plays), interviews, and field notes by the researcher. The data was combined to broadly view meaningful situations in school. In our attempt to understand the students' experiences, we found it crucial to go beyond individual experiences and focus on the collective understanding of the research topic. Thus, the analytical process, although collecting examples of subjective experiences, strove for a holistic understanding of student responses.

The researchers analyzed the data first individually and then together. We used a content analysis in accordance with Graneheim and Lundman (2004), where manifest and latent content, units of analysis, meaning units, condensation, abstracting, and themes were essential components. We first read the written data and then viewed the drawings and multimodal productions to get a general picture of participants' lived experiences. After that, we went through the data once again more carefully, in order to understand and interpret the data. The study explored the *latent content* as it tried to

understand the underlying meaning of a phenomenon in a certain context: a classroom. The *unit of analysis* was meaningful situations, and the *meaning units* were developed through attending to our research questions: (1) What meaningful school situations do students portray in personal narratives? (2) How are meaningful situations in schools characterized? (3) What differences and similarities can be found in the meaningful situations in schools? We compared similarities and differences in the empirical data, which corresponded to the *condensation* phase of the analysis. Finally, we formulated emerging *themes* based on the students' experiences of meaningful situations, signifying the *abstraction* phase. During the entire process we reflected continuously when reading the data by writing words and phrases in the margin of the written data. In addition, we noted keywords on a separate sheet when viewing the drawings and multimodal productions as a way to grasp the meaning and how different statements were connected to each other.

In order to invite the students into the data analysis, both researchers returned to the students and their teacher with a tentative analysis. The students had the opportunity to discuss and respond to our four themes that emerged from the data analysis, accompanied with examples of drawings, multimodal productions, and quotes from interviews. The themes were: (1) Having the opportunity to learn in different spaces, (2) Being free and able to participate, (3) Experiencing caring and sharing, and (4) Recognizing one's own growth and achievement. The students' responses to our analysis did not change the wording of the themes; however, through giving additional examples of meaningful situations, their views enriched and confirmed our analysis. Lastly, we reflected on the understanding of the data and related the findings to our conceptual framework.

## Methodological Considerations

There could be some potential weaknesses with the use of the chosen methods drawings, interviews, and multimodal productions (digital narratives, posters, and role plays) in this study. The students most likely had varied competences in expressing their experiences in drawings and multimodal productions and the results might have been different if, for example, methods where students wrote down their experiences were used. However, as we complemented the drawings and multimodal productions with interviews, we regarded students having opportunities to express themselves through different modes. One limitation may be that the reflections captured students' experiences at a certain point and did not reflect a process. Therefore, the results show *some* aspects of their experiences concerning meaningful situations in school. In spite of these challenges relating to methodology, we regard our choice to use multiple methods sufficient, since the data collections enabled a range of methods that students were able to use, which contributed to a large variation of students' experiences. Even if some students expressed themselves in short responses, other students compensated for this by elaborating on meaningful experiences in a more extensive way. The analysis focused on the encompassing understanding of the phenomenon and not on individual student experiences. In addition, the methodological choices allowed the students to express their meaningful experiences of school in their own words, which may reduce the risk of overlooking aspects that students consider relevant.

## Findings

The analysis resulted in four themes without hierarchic order: (1) Having the opportunity to learn in different spaces; (2) Being free and able to participate; (3) Experiencing caring and sharing, and (4) Recognizing one's own growth and achievement.

### ***Having the Opportunity to Learn in Different Places and Spaces***

The first theme relates to meaningful situations where the students emphasize the importance of learning in different places and spaces. The students brought up a field trip to a teacher's summer

house. There were many activities taking place during that day that resulted in meaningful experiences. One of the students said: “We learned how to do a fish, how you cut it up and like that” (individual interview). Another explained: “When we went to the teacher’s [teacher name removed] summer house we got to play and swim and ride a boat, but in school you can’t do that” (individual interview).

The students also made drawings of this event (Figure 1). One student depicted a situation where they played in a tree house at the teacher’s summer house.

In the follow-up interview, the student explained why it was a meaningful event:

- R: Why do you think this was a good and important day for you?  
 S: I remembered it and it was super fun.  
 R: What was fun?  
 S: That we could go to the teacher’s [teacher name removed] summer house with boat and so on ...  
 R: If you compare this to an ordinary school day, what was the difference?  
 S: Mm, that we have more fun [laugh], we can run and swim and so on ...  
 R: What do you think you learned that day?  
 S: Mm, that you should have a life vest when you are going by boat, and also rubber boots ... to be careful when you walk up the ladder and when you are there [in the tree house]. (individual interview)

Learning in different places and spaces was also related to time in order to explore history. The class did a thematic work on the Titanic, as described by the students. Two of the PowerPoint presentations depicted this school assignment as something memorable and meaningful. The thematic work started out with a lesson about water and icebergs, and one of the students wanted to know more about the *Titanic*. This special interest initiated a process where the whole class read books, saw the *Titanic* movie, made a paper model of the ship, and listened to the song, that according to survivors, was played when it sank (field notes). In one of the group’s PowerPoint presentations, the students explained why this was a meaningful situation: “It was fun and we learned many new things” (field notes). A student depicted a meaningful situation when she drew a picture of the Mona Lisa, and she connected this activity to historical events (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** A student depicting an outing to a teacher’s summerhouse.



**Figure 2.** Student drawing of a meaningful event with the subtitle “I’m drawing Måna Lisa. It’s fun.”

She commented in the interview: “When we made a drawing of Mona Lisa ... I like to draw and then I thought, what a famous painting, so old and the most famous in the world” (interview).

In summary, the meaningful situations that the students brought up relating to this theme emphasized the importance of different learning environments, from classrooms and outdoors to a variety of times throughout history.

### **Being Free and Able to Participate**

The second theme relates to meaningful situations where the students felt free and were able to participate. This involved situations of choosing activities in school, either during class, after school activities, or recess. The students distinguished between “work of choice” and “student’s choice”:

- R: What is “work of choice” for you?  
 S: Then you can do almost everything that you want. Sometimes, we can choose to play chess in after school activities ... we can dress up and play ...  
 R: How do you have “work of choice” in the classroom, if you are supposed to learn Swedish and maths?  
 S: Sometimes we can choose on Fridays.  
 R: How do you work then?  
 S: We can choose to draw.  
 R: Can you do “work of choice” and work with Swedish, for example?  
 S: No. Our teacher [name removed] has told us that “student’s choice” is when you can choose what to do [school work].

Other examples of being free and able to participate included the following: “In first grade we used to be out in the woods on field trips, we were allowed to bring *fika* [cookies and lemonade] and then we played and made a lot of tree houses” and “We usually play that we are animals or play family” (interview). When the students were able to choose activities, they said they learned new things; this did not always happen in the classroom but sometimes on field trips, for example. One student said:

You experience a lot more [on a field trip], you almost have “work of choice” all the time, but you learn a lot of things, as much as you learn on a regular school day. Even though it is “free” you learn more things ... because you experience more than on a regular school day when you sit at your desk in the classroom ... . But still you don’t learn as much as when you participate, when you experience a lot of things. (interview)

Many of the students remembered situations when they had had fun in school. For example, to be able to choose activities and be active was described as having fun. Figure 3 shows when the students jumped from the school roof down into a pile of snow.

In the interview, the student explained the drawing:

- S: I draw a picture on when we jumped from a little roof, maybe 1 1/2 meter high ... It was fun and deep snow.  
 R: How did you land?  
 S: On my feet ...  
 R: Why do you think this was a meaningful event?  
 S: You don’t do it so often. And it was also fun.

When asked, the students reflected on the word “fun.” One student said: “Stuff that is fun you remember and save ... the brain sorts through things and keep the things that are meaningful” (interview). Another student said: “You just want to do it over and over again. If you think that a play is really fun, then you can do that for hours because it is so fun” (interview).

In summary, the meaningful situations that the students brought up relating to this theme stress the importance of being able to be free and participate; choose what activities to do in school, and when it is fun, the situation will enhance motivation and learning.



**Figure 3.** A student illustrated jumping from the school roof into a pile of snow.

### **Experiencing Caring and Sharing**

The third theme highlights the caring and sharing aspects of the meaningful situations that the students described. The students found it important to be together playing and learning in groups. Good relationships with peers and grown-ups were part of what made a situation meaningful (Figure 4).

One student exemplified a situation where they received help from one of their peers: “We went too far with a tube and so we yelled for help, because we could not turn around and then somebody came” (interview). The group who made a role-play about an outing described a meaningful situation where they experienced feelings of caring and sharing when some of the students had not brought a packed lunch. Then, one of the classmates shared their packed lunch with the other student who had forgotten to bring their lunch (field notes). Another example of caring and sharing is also from a role-play, where two students enacted the situation of drawing Mona Lisa in the arts classroom (field notes and Figure 2). In the scene, two students were sitting together at the same desk drawing when one of them asked the other if he could borrow a pen from her; she gave him the pen so he could continue the drawing.

The students explained how the inclusion and engagement of everybody in the class was essential for the activity to be experienced as meaningful. The students described this aspect of togetherness when explaining how they were working on a project about the *Titanic* and its history. One group explained why this project was meaningful: “The whole class participated in the work” (PowerPoint presentation). Other situations when peers behaved in a caring way was described by this student,



**Figure 4.** To be good friends represents a meaningful situation.



**Figure 5.** One of the classmate's parents is riding the boat.

“When you are going out [for recess], you must have a watch on ... and if someone does not have a watch you must be close so you can yell to each other” (interview).

According to the students, having a caring grown-up close by to set up ground rules and help to guide students constituted a number of meaningful situations. They described a visit by a police officer who gave information, and a parent who lent a helping hand by giving students a ride in his boat on a school outing (Figure 5).

In summary, the meaningful situations in school relating to this theme elucidate the importance of caring and sharing in relationships to peers, adults in school, and other significant adults. They described that reciprocal relationships where they experienced the feeling of togetherness was essential.

### ***Recognizing One's Own Growth and Achievement***

The fourth theme relates to meaningful situations where the students are growing personally and mentally as well as achieving new goals through hard work: being the best a person can be. The students described meaningful experiences such as scoring a goal on the soccer field during recess (Figure 6), finishing the math book, learning to swim backstroke, and winning a competition in school.

This drawing was discussed during the individual interview:

Researcher: How did you feel then?

Student: Happy.

R: Mm. Why do you think you remember this event so clearly?

S: ... I think it was my first goal. (individual interview)

Other meaningful situations entailed valuing hardships and turning a negative or problematic situation into something positive. Students' own efforts paid off in these situations through striving forward despite experiencing some difficulties and not giving up. One student said:



**Figure 6.** Scoring a goal on the soccer field during recess.

- S: When I finished the math book.  
 R: What happened?  
 S: It turned out that I had done some mistakes and so I corrected them and then I had I finished the math book. Then I was happy of course, because I finally got the red book [a more advanced book].  
 R: You could move on to a new math book so to speak?  
 S: Yes.  
 R: How does it feel when you succeed with something?  
 S: It feels like the hard times are over. (individual interview)

As shown before, a student drew a situation during an arts lesson where she depicted herself making a drawing of the famous painting *Mona Lisa* (Figure 2). Besides the connection to history, the situation as explained by the student entailed aspects of growth and achievement. In the interview, she commented on the drawing:

- R: What was your feeling when you drew the picture?  
 S: I don't know, I like to draw, a lot, and making drawings of real things, I like that.  
 R: Mm. Was it easy or difficult?  
 S: It felt difficult. I wanted it to be perfect.  
 R: ... What do you think you learned through working with the drawing [of *Mona Lisa*]?  
 S: That everything cannot be perfect immediately ... I had to erase many times ...  
 R: When you were done with *Mona Lisa*, were you pleased or?  
 S: First when I drew the face, I tried to draw it the most careful [as I could], but it got ugly I thought at first, but when I looked at it many times, it got a little better, but it still was a bit awkward.

In summary, the aspects of their schooling that the students brought up relating to this theme highlight that meaningful situations help them grow and achieve new knowledge. Students grew when they had to make an effort to achieve something, be it in the school during class or in recess. In other words, students displayed increased confidence and self-efficacy when they achieved something, which fostered positive feelings.

## Discussion

Previous research on meaningful situations in healthcare and schools is signified by, for example, sharing, togetherness, common responsibility, safety, warmth, thoughtfulness, nurturing communication, joy and laughter (Gustafsson et al., 2012) and friendship, social networks, and playing and working together (Hemming, 2011). A meaningful encounter can lead to life-changing moments and insights (Snellman et al., 2012).

In line with the abovementioned research, the students in this study explained that meaningful situations included being cared for by others, classmates, and/or teachers or other adults. These experiences had a positive impact on their wellbeing, as they described feelings of happiness and fulfillment. Students' experiences point to the fun aspect of meaningful situations as this was included in several of the themes. In line with Seligman's (1990) body of research on positive psychology, students perceive joyful and pleasurable situations as meaningful. Seligman, Ernst, and Gillam (2009) argue that the synergy between learning and positive emotion is well known and that the skills for happiness should be taught in school.

The meaningful situations were situated within respectful relationships, creating engagement for learning (c.f. Bragg, 2007; Rudduck, 2007). Gustafsson et al. (2012) described caring with words like togetherness, safety, and warmth, while Hemming's (2011) description of friendship and social networks in meaningful situations can be expressions for caring. Similarly, the students described reciprocal relationships with feelings of togetherness in which a dimension of protection was noted.

The children's experiences of being cared for by other human beings who are in a position of power was not described by adults (Gustafsson et al., 2012). The meaningful experiences described by the students included situations with caring adults, for example, a grown-up setting up ground rules to help guide and protect the students or giving safety information, in other words, *power used in a caring way*. According to Morrow and Richards (1996), there is a power imbalance in any adult-child relationship as the child is disadvantaged in terms of age and social status. This results in vulnerability that raises the need for protection by adults, which in turn increases children's helplessness and lowers them to a position of lesser power. However, the students in this study described meaningful situations where they felt that being protected was an act of caring. They described their experiences of meaningful situations with caregivers' concerning for, feeling interested in, providing for, or looking after them, which Westin and Danielson's (2006, 2007) define as caring encounters. In other words, contrary to Westin and Danielson's division of meaningful and caring encounters, the results of this study show how situations can be meaningful, caring, and even protective at the same time.

As noted earlier, there may be some issues of comparing meaningful situations in healthcare settings and educational settings, since teachers have a pronounced mission to facilitate learning while healthcare staff focus on caring because the main issue is aiding a healing process from disease to better health. Therefore, it may be seen as something natural that the students highlight learning and the patients emphasize health. However, interesting to note is that the students also illustrate wellbeing aspects, which are connected to their own experiences of health in school. Differences to previous research can be found in the students' emphasis on the learning aspect of meaningful situations, not only the wellbeing aspects, which were particularly present in meaningful encounters described in healthcare settings. Learning new things or achieving a deeper understanding is perceived as something meaningful. The students' experiences of meaningful situations are closely connected to their personal development but also to their academic achievement and engagement in and commitment to learning (Rudduck, 2007). In the students' learning processes, the psychosocial environment (encounters with people in social networks) was emphasized, but interacting with the physical environment (material and space) also enhanced their learning.

Other differences to meaningful experiences that adults elucidated in healthcare settings were that the students in our study did not describe life-changing encounters that led to turning points in life, instead they entailed elements of small turning points. The students valued hardships, meaning that

negative experiences could turn into something positive. The difficulties could relate to problems with math or being physically challenged when cross-country skiing. The students explained that the turning points, when something negative became a positive and meaningful experience, were rewarding and made them feel proud. This means that while the life-changing characteristics of meaningful encounters can be viewed differently by adults and children, they are nevertheless equally important for the development of the individual. It is also important to stress that the students illustrated that meaningful experiences do not have to be an encounter per se, but a meaningful situation in general.

As the research field on meaningful situations in schools needs further exploration, we turned to nearby research concepts of favorable conditions for learning and positive experiences in schools. While these are not entirely the same, we regard these areas connected. However, the results in our study show that meaningful situations do not have to be positive; they can also be negative experiences that turned into something meaningful.

The findings from this study confirm those of previous studies (e.g., Backman et al., 2012a, 2012b; Bergmark & Kostenius, 2011, 2012; Hopkins, 2010; Rudduck, 2007; Wilson & Corbett, 2007). The students emphasized the connection between learning and wellbeing and the relational aspects of learning processes. Good relationships with teachers and students facilitated the motivation and ability to learn in school. The knowledge acquired could relate to academic skills as well as practical life skills.

We also noted some differences to the previous literature on favorable conditions and positive experiences, namely that the students in our study did not highlight the impact of the teacher, which is stressed in previous research (cf. Cook-Sather, 2009b; Hopkins, 2010; Wilson & Corbett, 2007). Explanations to this omission can relate to the age of the students; they might not be able to understand and express the impact that teachers have on student learning, or perhaps the students are so familiar with the teacher's importance in the classroom that its significance is taken for granted.

## Implications for Practice

The description of meaningful situations that emerged in this study can inform professionals and students in their improvement work in schools. As stated in the beginning of the paper, there seems to be a focus on measurement and quantitative data in schools, and qualitative data from within schools need to be emphasized (Hargreaves, 2009). Our research is an example of how analysis of student-generated qualitative data can complement other data in schools (based on large-scale investigations) and hence indicate points of improvement.

The particular lesson learned in this case is the benefit of inviting students to reflect on situations they value based on a strengths-based stance as opposed to a deficiency-based point of view. As Bruner (1990) notes, narration can be a tool for self-reflection. When working with the students, we initially found that they had difficulties expressing themselves about meaningful experiences and what they perceived they learned from these situations. The use of different methods (i.e., drawings, multimodal productions, and interviews) for describing and reflecting on meaningful experiences contributed to the students' abilities to explain what a meaningful situation meant to them. The time span was also a critical aspect. As the process lasted for more than a year, the students were reminded of meaningful situations regularly, enabling them to add new aspects of meaningful experiences and deepen their understanding of them. In this way, students could make their experiences explicit and bring them to a level of awareness that made it possible for them to communicate these experiences to others.

Elucidating and discussing qualitative data from students is not solely a means in improvement work in schools as discussed above; it also has an intrinsic value for students (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009). The ability for self-reflection early in life has connections to health literacy that refers to the capacity to make sound health decisions in the context of everyday life (Kickbusch, 2008). In

addition, this can impact the ability to learn new knowledge, as health and learning are closely related (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Rothon et al., 2009).

The students found it initially difficult to express meaningful situations; this indicates the need for working with such experiences on a larger scale in schools. We suggest that students be given opportunities to bring forward, describe, and analyze meaningful situations as well as positive school experiences. Inviting students to identify and discuss what is meaningful to them can be seen as necessary, not just beneficial, because it integrates into their education, and teachers' practice, a deeper understanding of what and how they learn. Without that understanding, teachers' efforts to structure meaningful learning opportunities in school may not be adapted to students' experiences. The results of this study encourage students and teachers to both elucidate existing meaningful experiences as well as create additional ones to promote learning and wellbeing. Just remember the student quote: "Stuff that is fun you remember and save ... the brain sorts through things and keep the things that are meaningful."

## Acknowledgements

The study was supported financially from the EU structural fund project, Arctic Children InNet – Empowering School eHealth Model.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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