

A Perfect Learning Day: Perceptions of Secondary School Students about the Ideal School

Sandra Valentim¹, Carla Freire²

ESECS - Politécnico de Leiria, Portugal¹

ESECS, CI&DEI, CICS.NOVA.IPLeiaira – iACT, Politécnico de Leiria, Portugal²

Abstract

The technological evolution of recent years has opened doors to new challenges in several fields. In Education, more than ever, it seems necessary to develop educational processes that keep the students' interest in the classroom. These students seem increasingly distant from teachers, unaware, highly motivated to use technologies and needy of active strategies that allow them to remain encouraged to learn. The present research emerged from the difficulty in feeling students engaged in classes and the need to understand the reasons of this demotivation, which leads many students to indiscipline and school failure. An opportunity arose to collaborate in a research project on pedagogical practices and innovative learning environments, the DELLI Project. This was the mobile for the elaboration of a diagnosis, whose purpose was to perceive what would be an ideal day of classes for secondary school students. The study objectives were to identify the students' perceptions regarding the idealized school and to contribute with suggestions of improvement of teaching practices, in order to identify the difficulties felt in the classroom and other areas where one can intervene improving learning. The research was based on the Qualitative Paradigm and on a descriptive study, anchored in assumptions of a Design Thinking model. The diagnosis was made at two public schools, where data was collected through a non-formal instrument, to encourage free responses appealing to critical ability to anonymously express perceptions regarding what students believe to be a perfect school day. A content analysis was performed in search for answers in the words of the participants. It was concluded that an ideal school day for these students implies the accomplishment of some changes in teaching-learning strategies. Changes related to flexibility, both in terms of timetables and classroom spaces, and especially in the way of being, in the ability of teachers' openness and accompaniment to the way in which their students are taught. We hope this study contributes to an evolution in the performance of schools and teachers, leading to an approximation of what students see as an Ideal School.

Keywords: *Students, Teachers, Pedagogical Practices, Significant Learning, Renewal, Design thinking*

1. Introduction

This study emerged from the perception of a current difficulty of teachers in keeping students motivated for learning, as these come to school with dispersed interests and motivated to use technologies. Today's students change behaviours daily, have different interests and expectations, need to feel that they are, effectively, protagonists of their learning. They are more awake to new stimuli and no longer feel motivated by classes based on traditional formats. But technology will only make sense in schools if it is adapted to classroom's reality.

Besides the importance of updating methodologies to impel new curricular approaches, there is more to do. Pedro and Matos [1] state that it is also necessary to redesign spaces in which students learn, referring to the need of developing educational designs closer to social experiences. Concerning the need to rethink learning spaces, European Schoolnet coordinated the European Classroom Lab project, launched in Brussels in 2012. These labs are inspiring learning environments aiming to challenge education stakeholders to revise the role of pedagogy, technology and design in classrooms, supporting "the dissemination and expansion of innovative and advanced pedagogical approaches with the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for teaching and learning in the Classroom of the Future environment" [2, p.2].

This project was the driving force, in Portugal and other European countries, for the appearance of Future Classrooms (FCs), real challenges for teachers and students, where instead of using pedagogy through a transmissive teaching, it's sought to promote heutagogy in spaces of interaction, project, research, generating a more reflective education. The FCs, recognized by Pedro [3] as innovative educational environments, function as learning laboratories conducive to the use of new technologies



and teaching methodologies, emerging as promoters of multiple and varied competences for the 21st century.

The interest in the development and better use of these new classrooms generated the possibility of participating in a research project belonging to Universidade Lusófona's Design Research Centre of Lisbon (DELLI) – which is developing a model of research and practice in design that intends to operate in a territory encompassing the intersection of education, research and industry. Within the DELLI framework, the purpose of the current study aims to perceive how an ideal day of classes for secondary school students would be, in order to achieve the traced targets for the research: to identify the students' perceptions regarding the idealized school and to contribute with suggestions of improvement for teaching practices, in order to identify the difficulties felt in the classroom and other areas where one can intervene to improve learning.

2. Research scope and method

2.1 Participants

Participants were defined by the DELLI Project team considering some characteristics that were imposed, such as geographical convenience, having one or more FCs.

The diagnosis was made with students from two secondary schools in distinct areas of Portugal: Alcanena and Aveiro. From Alcanena, a group of seventeen 10th grade vocational education students, male and female, and six 12th grade regular education male students were selected by the School Board. In Aveiro, also selected by the Board, thirty 10th grade regular education male and female students, participated in the study.

2.2 Procedures

Teaching experience and the contact with Design Thinking (DT) model were the grounds for this investigation. The influence of DT model instigated a constant questioning about how to understand Teaching, having led to considerations on the necessity to rethink the role of the teacher. This role, which resembles that of the designer, should cause the teacher to question what he does and how he does it daily, daring to redo, to experiment, to innovate, always with the purpose of allowing students to feel pleasure in learning and consider themselves as central figures of their learning process.

This study was framed in the qualitative paradigm to the extent that it was sought to obtain suggestions for improvement of educational experiences by a specific group of participants. Particularly, this research categorised as a simple descriptive study is aimed to ponder on how students interpret their current educational context and how they would like the future of their learning to be. Ferreira and Almeida [4] clarify that DT is included in qualitative research plans and can be supplemented with other participatory or visualization methodologies and tools, being useful in qualitative and critical investigations. Being an action-oriented tool, based on a comprehensive, participatory, multidisciplinary and experimental logic, is used in investigations that intend to understand community problems involving several stakeholders, hence the framework of the involvement of this model in the research methodology. The DT model developed by Mateus [5] was also an anchor for the study.

Vilelas [6] explains that the purpose of descriptive studies is to know the relevant characteristics of individuals, inserted in groups or communities, estimating different factors in order to make a portrait of the situation studied. The fact of these studies being generally realistic, easy to delineate and perform, are compensatory benefits since the measurement can go beyond quantitative aspects and the description will be a way to achieve it. And this was considered in this study – to achieve the students' perspectives on FCs and how these classrooms may or may not be the future of the school.

As argued by Mateus [5] DT is a comprehensive, multidimensional process that seeks to achieve innovation by including new methods of work based on creativity, with a focus on dialogue and joint creation. This idea pursued the purpose of this study in promoting the use of DT in the classroom as a way of innovation, encouraging changes in teaching-learning practices, serving as a potential transformative of mentalities based on all the data collection made during the DELLI research process. DT involves not only thinking but also applying and experiencing, going through several phases and stages, thus the relation of DT with the type of descriptive study in question.

The information was collected through a non-formal instrument, which focused on aspects that needed to be measured — the portrayal of perceptions regarding the type of Education that students intended to have in the Future. Mateus [5] explains that most of the research tools of Ideas (R)Evolution were created with inspiration in DT models already tested, and the model used in this research was created based on the test variation of the DELLI Project. Ferreira and Almeida [4] point out the relationship between DT and participatory diagnostic methodologies, explaining that DT can be seen as an



alternative research tool that highlights the wishes and emotions of the stakeholders involved in the research process. Being these the ones to whom the solution is sought in the whole process, the research tools should be framed to allow a collaborative diagnosis, leading the acquisition of qualitative information that helps summarize and decipher the lived and perceived reality. Hence, the instrument used was considered unconventional because it intended to encourage freer responses in an informal way. It was applied to the students who were given the indication to describe how they imagine a perfect learning day, starting the moment they leave home until they return, reflecting about their perception of the school now and for the future.

The collected data resulted in texts, which needed to be analysed. This analysis, considered as a model of language exploration, implied the construction of a posterior structured content analysis. A process of organization into categories was performed so that these could represent the theory that one intended to test: the students' perceptions about the Education they receive nowadays and that they intend to receive in the future. The data collection instruments were pre-analysed and systematized through its messages and what was behind the words observed. This pre-analysis resulted in a grid of categories and subcategories that allowed one to understand better the main points students focused as in need of change.

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY
Type of School	Planning of class schedules, frequency and duration Desired Spaces
Type of Learning	Type of Content and Learning Strategies desired Learning Assessment
Technology	Type of equipment / resources
Influential roles in learning	Teacher (idealized) Family
Constraints in learning (nowadays)	External to School Internal to School
Other influencing factors	Socialization at School Nutrition (influential in learning)

Table 1 - Categories and subcategories in need of change

3. Results

Having analysed the student's claims, a set of data was obtained that allowed to draw some lectures that lead to reflect on practices that currently may not be effective in schools, as well as to draw some improvement suggestions that may contribute to an evolution in the performance of schools and teachers, leading to a resemblance of the School model that the students prospect as ideal. Diagram 1 shows the main categories in which students focused their points of view, which brought us to a concern about the current state of Education.

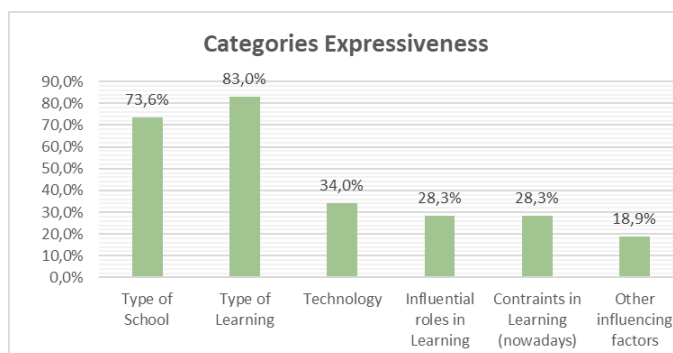


Diagram 1 - Expressiveness of categories – n=53

Reorganize school time - students point the school organization system as being too strict, feeling compelled to stay too long in the classroom, and even at school, where they do not feel satisfied/fulfilled.

Suggested improvement: flexible scheduling and planning of activities, innovating and differentiating with the same concern that already exists at the curricular level. Perhaps some of the schools that are already functioning according to the Portuguese Curriculum Autonomy and Flexibility Project may represent good practices to be reproduced.

Innovate classroom spaces - students show a desire to have classes in different places, in larger rooms with natural light, with comfortable chairs and better tables, outdoors in a dynamic and interactive space.

Suggestion for improvement: rethink classroom spaces, allowing them to be transformable, with the possibility to move at any moment, granting change of work processes and resorting to outer space as a place of learning.

Reconsider contents - students lack a flexibility and freedom of choice of subjects to learn, pointing out the shortage of subjects with practical significance, that they may apply when adults.

Suggested improvement: review and adapt the school curriculum, providing the acquisition of significant contents; draw more flexible syllabus, adapting them to the students' realities in each school context, in order to make learning accessible to all.

Review the assessment - students consider important to be evaluated continuously, using more practical exams and less theoretical tests, which they believe only evaluate the ability to memorize and not the acquired learning. There is also a clear concern about the value of exams in the external evaluation.

Suggested improvement: consider carrying out more meaningful pedagogical activities (as projects and research works) with practical application as a tool for continuous assessment that may motivate learning; grant moments of practical and formative evaluation throughout the year, reinforcing collaborative, reflexive and self-regulating work, alternatively to written tests; review the burden of exams of access to Higher Education in the evaluation.

Consider the use of ICT as a tool to support the teaching-learning process - students would like to have more computers running, tools to access internet, the possibility of using mobile phones in the classroom, more classes in FCs, stronger wi-fi and teachers who use more interactive methods, instead abide by school textbooks.

Suggested improvement: adapt continuing teacher education to new technological challenges; encourage, in the initial teacher training, the inclusion of disciplines that promote the use of ICT as motivating and seductive instruments for a generation of students who need know how to persevere in the current work markets.

Rethink the Teacher's role - students feel that teachers need to change their methods and attitude towards teaching; should not be so expositive, not requiring students to memorize subjects, creating more practical situations and learning dynamics and be closer to them, as guides with whom they can communicate and to whom they may rely on.

Suggestion for improvement: teachers should re-learn to teach; assume the role of mediator in learning processes, ceasing to be the transmitter of contents; reinforce pedagogical differentiation, focusing pedagogical practices on students, and their specific needs, not on knowledge, fostering the interest of students, stimulating their creativity and critical thinking, in order to allow the development of essential skills, fundamental to the future; encourage habits of collaboration and cooperation among teachers, fostering the innovation of pedagogical practices and stimulating this method of work in students. All this must come from Teachers, but also from Schools, valuing active and experimental methodologies, as strategies to improve the quality of learning.

4. Conclusions

Regarding students' perceptions about the ideal school to generate learning in the future, the answers gathered demonstrate that an ideal school day for the participants implies some modifications regarding timetables, learning spaces, teachers, among others.

Students would like the school system to be more flexible, where they can feel satisfied and fulfilled. They would like to take classes in larger open spaces with no wall limitations and have more versatile learning topics that could allow a more practical assessment, reducing theoretical tests.

Students also request that teachers are closer to them, that allow them to communicate, acting as their guides in more practical tasks, betting on more active and motivating strategies, using ICT as tools to support the teaching-learning process.

Reflecting on the whole course of this project, we believe that we have been able to find what students consider as weaknesses in teaching and in classrooms, which after some adjustments can be transformed in strengths in the future. In this sense, it is suggested:

- » to consider innovation and differentiation, based on flexible scheduling, curricula and teacher performance;
- » that schools deconstruct the conventionality of the classroom, thinking of it as a place/space where it is possible to move freely, to learn freely and meaningfully, without pressure;

- » a review and adequacy of the syllabus contents, in order to promote significant acquisitions, adjusted to the realities and daily necessities of the students;
- » that pedagogical activities are considered in a more practical and meaningful sense, fostering collaboration among the various actors (students, teachers, tutors, school community);
- » to motivate the accomplishment of projects in order to allow continuous evaluation, with different weights, that allow to take advantage of the work carried out, not concentrating in a single test to verify of what the student may have learned;
- » that teacher training is adapted to new technological challenges, encouraging the inclusion of subjects that promote the use of ICT in teacher training courses; above all, there must be a bet in more active educational strategies, in which the teacher assumes the guiding role that focuses his pedagogical practices on the needs of the students, allowing the collaborative among pairs.

Changes are difficult because they touch everyone inside, tinkering with everyone's beliefs, those who people intended to maintain because they generally give a sense of security and control over everything around them. However, these changes, these adjustments, may make the teaching-learning process richer and all those who are involved will benefit if they happen.

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