

School experiences that make an impression

- a study on how to promote Bildung and the desire to learn

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates, through focus groups, how students in upper secondary school in Norway experience schooling. The background for the study is a tension between measurable outcomes and the educational aim of supporting students' human growth, their *Bildung*. As teacher educators, we wanted to learn about situations that made an impression on students and thereby might promote Bildung and the desire to learn. Findings show that what made an impression was primarily related to teachers, fellow students, school atmosphere, and to aesthetic experiences and variations. Students emphasise teachers' attitudes, interpersonal skills and ability to vary their teaching. Teachers

content knowledge was taken for granted. Based on the findings, we suggest implications for how to educate teachers, for teachers working conditions and for cooperation in schools. In order to promote students' Bildung, also teachers' human development needs to be put on the agenda.

Keywords: Students' school experiences, upper secondary school, Bildung, measurable outcomes

Introduction

Schools are today expected to meet the requirements of a knowledge-based global economy, where economic growth seems to be a driving force (Ball, 2012). There is a focus on measurable outcomes which can be associated with a global trend of marketisation of education (Biesta, 2017; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). However, while policy documents seem concerned about students' learning outcomes and what are expected to be the important skills needed in the future, the so-called 21st century skills (MER, 2015; OECD, 2012), some researchers find that human development, as well as critical thinking and imagination, are neglected (Eisner, 2002; Nussbaum, 2009). The aim of education is not only to help young people to perform well in school; schools are also places to live together with others and mediums for growth (Eisner, 2002). What should be important is not only what people know, but also who they are and how they will use their knowledge. These aspects are covered by the concept *Bildung*¹ (Hopmann, 2007; Klafki, 2001).

As teacher educators visiting student teachers in their practicum in upper secondary school in Norway, we have noticed an increased emphasis on measurable outcomes and the cognitive dimension of learning. The teaching is often focused on facts and does not appear as something that might generate interest and the desire to learn. This impression made us ask if education as human development or *Bildung* (*danning* in Norwegian) is at risk. Furthermore, emphasis on achievement might put pressure on students and negatively affect their well-being by giving an impression that their value depends on their performance (Skaalvik & Federici, 2015). Even if international reports tell that most secondary school students are happy with life, schoolwork anxiety are an issue (OECD, 2017). In Norway, reports show that young people are well adapted, but worried (Bakken, 2016; Sletten & Bakken, 2016). More

¹ The concept is difficult to translate into English, and we have therefore chosen to use the German word 'Bildung', which is sometimes also used in English (e.g. Hopmann, 2007).

students than before find school boring and dread school (Bakken, 2018). However, while large-scale research points to general tendencies, a Finnish study underlines that adolescents are not a uniform group when it comes to school engagement and well-being. Some value school, others become exhausted even if they are engaged, and some do well even if they are not interested (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Consequently, the current study, through focus groups, aims to get a deeper and more contextualised picture of students' experiences of schooling. Especially, we wanted to learn about experiences that might promote *Bildung* and the desire to learn, qualities that Norwegian schools are required by law to promote (Education Act, 2014, § 1).

The research question is: *What school experiences seem to promote Bildung and the desire to learn?*

In the following, we first introduce our theoretical framework, then we present and discuss the current study before finally suggesting some implications of the findings.

Theoretical framework

In contrast to an approach where targets are set in advance and predestined knowledge is transmitted, *Bildung* is about growing as a human being. "If we are always aiming at pre-specified ends then we can never grow", Mckernan (2010, p. 8) states. He describes education as an induction into the knowledge of a culture. However, it is not possible to predict students' outcomes of this induction. On a personal level, formal education is something a person *has*. *Bildung*, however, is about *who people are*, and influences how they use the education they have received (Hellesnes, 1992). Through the content, teachers are also supposed to support pupils' social and moral development. However, how people use their education cannot be forced upon them and can only become visible in the future. Therefore, *Bildung* cannot be measured or reduced to a certain form of mastering.

Bildung has been a central part of Nordic educational politics, and in Norway it still is (Education Act, 2014, §1). Bildung can be seen as a process, as the forming of an individual's abilities and talents, and, as a result, an ideal. It is an interaction between the individual and the culture the individual is a part of (Klafki, 2001); between what one understands and the frames of reference the understanding is based on (Hellesnes, 1992). Without this interaction among perspectives, a certain way of understanding might be established as "the right one".

In-depth understanding is a prerequisite for true Bildung. The students need to grip and be gripped by a content that is conceived as meaningful (Klafki, 2001). This dialectic process, where teaching opens the world for the student and the student for the world, is what Bildung is about (Hopmann, 2007; Willbergh, 2015). Furthermore, Bildung has to do with becoming part of a culture, but also to criticise and move beyond it and be able to act independently (Hellesnes, 1992; Klafki, 2001; Løvlie, 2003).

Interest and meaningfulness might lead to the in-depth understanding that fosters Bildung. To make an impression and make students interested can be accomplished when education catches their feelings and is characterised by amazement, creativity and imagination (Næss, 2010). However, management by objectives might underestimate the role interest and feelings have for learning. Following Illeris (2015), there are three dimensions in all learning: a cognitive, a social and an emotional. They are all important for what he refers to as transformative learning, learning that changes people. Van Manen (1993) describes interest as a precondition for learning. Being interested is to be intensively present for something or someone, to be able to concentrate and be attentive. It happens when something comes across as meaningful for the individual. The desire to learn can be understood as a deep interest based on meaning more than that something is entertaining. Consequently, the in-depth engagement, that includes all dimensions of learning, constitutes a connection between interest and Bildung.

A variety of dimensions should be included in an education aiming to promote Bildung. Klafki (2001) refers to Pestalozzi and his idea about learning by head, hand and heart (through the intellectual, the practical and emotional), in other words learning as whole human beings. The variety of dimensions that appealed to different senses was something we missed in today's classrooms. There are different forms of knowledge, and the forms are represented in different ways. Eisner states: “- to use new tools and new forms of representation enables us to look for different things and to ask new questions” (Eisner, 2002, p. 380). This wider perspective might prepare the way for alternative understandings. Representations that appeal to the senses, and to the feelings, can be categorised as aesthetic (Ulvik, 2013). Aesthetics, from Greek *aisthētikos*, is that which pertains to the senses. Some describe aesthetic experiences as precognitive (Østergaard, 2013). The aesthetic understanding gives access to dimensions that are outside the domain of logic and expresses what is indescribable (Austring & Sørensen, 2006). Aesthetic expressions are communicated through symbolic forms like music, images, theatre and poetic language, expressions that represent an interpretation of the world and affect feelings. Symbolic forms do not express fixed answers and facts and might in that way support students' Bildung.

Biesta (2013) points to three functions of education: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Qualification has to do with equipping people with knowledge, skills and dispositions they need in today's society. However, it is impossible to predict what will be useful in the future, and programmes where the meaning of a matter is fixed are not open for students' interpretation. A matter can always have different meanings (Hopmann, 2007). Socialisation, Biesta's second function, is about inserting each individual to exist in social, cultural and political orders. One becomes part of existing ways of doing and being. However, Hellesnes (1992) seems to assume a broader understanding of socialisation and claims that it can take place in two ways, either as adaption or as Bildung. Going the first way, one accepts

society's framework and does not question it. Going the second, one examines this framework critically and develop one's own insight. Socialisation in that respect seems to overlap with Biesta's third function, subjectification. Whilst socialisation according to Biesta (2013) is to be included in a society, subjectification adds to the existing order. It has to do with human freedom and the responsibility that follows. The way we understand Bildung, both qualification, socialisation and subjectification are part of it. We build on Klafki (2001) who sees Bildung as a dialectic process between the subjective and the objective in the teaching. The process opens doors to the world as well as roots students in the culture, not only to fit into it, but enables them to criticise and think independently.

The school's functions need to be balanced (Biesta, 2013; Eisner, 1985). However, highlighting one function can happen at the expense of the others. The emphasis on achievement that we see today might thereby negatively impact other dimensions – or, as we see it, the Bildung. A one-sided cognitive approach to teaching is deficient. Hopmann (2007) points to how tests that reduce subject matters to fixed answers can neglect non-cognitive solutions. However, one cannot force people to be affected by or interested in education; rather, one can make space, create forms and give time for young people to meet the world, to encounter resistance and to meet their own desires in relation to others (Biesta, 2017). This kind of education is characterised by slowing down, giving time, and providing forms where young people can meet themselves and the world. In that case, one cannot introduce too many topics; one has to select (Klafki, 2001). However, even if these conditions are present, there is no guarantee for success. Human beings are not objects (Buber, 1992). They have their own will that needs to be taken into consideration, which means that education is always a risky undertaking (Bollnow, 1969).

The study

The context

Before presenting the study, we will briefly explain the Norwegian context. Education in the Nordic countries, including Norway, has been characterised by a strong emphasis on welfare and social equality. During the last decades, however, there has been a growing influence of neoliberal ideas with an emphasis on academic performance (Lundahl, 2016). In Norway, these neoliberal discourses seem intertwined with more traditional values related to social-democratic progressivism and *Bildung* (Hilt, Riese, & Søreide, 2019).

The latest Norwegian reform, the Knowledge Promotion from 2006, introduced management by objectives supposed to meet the requirements of a knowledge-based global economy. However, compared to the other Nordic countries, except Finland, there has been little privatisation of education and few possibilities for profit making for schools. Norway has furthermore retained the idea of school as a meeting place for the whole nation (Lundahl, 2016). Even if marketisation of education in Norway has been modest, the PISA results still led to many reforms enacted to improve learning outcomes. One strategy is increased competition between schools, resulting in public ranking lists and an increased demand for school choice in urban parts of the country (Dovemark et al., 2018).

School choice and competition especially come to the fore in upper secondary school, which was a reason for conducting our study there. The tension between *Bildung* and management by objectives might be pushed to extremes at this level.

Even if the Norwegian comprehensive school system is a 10-year system, most young people attend upper secondary, level 11–13 (age 16–19), a school system with two main programmes: vocational and academic. Each of the programmes offers different choices and are offered in the same schools. The Norwegian school system, furthermore, aims to offer a

general education for all students, which means that the programmes have many core subjects in common.

The study is part of a wider study that involves six researchers and includes perspectives from students, student teachers, teachers and school leaders. For the purpose of this study, three of the researchers and authors of the article investigated *students'* school experiences.

Sample

The sample in the study represented different programmes (vocational and academic), genders and levels (11, 12 and 13), and consisted of 14 focus groups with 5–7 students in each group, 84 students in all. The students were selected by purpose in order to acquire information from some who were willing to share their thoughts about the topic of interest. We contacted teachers we already cooperated with, in six different upper secondary schools in three municipalities, and asked for groups of students. The schools had different locations and sizes and offered different programmes (see table 1). When conducting focus groups, it is recommended to bring together people with shared experiences, but also to include some differences (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001). We therefore wanted a mix of students in each group, but also wanted the students in each group to come from the same class; it might be easier to exchange ideas in naturally-occurring groups where people are likely to talk more freely than in groups that do not know each other (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001). We got self-selected groups from all the six schools, and from 13 different classes. We included all students that volunteered to participate. They were not a representative group, but a varied group with different voices. Other students or teachers might have brought up different stories. Most groups had a balanced mixture of girls and boys. One group included only girls, and three had a majority of boys. We experienced the students as surprisingly talkative, some more than others, but no groups were dominated by one or two students.

Insert table about here.

The students were informed about the project both orally and in writing. They signed an agreement saying that they gave their informed consent to participate and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were also assured anonymity, which was important because some of the students were worried that their teachers might come to know what they told us. A reason for this concern was that even though we asked for positive experiences, the students also gave examples of the opposite. In order to protect the participants' and their teachers' anonymity, we have not provided detailed information about the students.

Method

Focus groups, is especially suited to examine experiences, attitudes and beliefs (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001). Diverse points of view may yield more than the sum of the individual points of view. Meaning is created collectively, and the aim is to identify points of view and get insights into how people experience a situation – here students' experiences in upper secondary school. To get a varied picture as well as access to specific experiences, we wanted demographic diversity and therefore included a rather large number of students and a variation of schools and specialised courses within the main programmes.

The expanded research group developed the themes we wanted the students to discuss, and we piloted a focus group conversation before we separately conducted focus groups with students in the schools. The schools had given us rooms where we could carry out the conversations, and each focus group was moderated by one researcher (the authors of the article moderated nine of the fourteen groups). The moderator aimed not to have a leading role, only ensured that interaction between participants was encouraged for example through eye contact or direct questions to silent students. However, the conversations were an interplay among

students and between moderator and group. We see from the transcripts that the conversations progressed differently and that some groups did stick to the themes more than others did, and as a result are more quoted.

We wanted the students to talk to each other and to tell stories from their schooling. Narratives, more than questions/answers, provide space for subjective experiences. The conversations lasted for about 45 minutes, and the students knew beforehand the themes. They were asked to describe their ideal school and to tell us about when their school lived up to this ideal. In addition, they were asked to describe situations that made them want to learn more. A challenge was to ask students about *Bildung* (danning), a notion students normally will not use. Based on the characteristics of *Bildung* presented in the article, we operationalized the concept to talk about experiences that were meaningful, made an impression on them, affected them, changed them, and that they would never forget. Finally, they were asked about opportunities for themselves and their peers to use their talents in school. The conversations were audiotaped and transcribed.

Analysis

We consider the data to be on a group level and have analysed the content, not the interaction in the groups. Consequently, we analysed what was said, not who said it (Bjørklund, 2005).

The first step in the analysis was for each researcher to write down the immediate impression from the conversations. The next step was to write down impressions formed by reading all the transcripts. This part of the analysis was done and discussed in the whole research group. Thereafter, each author of this article made a preliminary and data-driven thematic content analysis of the transcripts, in light of the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were further developed in a moderation process alternating, in a hermeneutic movement, between the parts and the whole (Gadamer, 2004), between working individually

and as a collective. Our approach can be characterised as *interpretive*, described as involving the researchers' best effort to make sense of the data (Hatch, 2002). It is an artistic and creative way of working with data that takes into consideration that there can be alternative interpretations. We therefore aimed to ground the interpretations in the data and to conduct the analysis in a moderation process among ourselves. What we present as findings is what came up in our process.

What made an impression on students and made them want to learn more can be divided into three main categories: (i) teachers, (ii) fellow students and the school atmosphere, and (iii) aesthetic experiences and variations. When it comes to teachers, students emphasised their commitment and ability to see each student. Their fellow students for their part, made it worthwhile to go to school. Students emphasised to be in classes based on interests, like sport, music and different vocational courses. Furthermore, they enjoyed cooperation and common experiences. They also found the atmosphere in the school important, what some mentioned as the school spirit. Their stories about teaching that makes an impression were often connected to variations and what we have chosen to call aesthetic experiences – experiences that appeal to multiple senses and touch students' feelings.

Findings

In the following, we elaborate the three main categories. We will emphasise that they are interconnected and overlapping. Quotes are chosen to provide the reader with students' voices and to illustrate the main categories. We have indicated by numbers which of the 14 groups the quotes come from.

Teachers

We found that teachers' commitment related to the subject they teach has a great influence on students' desire to learn. "An engaged teacher is so important" (4) and teachers "have to be engaged in what they teach" (1), are examples of statements that we find in all the conversations when we asked about what had made an impression on the students. Engaged teachers are able to make most things interesting:

Engaged teachers are great. I've had some of those over the years. Even if they talk about something boring and heavy, they are so engaged that you look forward to listening to them.
(12)

If students like the teacher, they tend to like the subject. Furthermore, engaged teachers are able to vary their teaching:

They need to vary their teaching. We spend thirteen years in school, and it's always the same. You read something, you do some tasks, and then you are tested. Once they do something different it becomes much more interesting and engaging. (3)

Students do not want teaching that is predictable.

Furthermore, teachers who have an impact, have something to offer beyond the subject; they seem to have a mission, as the following example illustrates: "Instead of only being a teacher who teaches [...] she wants to shed light on something that means something to her" (7). In that way, the teacher might provide alternative understandings that can challenge students' preconceptions.

However, a good teacher also combines engagement in a subject with engagement in their students. "A close relationship to teachers is very important," (8) one of the students says. It means that "teachers care about our wellbeing, they care about what we think" (3). Teachers

who treat students as subjects are able to relate the subject matter to something that is interesting and meaningful to the students.

Even if students value teachers who care, they also want demands: “It is easier to pay attention and to learn when the teachers expect something from you” (12), one of the students says. Teachers who care, are in a position to demand and challenge.

Fellow students and school atmosphere

While school outcomes and results are often connected to academic achievement, students underline the social value of schools. The social is a reason for showing up to school, and through school, students become socialised into society and learn to interact with other people.

A social fellowship with classmates and a robust sense of unity in the class are valuable in themselves. One student explains:

School is important for our social life. Without school we would spend more time alone, we wouldn't meet people. OK, we are here to learn, but social life makes you come here not just to learn about Ibsen, but to be with others. (3)

Another says:

You learn how to act differently in different situations, to be social. I think that's one of the most important aspects of school, how to be a part of society (14).

A well-functioning community is associated with improved conditions for participation, for an interplay between the individual and the content – and thereby crucial for Bildung. A student says that “if you feel safe in your class, then you might dare to raise your hand and ask questions” (2).

The atmosphere in the class is also important when it comes to engagement for school:

If you feel well in class, you become more engaged and motivated. (3)

If you see that your friends are making an effort, you become inspired. You think that you should pull yourself together and do something. (3)

Students are not isolated individuals, but part of a community that has an impact on their education.

Furthermore, the physical environment matters. However, students' ideas of the *ideal school* are modest, and an important thing seems to be comfortable chairs. They spend most of their day on a chair, and they express the need for breaks, to move their bodies and to go outside. They link these ideas to a sense of freedom, getting more energy, and to being more motivated throughout the day. Learning as whole human beings seems to have limited conditions.

Among the rather modest wishes from the students, we find access to games and activities and places to gather: "It might sound funny and childish, but everyone can find joy in a break during which you can just exist, and nothing else" (10). Students are not only on their way to a future; they have a life here and now. What surprised us was how important it was getting to know students from other programmes, classes and grades. A ping-pong-table might actually make a difference: "It was great fun, and I wanted to play every break. People joined just to watch" (10). The students link social activities to motivation, relationships and a general sense of belonging.

The students want to expand their horizons and to learn to know new people and to be part of an inclusive environment. They enjoy school gatherings when all the students are together and do something in common. They mention a school assembly hall, where students can gather to sing and play concerts. A good atmosphere influences their outcomes but is also important

when it comes to their inner lives. Obviously, school is for the students a place to live together with others, to be included and part of “us”.

Aesthetic experiences and variations

Situations that left an impression on students and promoted interest and in-depth learning often appealed to multiple senses:

The teacher had been to India, so she brought some Indian tea and a sort of costume, and we saw a film, drank tea and enjoyed ourselves. Then I wanted to learn more about India. (2)

The teaching described above is an example of teaching with an aesthetic quality (Østergaard, 2013). Through taste and visual expressions, the students are inspired to learn, and they learn more than facts. They get a sense of India.

Through symbolic forms like films and other visual impressions, music and narratives, students experience expressions that make impressions as illustrated below:

We saw a film about taking care of the environment and about sustainability. [...] I do not eat red meat anymore, so the film actually changed me. (2)

Sometimes our Spanish teacher plays a song we are supposed to translate or understand the meaning of. Then we learn through music. It's great fun. (14)

Instead of learning about all the grammatical rules, she *told* us about German culture, how it is, what they eat. (5)

Learning outcome from using symbolic forms cannot be planned beforehand, and different students will respond differently, either if it is to change a way of living or to be inspired to learn more.

In addition, teachers' charisma and commitment and their lessons' dramaturgy might involve an aesthetic element. In one of the focus groups, students tell about the philosophy teacher who ends all his lessons in the following way:

We have to stand up, put our hand on our hearts and then he says: 'Why do we have to learn history and philosophy?' And we have to answer in chorus: 'Because we are going to be better human beings'. The funny thing is that even if he does all these strange things and interrupts his lessons, it is in his lessons we learn the most. (1)

In a playful way, the teacher tries to say something about the relevance of his teaching. The purpose is not only about learning facts; it is about developing as a human being – which is what Bildung is about.

Even if students emphasise what stands out, they neither need great excursions nor spectacular lessons to enjoy teaching. A field trip outside the school building and an experiment in science are examples that are mentioned. Sometimes the variations have an aesthetic dimension, but also empirical variations are appreciated:

We got another understanding of fish when we saw the fish in real life. (3)

It becomes more interesting when it is not only something on a screen. (9)

Real experiences make teaching less abstract and easier to understand and thereby more interesting.

Teaching that appeals to senses and includes a social dimension is often mentioned as something from which students learn a lot. Situations where the cognitive, social and emotional interact give opportunities for learning that goes beyond fixed facts. Expressions that made impressions sometimes changed students as human beings, their actions, interests or meanings – like the student who did not eat red meat anymore. Aesthetic expressions offer varied and individual interpretations and support subjectification.

In the situations described above, the students appear as consumers of aesthetic experiences. One of the questions we wanted students to talk about was opportunities for using their talents at school and to express themselves and follow their own interests. The students who have chosen a vocational programme, or academic programmes that include their interest or talent, like music or art, respond mainly positively, although some of them are disappointed with their programme and feel that they are given few opportunities to be creative. Most of the students in the academic programme claim that the school does not value their interests or talents. One student, however, states that school is different from leisure time, and that the focus *should* be different, with the main purpose being to learn something new. Learning something new might call attention to something the student is not aware of beforehand and provoke curiosity and challenge preconceptions.

When it comes to possibilities for expressing themselves, the students talk about few variations and possibilities for choosing. When a teacher opens up for other forms, it is well received:

It's often very *square*, the task is 'make a PowerPoint that lasts so and so.' Some teachers sometimes ask us to make a video, and that gives motivation. (13)

The students explain the lack of variation with assessment, and that alternative forms might be difficult to compare and grade. Nevertheless, they wish for more opportunities to choose:

It would have been good fun to make a film! A short film that you can present for the rest of the class. On pollution, for instance. We could walk around, film different places, like the media does! Our creativity would have blossomed! (2)

When students are given opportunities to express themselves in a different manner than they usually do, the experience can be of great value. At the same time, the students are aware of an *overload* of both subjects and curriculum in upper secondary school. The space for in-

depth learning is sparse. When talking about the “ideal school”, some students nevertheless express a wish for more creative subjects, like music, dance and fine arts. One student brings this reflection to a higher societal level:

I think society is almost a bit afraid to include subjects like that. They are concerned about the next generation getting enough knowledge, but creative subjects are important! A lot of good thought can come out of it, and you can use your creativity. It's transferrable to other, more fact-based subjects. (12)

Even if the last quote is critical towards the system, most students in our sample seem to accept school as it is and only ask for adjustments. In that way, their socialisation is more like adaption than Bildung (Hellesnes, 1992).

Discussion

Initially, we had an impression that the cognitive dimension of learning was increasingly influential in schools. With our somewhat critical point of departure, we wanted to learn more about how students experience school, especially about experiences that seem to promote Bildung and the desire to learn – something we thought might be put at risk in today's school.

What makes an impression and students find interesting and meaningful might create conditions for in-depth understanding, something Klafki sees as a prerequisite for Bildung (Klafki, 2001). However, Bildung cannot be forced upon people, and existential meetings that challenge students' preconceptions cannot be planned for (Bollnow, 1969). Teachers who know both their subject and their students well, can prepare for meetings to happen, but not predetermine the outcome of them.

First and foremost, *teachers* play a critical role in how students perceive school. The stories about experiences that make an impression are about who teachers are, what they do and ask students to do, and how teachers together are able to create an inclusive environment in the

school. More than teachers content knowledge, it is the teachers' attitudes, interpersonal skills and how they use their knowledge that count. These are qualities that are not innate but are developed in interaction between the individual teacher and the culture, pre and in service, and can be connected to teachers' Bildung. However, teachers are part of a system, and to promote in-depth learning and Bildung, teachers need working conditions that support their efforts and that give their students time to get interested. In the larger study this study is a part of, the teachers support the students' points of view. They underline, however, the time and assessment pressure that challenge their wish to prepare lessons that make an impression on students (Ulvik, 2020).

Teachers' subject knowledge is currently emphasised in Norway. It is underlined in policy documents, and also by the fact that all teacher education today requires a master's degree (MER, 2017). It seems to be taken for granted among students in upper secondary school that teachers know their subject, but varied teaching and engaged teachers are underlined as important and sometimes missed. Eisner (2002) states that "[...] it is from surprise that we are most likely to learn something" (p.8), and Næss (2010) underlines the significance of feelings and imagination when it comes to nurturing a desire to learn. Likewise, the students value teaching that is not always predictable, and they underline the importance of teachers' commitment and ability to catch students' interest through varied forms of representation. Van Manen (1993) points to lack of interest in schools, especially among the oldest students. Without interest, what happens in school is more like a play – not anything that will have a lasting significance. From what the students say – and supported by research – some teachers seem to use their professional space or their agency to act more independently than their colleagues (Oolbakkink-Marchand, Hadar, Smith, Helleve, & Ulvik, 2017). These teachers are able to make a positive impact by creating meetings among students, teacher and content.

The teachers add something new to the scene, but also offer a space for students to make their own interpretations, a space for subjectification.

A positive relationship and the ability to see something from the students' perspective seem crucial for promoting meaningful experiences (Noddings, 2012). Through their communication with students, teachers can either build up or tear down (Løgstrup, 1969). Teachers therefore need to be conscious of their power and act for the best of the students (van Manen, 1993). This requires pedagogical tact and is part of teachers' artistry (van Manen, 1993). Based on experiences and professional decisions, teachers who see students as subjects, might be able to relate the subject matter to something meaningful for their students (Willbergh, 2015). Students are recognised as subjects (Buber, 1992). They feel related to the teacher, the class and the school, and are allowed to make knowledge their own – a prerequisite for Bildung. The teachers who promoted a desire for learning in our study were able to make students feel like unique individuals.

The relationship between teachers and students is crucial when it comes to students' learning (Hattie, 2009). However, we find that the students are not primarily occupied with what the relationship means for their learning, but for their being or existence. Therefore, it is important that the relationship is not limited to being a tool for effective learning, but that it is in itself a purpose. Schools are not only a place to achieve what is measurable, but also a place to live together with other people.

It is not only relationships between teachers and students that are important. *Interactions* with fellow students are crucial when it comes to students' good and lasting experiences at school and for becoming part of a society. The inner part of a human being, the core, called the self or the existence, will never step forward in loneliness. Only in meetings with others can human beings find their selves (Bollnow, 1969). An important part of Bildung is about socialisation, not only to fit into the society as it is, but to be able to criticise and bring it

forward. Based on our study, we cannot claim that students' experiences with interaction are like existential meetings in the strict sense, where people connect in ways that create discontinuity and something completely new (Bollnow, 1969). However, we can claim that students experience being affected in a way they find crucial and that addresses them. These are experiences where students are addressed by expectations from others and invited to answer in their own unique way.

Bildung is based on this interaction between the individual and the world. Teachers who make an impression are able to create *meeting places* that are good for the individual and for the community, and where students see and interact with each other. Buber (1992) describes meetings as *grace*. They cannot be prescribed, but arise when one treats the other as a thou, and not as an object. Meetings depend on more than one part, but some teachers are able to arrange for meetings to happen. Despite a framework influenced by the logic of marketing, they teach in a way that supports people and means something in their lives, not only for further education or working life.

Through students' narratives, we caught a glimpse of teachers who use their agency to slow down and who move *beyond what is predefined*. Even if continuous acquisition is important, it is not sufficient for deep insight (Bollnow, 1969). One cannot plan for real insight, but try to pave the way for it and catch the moments that arise. If teachers only relate to prescribed plans and follow drawn up pathways, there might be no place for discontinuity and mind-changing moments. A step in the right direction could be from time to time to give room for what is not pre-planned and create possibilities to slow down, to offer room for being affected by something and to be responsive to students' voices.

The students in our study complained about too many subjects and topics in upper secondary school. To learn something in-depth, one has to choose, and Klafki (2001) claims that one should pay attention to key contemporary issues. In today's society that can be issues like

climate, migration and wars. Aesthetic impressions that involve senses and touch the feelings might create an interest and offer a qualitatively different understanding than learning facts about them, an understanding that might make students relate to what happens in the world. The aesthetic expressions have to do with how people experience, feel and perceive life and try to create an understanding of how it is to be a human being in the world (Ulvik, 2013).

Today, students are measured based on pre-defined outcomes in knowledge, skills and general competences. As a result, the space for what is not defined beforehand is reduced, and the objectives model might therefore promote copying more than innovation. If everyone is supposed to aim for the same outcome, the space for what is different and unique might be reduced. The students complained about lack of variation and possibilities for self-expression. For schools and teachers to contribute to Bildung, it is necessary to move beyond learning only as acquisition. What is interesting is not only students' achievement, but how they will use it. Then they need time and opportunities to develop.

A part of Bildung is critical thinking, a condition for innovation and change. We noticed that most students accepted the school as it is and only have minor suggestions for change – more suggestions for form than for content. In order to provide growth and equip students for an unknown future, there is also a need to encourage students' uniqueness and to put emphasis on a broader understanding of competence that includes the whole human being, not only the cognitive dimension, but also the social and emotional. One way of doing it is through aesthetic expressions that make impressions. These experiences might promote desire to learn, but also a lot more that we cannot measure and control, like students' personal Bildung.

Implications for educating and supporting teachers

When asked about what made an impression on them, students did not mention or problematize teachers' content knowledge. Content knowledge was important, but seems to

be taken for granted. What received attention was teachers' way of teaching and their ability to make their teaching meaningful, their attitude and finally, yet importantly, their ability to build relationships and to create including environments that offered safe meeting places for young people to interact with each other.

The qualities students ask for connected to *Bildung* and the desire to learn, such as engagement and variations, are qualities we assume most teachers are aware. However, even if all students had some good experiences to report, these experiences were often connected to a few individual teachers and to situations and circumstances where schools managed to create what some students mentioned as a school spirit. In order to meet students' needs, teachers have to understand what the needs are and have working conditions and collegial cooperation to support them in translating this understanding into teaching practice. For this to happen, there are implications for teacher education, for the educational system and for cooperation in schools.

What teachers need to develop beyond the content knowledge is the ability to make wise educational judgements (Biesta, 2012). Consequently, teacher education should put student teachers' *Bildung* on the agenda. Higher education, including teacher education, is, like schools, managed by objectives and affected by neoliberal principles. However, fixed learning outcomes are no guarantee for acting wisely in the future. In order to make wise educational judgements, one needs a vision or a guiding star – an image (a *Bild*) of the ideal. To have a consciousness about the purpose of education provides a horizon to test one's own perceptions (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). Consequently, teacher education should encourage student teachers to express and, together with fellow students, develop their visions. Furthermore, pre-service teachers come into teacher education with images of what it means to be a teacher, and sometimes these taken-for-granted preconceptions should be challenged (Loughran, 2014). Teacher education can provide alternative images by modelling

the teaching profession (Lunenberg, Korthagen, & Swennen, 2007). Without alternative images, it is easy to teach as one has been taught and to repeat what one already knows. Bildung depends on interaction with other human beings (Klafki, 2001). We suggest that student teachers need to be part of a community where their own horizon of understanding can be challenged by others (Gadamer, 2004), or, as in dialogism, where polyvocality creates new meaning. Teaching is a complex endeavour that goes beyond the merely technical (Loughran, 2014) and should be developed in an interplay with others.

Encountering the school system, it might be difficult for teachers to implement their ideals. The students in the current study describe a school with too many topics and subjects, something that challenge in depth learning. In order to promote Bildung and the desire to learn, the school system should reduce the time and assessment pressure, put less emphasis on predefined outcomes and include varied forms of knowledge and representations. Students need space and time to grow and to learn as whole human beings. Furthermore, they need teachers who use their agency and within certain frames are allowed to be creative and unique like some of the teachers the students told us about.

Even if students payed special attention to individual teachers, they also emphasised what teachers have to plan for and try to work on together, like a positive atmosphere in the class and possibilities for social activities and school gatherings. Subject knowledge as well as the social need to be considered. For students, school is a crucial social meeting place, a place where they spend an important part of their life and want to be included in a community.

When creating local conditions that support good school experiences, there need to be cooperation among all the involved parties in a school i.e. students, teachers and leadership.

Concluding comments

In this study, we were looking for school experiences that promoted students' Bildung and

desire to learn. These experiences seem to be the ones that appeal not only to the intellectual dimension, but also to the practical and emotional. These are experiences that make an impression on students who spend long days on a chair and who easily direct their attention towards measurable outcomes. Bildung is not only about development of the mind, but of the whole human being. Even if some individual teachers manage to engage students and make teaching meaningful for them, students point at a system with time and assessment pressure and with limited opportunities for becoming interested. We suggest reducing the pressure and to include varied representations that might give access to a broader spectrum of knowledge. Considering today's key contemporary issues, we need people who are not only clever, but who are wise and able to use their knowledge wisely.

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