



# School satisfaction and social relations: Swedish schoolchildren's improvement suggestions

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## Abstract

**Objectives** The aim was to explore schoolchildren's views on how to increase school satisfaction and improve social relations among peers at school.

**Method** Improvement suggestions were collected from school children aged 10–12 years with the help of a feedback model developed for the purpose. Qualitative content analysis was used.

**Results** Two categories emerged from the analysis: 'psychosocial climate', which included the subcategories 'adults' roles and responsibilities' and 'classmates' norms and values'; 'influence', which included the subcategories 'changes in the physical environment' and 'flexible learning'. The categories are seen as important to increase school satisfaction and improve social relations among peers at school.

**Conclusion** Examining children's opinions is requested and promoted by the UN convention on the Rights of the Child. The findings contribute to the field by showing how school satisfaction and social relations might be improved, if the child perspective is considered in the planning of health promotion activities in school.

**Keywords** PUBLIC health · Schoolchildren · School satisfaction · Social relations · Qualitative content analysis

## Introduction

The school setting is known to influence the health of children (Gustafsson et al. 2010) in beneficial as well as detrimental ways, promoting good health as well as causing health problems (Gustafsson et al. 2010; Sansolios and Egberg Mikkelsen 2011). By identifying the needs of an individual or a group, health promotion enables people to take control over and improve their health, by making changes that will lead to enhanced health (World Health Organization 1986). In Sweden, the public policy is that school health promotion should be a vital part of the school work (Sveriges Riksdag 2010/800). A prerequisite for a long-term positive health change is that those affected by the changes can make their voices heard and that they have the opportunity to influence decisions before they are taken (Griebler et al. 2014).

Although it is important that every child is respected, listened to and treated in a pleasant way to ensure health promotion (Persson and Haraldsson 2013), children's opinions are often overlooked even if they are heard. Society would benefit from listening more to children since they know about their own situation (General Assembly 1989). About 70 % of Swedish schoolchildren, aged 10–12 years, report that they sometimes or often can influence their classroom environment, but only 50 % of them think they can influence who to work with, and how the playground should look like (Skolverket 2013). However, the proportion of schoolchildren reporting that they often or always can influence the tempo in education has increased gradually and was twice as high in 2011 than in 1988 (Hagquist 2012), but for reasons of health, it is important that efforts continue and further improvements are made. Since it is vital for a child's well-being and academic performance to enjoy school and to have functional

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social relations with peers in school (Bond et al. 2007; Gorard and Huat See 2011). School satisfaction is defined as a child's subjective cognitive appraisal of the quality of school life (Baker 1998). About 45 % of Swedish schoolchildren in grade 5, aged 10–11 years, enjoy school 'very much', which is an increase with 8 % since the late 80 s (HBSC 2014).

A threat to children's enjoyment of school is negative social relations, such as bullying, which has a harmful impact on children's mental health (Beckman et al. 2012) and capacity to learn, as well as on the overall school climate (Gustafsson et al. 2010). Between 3 and 7 % of the Swedish schoolchildren in grade 5, report being bullied two to three times a month (HBSC 2014). The proportion of bullied girls is higher in 2011 than in 1988, while the proportion of boys is constant over time (Hagquist 2012). Furthermore, around 75 % of the schoolchildren in grade 5 report that they believe they are better skilled compared to their classmates (HBSC 2014). However, Swedish schoolchildren's school performance is decreasing (PISA 2012), which in turn can affect school satisfaction, social relations and mental health negatively. There is also a need for early actions to promote the health and well-being of schoolchildren in this respect (Gustafsson et al. 2010).

Previous research investigating children's school satisfaction and social relations among peers is scant, often quantitative in kind, and mostly targeting older children (Hui and Sun 2010; Gorard and Huat See 2011; Mager and Nowak 2012). Social relations in school and school satisfaction deserve more research attention from both a health promotive and public health perspective (World Health Organization 2000). It also needs to be investigated in a Swedish context, not least in view of the importance placed on school satisfaction and social relationships in the Swedish education act, and in the national public health targets (Sveriges Riksdag 2010/800; Sveriges Regering 2007/08). The aim of the study is therefore to explore children's views on how to increase school satisfaction and improve social relations among peers at school.

## Method

### Background to the current study

In the period 2006–2012, all primary schools in a municipality in mid-Sweden participated in a community-based, public health project. The aim of the project was to promote well-being, school satisfaction and social relations among schoolchildren. It included a range of different programmes, such as leadership and socio-emotional training (Karlstads kommun 2012). The study reported in this paper is a product of the reverse evaluation of the

project and has the focus on feedback survey data and gather children's views about some of the issues that could be improved further.

### Design and setting

This study has an explorative design and takes a qualitative approach to data, using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Data were gathered in November 2011 at three different primary schools in one-fifth grade class and one-sixth grade class at each school. The participants in the classes were aged 10–11 in grade 5 and 11–12 years in grade 6. The schools are in a mid-Swedish municipality with a population of ~100,000. The inclusion criteria were that the schools had participated in the initial cross-sectional survey and were located in different school districts with diverse features in terms of geographical area (city and country side), socioeconomic status and pupil intake. The three schools agreed to participate in the study, and one-fifth grade class and one-sixth grade class at each school participated, six classes in all.

### Participants

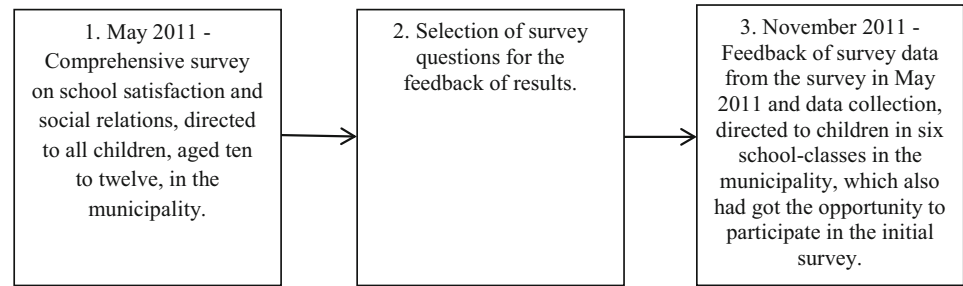
All children (n92) in the six school classes were asked to participate in the study. On average, there were 15 children in each of the two classes in the three schools. The response rate of the six classes was 68 %. A total of 66 schoolchildren (61 % girls) participated, aged between 10 and 12 and in grades 5–6. Their participation had to be approved by their parents. Parents and children were given written information about the study, and the letter contained a consent slip to be signed by the parents and returned to the teacher. The consent slips were collected on the day of the data collection.

### Procedure

Data were fed back to the children, who also had been given the opportunity to participate in a comprehensive survey, in May 2011, with a cross-sectional design (Fig. 1). The survey had a total of 1247 participating children (49 % girls), aged between 10 and 12, in grades 4 and 5, and the response rate was 84 %. It consisted of questions about school satisfaction and negative social relations, for example, with the questions framed in terms of bullying at school. Because of the negative responses and in the light of earlier research, these questions were chosen as a platform for feedback data and written suggestions for improvement (Table 1). In order to present and collect the data, a feedback model was developed and used (Fig. 2). The data were fed back using Microsoft Power Point and a projector in a classroom setting, during regular class

**Fig. 1** Model of research procedure, Sweden, 2015

**Model of research procedure**

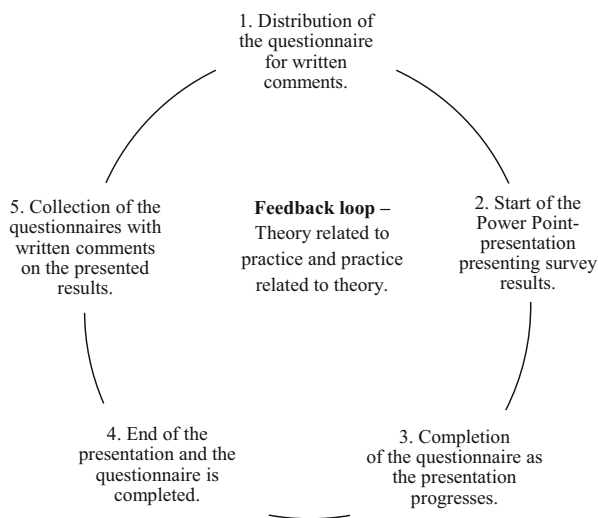


**Table 1** Questions designed to elicit suggestions for improvements, Sweden, 2015

Questions
Do you think it is funny or boring in school?
Do you think it is untidy and disorderly in the classroom?
I have been scoffed at, ridiculed and called nasty names in an unpleasant and hurtful way?
Other students have not included me, but excluded me from others on purpose, or totally ignored me, or pretended that I did not exist?
I have been hit, kicked, pushed or locked in?
How often have you been bullied in school in the past couple of months?

related questions. Questions about what children and/or the school might do to increase school satisfaction or improve social relations among peers were put to the children in connection with each presented data item or slide. For every slide shown, the presentation stopped, and the children were given time to write down their suggestions in the appropriate slot on the form. The form was initially presented to teachers of children in the age group to be studied, with a view to gauging the appropriateness of the number of and type of questions to be asked, and whether the children would be able to write down answers to the questions during 1 h. The teachers studied the form and gave their approval. The feedback of data was directed to all children in these classes, regardless of whether the child took part in the initial survey or not. The presentation and data collection took about an hour. A research colleague was present as a resource person for the data collection. The suggestions were later transcribed verbatim. All participants received both written and verbal information about the aim of the study, its design, the voluntary nature of participation, the opportunity to withdraw their participation at any time, the anonymity of answers and the confidential treatment of data. The Ethics Committee at Karlstad University reviewed the study, and no objections were raised (number: C2012/193).

**The Health Promotion - Feedback Model**



**Fig. 2** The five stages of the Health Promotion Feedback Model, Sweden, 2015

hours. Each Power Point slide represented statistics from one survey question. The presentation, the slides and the question form were similar and adapted to the age group. All slides in the presentation and on the form had two

**Analysis**

The analysis began by reading through the suggestions so as to become familiar with the content. Second, meaning-carrying units which corresponded with the aim of the study were extracted and then coded. To identify similarities and dissimilarities, the codes were compared, sorted and abstracted into subcategories and categories. In order to verify the empirical basis of the data, comparisons were made with the context in each step of the analysis (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). All three authors participated in the analysis process to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

## Results

Two categories emerged from the analysis: (1) ‘psychosocial climate’, which included the subcategories ‘adults’ roles and responsibilities’ and ‘classmates’ norms and values’; (2) ‘influence’, which included the subcategories ‘changes in the physical environment’ and ‘flexible learning’ (Fig. 3).

### Psychosocial climate

The category ‘psychosocial climate’ describes the importance of a good psychosocial climate for increased school satisfaction and social relations among peers and included adults’ roles and responsibilities and classmates’ norms and values.

#### *Adults’ roles and responsibilities*

The subcategory of ‘adults’ roles and responsibilities’ consisted of suggestions about the presence of adults at school, both inside and outside the school building, for example, during recess. The children wanted more adult supervision to detect and prevent bullying. “Teachers could have more control over what happens, and should stop drinking coffee”. They thought that it was the adults’ job to keep track of the children and make sure that nobody was the butt of insults or was bullied. The children wanted the teacher to say more in class about the penalties for bullying another child and discuss instances of bullying to reduce victimization. “Talk to the classes, and listen better to children when they tell about it, rather than just ignore it”. There was a suggestion of one meeting a week to discuss the subject, where children could air their views. Adults could be quicker to help victims of bullying, taking up the matter with the offender and the bully’s parents, as well as in getting the principal involved. “Teachers cannot stand by and do nothing; they have to try to fix it as well”. The children considered that a staff bullying prevention team is necessary in dealing with these kinds of problems and for bringing them to awareness. The teacher should keep an extra eye out for known bullies and put more thought into the composition of groups when doing group work: “Teachers should find out who you are friends with. In the music and home economics groups I do not have any

friends, and my five friends are in another group”. Overall, they should listen to and show more interest in children. Adults could ask children who spent recess alone, if they really wanted to be alone. The principal should observe classes more often, and teachers should be more involved in and do more together with their class for improved adult presentation. Also, the teacher should spend more time in the classroom, be nice, but stricter in maintaining peace and quiet. They should not yell, because that would only make it more enticing to mess around in class. Teachers should also be fair, kind, friendly, patient, imaginative, funny and provide help when needed.

#### *Classmates’ norms and values*

The subcategory of ‘classmates’ norms and values’ consisted of children’s wish for having rules of conduct and well-defined consequences for bullying, as well as the importance of having friends at school. The rules and consequences were proposed to be made known to all at school. Rules of conduct were to prevent exclusion, for example, during games and sports activities. “You let everyone be included, and then you become a good friend, and make new friends”. Respecting and caring more for each other and being nicer and friendlier to others were vital. They suggested rules demanding that everyone should be respected for who they are and that everyone gets treated equally. “You should treat others as you would like to be treated”. Being kinder and more helpful to others were also suggested. The consequences suggested for bullying included expulsion, detention, being asked to leave the classroom, receiving a note to take home to your parents and being reported to the police. To make them clearly known, these should be presented to everyone in the school; signs should be set up stating the penalties. They thought that if someone was bullied, then it was up to the individual child to step in initially, by protecting, defending and supporting the person. Appointing peer-facilitators, children with the specific task of helping and supporting others in need, was a step in improving the safety at school: “You can go to the peer-facilitators if you see someone getting bullied”. Thereafter, you could go to an adult for help, for instance, the principal, a teacher, the school nurse, the child counsellor or a parent. Children should also mind their behaviour in the classroom; only talk when they were

**Fig. 3** Categories of the analysis that emerged as important to increase school satisfaction and improve social relations among peers, Sweden, 2015

#### The analysis results

Category	Psychosocial climate	Influence
<b>Sub categories</b>	Adults’ roles and responsibilities	Changes in the physical environment
	Classmates’ norms and values	Flexible learning

supposed to, sit still and raise their hand if they want something, use proper language, do what you they are told, not run around and not disturb others, concentrate on their schoolwork, take more responsibility for themselves, listen more to the teacher, be kind and calm and make the most of tedious tasks. "You should not join in when someone else is messing or laughing. You should ignore it". They wanted classmates to talk at a lower volume during lesson time. Children could listen to music through earphones since that could have a calming effect on the working atmosphere. Also, meeting friends at school was an important part of their day, for instance, during recess, and made school more pleasant place to be at. "I think it is fun to go to school because all of my friends are there". School made it possible to socialize with friends that they did not meet during their leisure time. To this end, training in how to be a good friend was proposed. They wanted the teacher to talk more about this and help children to form friendships. "Perhaps, you could do an exercise in friendship once a month, so that you start thinking".

### Influence

The category of 'influence' describes the importance of children's desire and capabilities to influence their school situation for increased school satisfaction and social relations among peers and included changes in the physical environment and flexible learning.

#### *Changes in the physical environment*

The subcategory 'changes in the physical environment' contained suggestions about changes in the physical environment for increased school satisfaction and social relations among peers at school. The children requested a more brightly coloured school and fresher toilets. "Paint the school more brightly then it might be a better place to be in". They suggested cleaning days, where children took turns in cleaning the classroom for improved school well-being. The school canteen should also serve a better and tastier school meal. Concerning the playground, children wanted more and better equipment, equipment which would allow more children to play at the same time. They wanted a skate ramp, a bigger football ground, floor ball goals on the ground, bigger scaffolding and more forest around the school: "... have better surroundings around the school and in the playground".

#### *Flexible learning*

The children wanted a more flexible learning situation and classes in things that they were interested in, such as mathematics, crafts, sports, music, painting, computer

science, chemistry and outdoor activities. They made a special mention of theme days, for example, 'outdoor days', 'companion days' or 'football days'. These days were considered particularly enjoyable. They liked learning new things and expected to do so, but wanted more enjoyable lessons, which had better appeal to children. New and more learning options were requested; if something was boring, they wanted to be given alternatives. More than just theoretical knowledge was proposed, and they wanted more individualized work, such as challenges when needed. "You do not always have to learn by writing on paper or in a book". The children wished to have more of a say in deciding what to do during the school day. They stated that school should not end at the same time every day. The recess was mentioned as something enjoyable, a time for joyful games. They wanted to go where they wished during the recess. They also wished for more and longer recess and wanted the chance to stay inside and as well as to have more things to do. More enjoyable exercises for homework and fewer of them were desired. A system of rewards for working and behaving well in class was suggested. The teacher could give reward points, and when a specific amount of points had been reached, the class got a reward, such as watching a movie.

### Discussion

#### A good psychosocial climate

First, adults' roles and responsibilities were important for a good psychosocial climate at school. The teachers should keep better track of children, be more supportive, fair and patient. We also know from previous research that these qualities in teachers make children feel more satisfied with school (Bond et al. 2007). It is argued that increased adult presence in school may enhance safe, healthy playground exploration and reduce dangerous, inappropriate and injurious behaviour (Schwebel 2006). Passive pedagogy can negatively affect school satisfaction (Gorard and Huat See 2011). The children tried to resolve bullying issues on their own, before they told an adult. Yet, research emphasizes that both teacher preparedness and children reporting to them play an important role in teachers' responsiveness to bullying and in effective bullying prevention (Novick and Isaacs 2010). Bullying prevention may decrease the number of disrupted children and the numbers of dropouts linked to bullying and also generate a healthier, happier and more productive school population (Srabstein and Leventhal 2010). The teachers should put in more effort when composing study groups so that everyone has someone they know in the group. Hence, new groupings can be one way of expanding a child's social network (Persson and Haraldsson 2013).

Second, classmates' norms and values were essential for a good psychosocial climate. It involved stricter rules and more clearly defined penalties for breaking them and signs highlighting the rules. A study of Ediger (2009) showed that this could be one method of preventing misbehaviour. Children of this age are too young to handle problems like bullying on their own. Adults must take action and find solutions to such situations. School health promotion can help fostering an environment, which meets young people's needs so that they feel that they belong and are cared for at school (Persson and Haraldsson 2013). More order in classrooms was wanted. A calm classroom setting contributes not only to child well-being, but also to school satisfaction and consequently productivity and learning (De Giuli et al. 2012). Friendship was an important element of the school day, since friends made the day more fun, which is also supported by Backman et al. (2012). Friends play an important role in academic success, school retention rates, misbehaviour and dropping out (Vitaro et al. 2001).

#### The importance of child influence

The category 'changes in the physical environment' reflects the children's wish to be allowed to influence the school environment in a direction more suited to their needs and interests. The detrimental effects of generally negative environments on children's learning process, interaction and ability to externalize and internalize have been shown by Milkie and Warner (2011), for example. Children also wanted greener surroundings around the school, which is supported by research showing that nature is important to perceived restorativeness (Bagot et al. 2015). Further, a cleaner school environment was requested, and this is a recently prioritized school issue in Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2014).

Moreover, flexibility in learning and more individualized instruction were also on demand. The Swedish education act states that tuition is to be tailored to each child's abilities and needs (Sveriges riksdag 2010/800). While they wanted less homework, it is argued that homework can help children in their learning, through helping them to develop a sense of responsibility (Xu 2012). But, if the demands are too high, there is a risk of health problems, such as negative stress (HBSC 2014). The children wanted to be more involved in decision-making as it pertained to the learning process. This is consistent with the wishes of older children (Backman et al. 2012) whose greater involvement in their schoolwork made them less stressful (Haraldsson et al. 2010). Further, the children suggested more and longer recesses, more physical activity and more activities outdoors in general. Schools must provide opportunities for increased physical activity

(Sveriges Regering 2007/08:110), and physical educators have an important role in helping them to accomplish this (Hills et al. 2015).

#### *Child influence and health promotion theories*

This study shares some substantial similarities with the collaborative model, SchoolBeat, tailored for whole-school health in the Netherlands, which emphasizes vital issues in evaluating school health promotion. The model highlights the importance of taking the experiences of the schools and the children involved in such projects into account if research is to inform policy and promote sustainability. Further, the SchoolBeat model, like this study, supports an interactive cycle of research and action, involving interaction between participating schools and research staff, and conclusions are drawn from the data collected. Hence, the way data reported to the collaboration partners can influence the interpretation and direction of decision-making (Leurs et al. 2005). Moreover, Waters et al. (2009) describe a developmental, ecological and health promotion intervention theory that can facilitate the identification of interpersonal and organizational aspects of a school environment, which in turn may satisfy individual needs of feeling independent, competent and connected and may improve health and well-being outcomes for adolescents. Like this study, the theory emphasizes the prominence of child involvement in decision-making and purports to enhance autonomy (Whitlock 2006). Another school health promotion theory stresses that all humans have fundamental human needs and integral capabilities or potentials, and schools need to ensure that these needs are met in order to promote children's health and to be a health-promoting school. The needs, which also the children in this study expressed, are basic: being concerned for others, caring for each other, being able to play and laugh, being concerned about nature and surroundings and being able to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life (Markham and Aveyard 2003). Finally, Rowe and Stewart (2011) have studied the health-promoting school model, the whole-school approach, in three school communities in southeast Queensland. They found that the key elements of the health-promoting school approach were supported by factors similar to the suggestions for improvements in future school health promotion made by children in this study, namely informal teaching, reinforcement and adequate time for relationships to develop. In addition, child influence on different kinds of school activities was important in promoting school connectedness in the study. We are also aware of that adults do not necessarily need to agree with all of the suggestions; however, the aim of the study was to investigate children's views in health promotion, as they are experts on their environment. These

suggestions can be used as a stimulus for a discussion about the subject, involving children, teachers and parents (Jensen and Simovska 2005). Previous research has also shown that child influence has a bearing on positive life skills, self-esteem and social status, awareness of civil rights, child–adult relationships, health, academic achievement and school ethos (Mager and Nowak 2012; Griebler et al. 2014).

#### Methodological considerations

In qualitative content analysis, it is important that there is variation and diversity in the source material (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). This prerequisite was fulfilled through the participation of three schools, all with separate locations, socioeconomic status and pupil intake. Given the children's different backgrounds and experience of school, the research question could be approached from several angles, which is vital for the credibility of the results. All the children in these classes were asked to participate in the study, and almost 70 % ended up participating. The main reasons for not participating in the study were sick absence, the child's consent slip was not handed into the teacher in time or the parents did not give their consent. Inclusion of citations facilitates the assessment of the study's credibility. Trustworthiness is strengthened as three researchers carried out the analysis. The research process, its design and implementation have been described in detail, and the analysis has been carefully outlined (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). Since there is a lack of research on feedback from surveys, especially in regard to children, and new models of feedback are called for (Bälter et al. 2012), we chose not to focus individual or group interviews. Perhaps, in the future, the results might be followed up with interviews, so as to elaborate the children's suggestions. However, the use of the question form as a way of collecting data made it impossible to ask supplementary questions. The children's ability to write and express themselves differed; some wrote more than others for obvious reasons. This could be seen as a shortcoming; nevertheless, the empirical basis of the data was sufficient to gather a rich harvest of responses. The form was initially reviewed and approved by teachers of children in this age group. Such preparatory measure is one of the strengths of the study. Another strength of the study is the focus on children aged 10–12, as there are few studies on this age group in the body of health promotion literature.

#### Conclusions

Investigating children's opinions are requested and promoted by the UN convention on the Rights of the Child.

The children in the study wanted a better 'psychosocial climate' and more 'influence' to reach increased school satisfaction and improved social relations. Young children's views are seldom heard in school health promotion, and generally the children wanted to have more opportunities to influence learning. The findings complement to knowledge in the field by showing how school satisfaction and social relations might be improved in from a child's perspective. These findings are also vital from a public health perspective, because they provide an important basis for school leaders, educators and school health-care professionals when planning teaching and implementing health promotion activities in the future.

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