# "*Negative and positive experiences form the backbone of my understanding of myself and other people*": School life recollections of young adults

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The present paper analyses 70 retrospective narratives from young adults about their school life. It looks for answers to the questions of what people and situations young adults recall as sources of positive or negative feelings and how they (re)construct the impacts of school experiences on their lives as young adults. The analysis found that on one hand a cohesive and safe school climate was a source of high self-esteem, well-being and a sense of belonging to the school, while on the other, peer bullying and the difficulties of teachers in coping with complex situations in the classroom were the most persistent problems in the school atmosphere that the young adults recalled as negative. However, the narrators re-construct some negative past experiences into positives, both individually and collectively

**Keywords**: schoolchildren, autobiographic memories, emotional well-being at school, young adults, generational perspective

## Introduction

Occasionally we may find ourselves recalling our school life memories that are still deeply seated in our thoughts and emotions. Sometimes we find that some negative school experiences are even useful because they have made us stronger, or conversely, we recognise moments when bad memories still amplify our weaknesses. We recall joint events and relationships, both good and bad, and important actors at school – the teachers and schoolmates, friends-for-life and those whom we would better avoid meeting. Being experts of

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our own lives, we can evaluate what worked well and what did not. We can ask whether there are consistent strengths and weaknesses in school life that persistently accompany our lives, but which could have however been changed or improved. This question goes in line with the acknowledged crossroads of change in education systems. OECD (2018) refers to the need to broaden education goals towards encompassing individual and collective well-being, and put the focus on the learner's agency in the framework of "interactive, mutually supportive relationships" – their "co-agency" (p.4). Persistent effects of school life from generational perspective come up when we look back and consider their effects by constructing and re-constructing them as meaningful lived school experiences. Analysing these retrospectives can inform policy makers about persistent strengths and weaknesses that the education systems contain.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the retrospective narratives of young adults about their school life. The paper seeks answers to the following research questions.

(1) Which people and situations do young adults recall as sources of positive or negative feelings at school?

(2) How do they construct and re-construct the impacts of school experiences on their lives as young adults?

*Conceptual framework of the study*

The PISA standards have confirmed that school children in Estonia are among the top ten globally and at the very top in Europe (OECD, 2019a). The education system in Estonia is equally accessible to children with different socio-economic background (Tire et al., 2019) and is promising in terms of equitable educational outcomes. Self-assessments on the PISA standards however, show that children in Estonia are critical about their self-efficacy and report a low level of sense of belonging to school compared to other OECD countries (OECD, 2019b). Heidmets (2013) notes that adults in Estonia lack the self-confidence, creativity and courage to apply knowledge they have obtained. This leads to the question of whether the school environment is supporting or constraining children in being active and feeling happy (i.e., promoting or constraining their exercise of agency). In other words, what are the relational aspects with peers and teachers that lead to the relatively low self-confidence and courage as noted by Heidmets (2013).

Looking at children as active agents and experts of their life experiences (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014), international studies have shown that children are not so positive when assessing their school environment (Inchley et al., 2016; Rees et al., 2020). The studies have revealed that liking school deteriorates with age (Inchley et al., 2016; Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017) and this gap is the greatest for schoolchildren in Estonia (Kutsar & Kasearu 2017). A study by Kutsar, Soo and Mandel (2019) among schoolchildren in Estonia showed that they develop negative feelings toward various aspects of school life, leading to a dislike for school. Bullying among children and teacher practices such as unfair treatment and negative classroom management are the key factors that increase children's dissatisfaction and cause a dislike for school. This trend is similar in other countries (e.g., Borualgo & Casas 2021; Chai, Xue, & Han, 2020; Hallinan, 2008).

Aversive experiences at school, in particular exposure to bullying, can not only affect students' mental health but also have a significant social cost for them as adults, such as decreased functioning in education and employment, difficulties in relationships, and poor health (deLara, 2019; Sigurdson et al., 2014). However, a study by Choi (2005) shows that negative school experiences can be constantly re-constructed in accordance with their current situation, for example, as factors that have made them stronger adults.

The present paper is inspired by Social Relational Theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015) and the sociology of childhood (James et al., 1998), both looking at children as active social agents. Children as agents can set aims and find pathways to reach those aims, mediated by the need to maintain control over their situation (Snyder et al., 1997). Following the OECD (2018) definition of agency, we are inspired by a dialectical model of bidirectional causality that considers parents and children as equal agents who are culturally embedded into a context for their mutual interactions (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). We similarly see teachers and students are active agents in their shared environment.

In this paper, we focus on the ways of exercising agency in relation to different aspects of school life based on young adults' memories of their time at school. We agree with Sorbring and Kuczynski (2018) that children's experience and practice of agency is relational. Thus, we suggest that young adults' recollection of school life is relational as well: the process of autobiographical narration uncovers interactions of different people and contexts, namely the narrator here and then, their perceptions of other actors involved in co-creating school atmosphere, and their overall appraisal of the narrated people, places and situations. This approach is generational and allows us to highlight some patterns in the practice of agency in the school environment of children in the 'here and now' (Kutsar et al., 2019) and young adults when narrating the past.

*Framing the theoretical approach to studying childhood memories*
The present article focuses on childhood memories as autobiographical narratives of young adults about their school life. Autobiographical memories are episodes of human life (Williams et al., 2008), mostly vivid events strongly associated with emotions (Pascuzzi & Smorti, 2017). In autobiography, the narrators interpret their experiences in a specific socio-cultural framework and create meanings from experiences and events, about themselves and their relationships. Through storytelling, people create their identity and present themselves to oneself and to the others (Turunen et al., 2015). People's memories are selective, recalling what has an important personal meaning for them, what is worth remembering culturally, and what is thought to be of interest to a potential audience (Fivush et al., 2011).

The study of childhood memories presents a number of issues. When retrospectively describing what happened in childhood, an adult cannot re-experience childhood or proceed from their worldview at the time. They can recall their childhood experiences, try to understand how they were as a child and how they perceived the world, but their concepts of the world as an adult differ significantly from how a child experiences the world (Korkiakangas, 1994). When an adult recalls childhood, their memory works in an adult way. Thus, an adult can only interpret childhood in their personal memories based on the adult's understanding. This

combination of two different experiences adds research value to childhood autobiographical memories. In addition, the recollection combines both personal experience and what has been told about it, or it is based on someone else's narrative about the reminiscing person (Bauer & Larkina, 2014). The question here is to what extent are the memories of childhood reliable, i.e., do they represent what was actually experienced. It has been found that speaking about the past may be affected by the speaker's current mood (Drace, 2013). However, McBride and Cappeliez (2004) report no effect of current mood on autobiographical memory retrieval. Still, we agree with Choi (2005) that lived life may be reassessed in light of the current situation, e.g., a negative experience may obtain a positive meaning. Our interest in autobiographic narratives about school life lies in a generational approach that allows us to highlight positive and negative aspects of practicing (co)-agency in the school environment. As lived experiences, these narratives play a role in forming education outcomes that influence the practice of agency in young adulthood.

**Method and material**

The paper is based on 70 retrospective school life narratives, written by students of social sciences at the University of Tartu in Estonia. In 2016-2017, 103 childhood memories about education and learning were a part of the coursework for the course Children and Childhood in the University of Tartu, from which we selected only those memories (70) that reflected school life. Thirty-four memories were related to negative and 36 positive feelings and thoughts. We excluded memories that did not cover experiences of schooling (e.g., kindergarten). The exercise was voluntary and the narrators were not asked to reveal their socio-demographic background. From the participants' list we know that most of them were females. Upon receipt, the lecturer [2nd author] anonymized the stories and compiled them into a booklet of memories. Stories that the narrator did not want to be included (but still decided to submit) were excluded from this analysis.

When analysing narratives, a distinction is made between thematic, presentational and structural analysis (Riessman, 2008). In this article, we use a thematic method of analysis that focuses on the content of narratives, the events and related people described in the stories, and the meanings assigned to them (Bold, 2012). Repeated reading of student stories revealed several major categories, divided into 'happy' and 'unhappy' stories (Figures 1 and 2). We pay special attention to reinterpreting the emotional content of the story here and now, as a young adult learner in higher education. We will start with the memories associated with teachers and then reflect on the memories of fellow pupils.

**Findings**

*Teachers*

Teachers were central to school memories that elicited both positive and negative feelings (Figure 1).

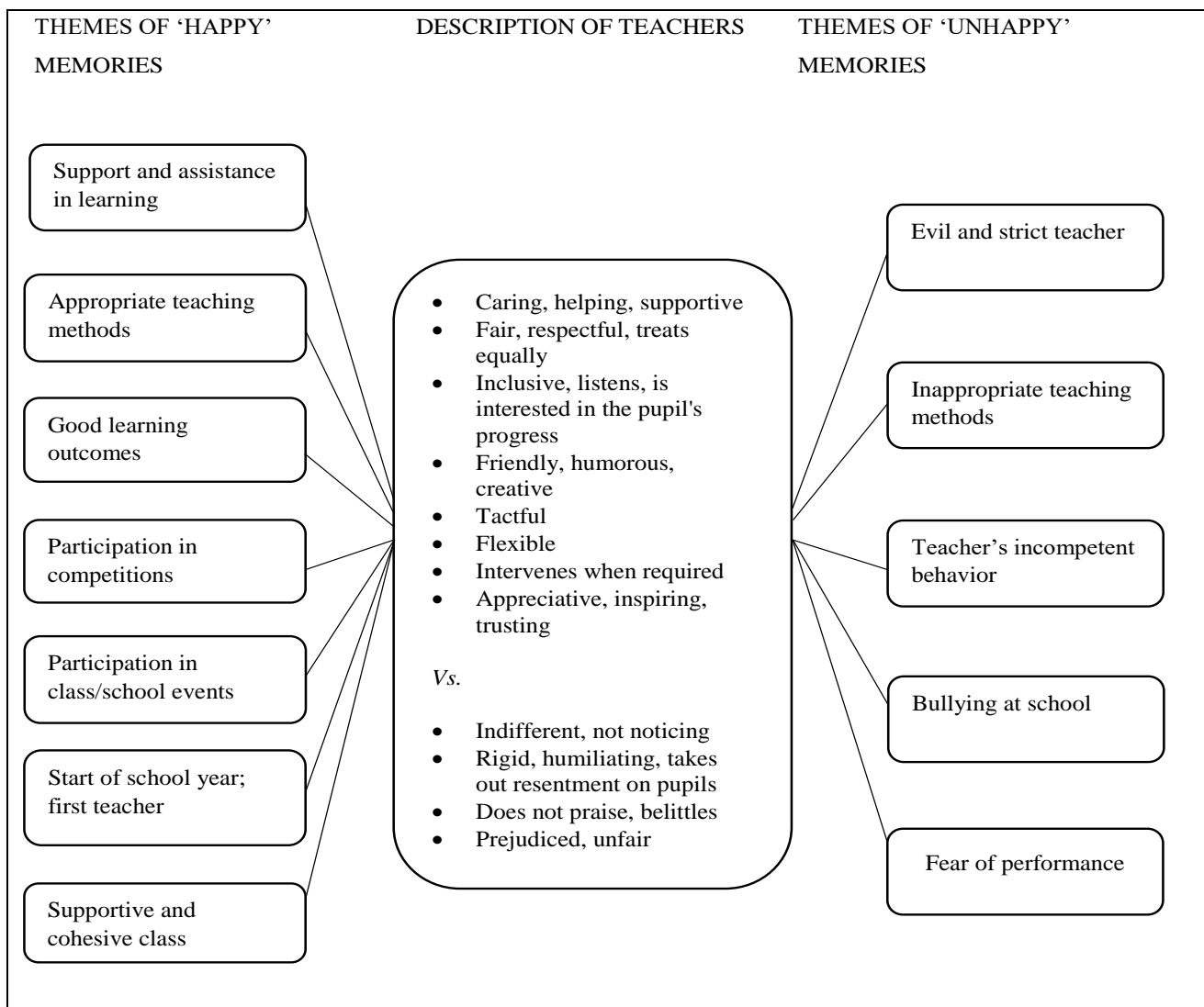| THEMES OF 'HAPPY' MEMORIES | DESCRIPTION OF TEACHERS | THEMES OF 'UNHAPPY' MEMORIES |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Support and assistance in learning | • Caring, helping, supportive<br>• Fair, respectful, treats equally<br>• Inclusive, listens, is interested in the pupil's progress<br>• Friendly, humorous, creative<br>• Tactful<br>• Flexible<br>• Intervenes when required<br>• Appreciative, inspiring, trusting<br><br>*Vs.*<br><br>• Indifferent, not noticing<br>• Rigid, humiliating, takes out resentment on pupils<br>• Does not praise, belittles<br>• Prejudiced, unfair | Evil and strict teacher |
| Appropriate teaching methods | | Inappropriate teaching methods |
| Good learning outcomes | | Teacher's incompetent behavior |
| Participation in competitions | | Bullying at school |
| Participation in class/school events | | Fear of performance |
| Start of school year; first teacher | | |
| Supportive and cohesive class | | |

Figure 1. Themes of memories related to teachers and description of teachers

*An encouraging and supportive teacher is a resource for practicing child agency*

In 'happy' stories, the students mostly described teachers as nice, supportive and encouraging. The narrators valued teachers who noticed students in difficulty, approached them personally, reassured them, and looked for solutions with them. These teachers encouraged students to address challenges and be active, for example, by participating in competitions or engaging in hobbies (set goals and increase hope in terms of Snyder et al., 1997). The supportive teacher saw the students' development potential and motivated them to put more effort into learning. In one story, the narrator recalled the difficulties in solving problems in Physics. She could not keep up with the pace of assimilating the new subject and got poor grades. A few extra lessons were enough for her to understand the subject better. The teacher's additional help improved both her (student's) grades and attitude towards the subject, and the teacher praised her for her progress. Pride and happiness replaced sadness and resentment. Her self-confidence increased and she started to help others who were struggling with the subject. This is an example how the co-agency of a teacher and a child worked out well.

A class teacher is the main adult with whom a primary pupil in Estonia comes into contact during the school day. Jointly spent time promoted getting to know each other and developed the close relationship between the teacher and the child. The narrators recalled teachers as caring, encouraging and promoting core values. With their actions, nature and attitude, the first teachers were able to create a sense of trust and belonging letting children experience participation and engagement.

> All positive memories from that time recall my first teacher, whom I still consider a great example. She was sunny, caring, fair, creative and loving. She taught us to consider others and emphasized that despite the differences, we are all good and nice.

Later on in school life, with the addition of subject teachers, the time for face-to-face communication and mutual understanding decreased as did the emotional bond with the teacher(s).

Helpful, encouraging and friendly teachers were key influential figures in the students' memories (Table I). Practicing co-agency increased confidence, faith, and a sense of closeness. The contribution of teachers was not only in getting good grades, but also in setting and achieving higher educational goals.

> I think it is much better to go to a school where you are cared for and, if helped, directed to find the right solutions. Thanks to the teacher, I was able to finish high school with a silver medal and set higher goals – to go to university and finish it. When I have achieved my goal, I will definitely go and thank her.

Table I. The impact of events related to 'happy' and 'unhappy' memories on the narrator

| The impact of 'happy' memories | The impact of 'unhappy' memories |
|---|---|
| • Joy<br>• Sense of worth<br>• Increased self-confidence, experience of success<br>• Sense of pride and satisfaction<br>• Sense of closeness and cohesion<br>• Better academic results, greater interest in learning, enjoying going to school<br>• Gaining new enriching experiences, tolerance for differences<br>• Gratitude to teachers, parents, peers<br>• Motivation to work harder in life, to strive further (e.g., going to university)<br>• Taking an example, following it in later activities (e.g., raising own children) | • Fear, sadness, anger, shame, insecurity<br>• Sense of hopelessness, loss of self-esteem and the will to live<br>• Injuries, physical pain<br>• Detachment, few friends<br>• Disappointment, feeling of injustice<br>• Being alone with worries<br>• Distrust for teachers<br>• Decline in learning interest and academic success, absence from school, early school leaving<br>• Lying, forgery<br>• Frequent illness, need to see a psychologist<br>• Doubting future plans and changing them<br>• Learning from bad experience<br>• Becoming mentally stronger, acquiring willpower, standing up for oneself |

Successful practice of relational agency between teachers and students increases motivation and liking school, which also positively influences school outcomes, as illustrated above.

*A cruel and strict teacher constrains child agency*

Cruel and strict teachers came up in several 'unhappy' memories: they were recalled as emotionally cold, threatening and scolding. They overloaded students with homework, belittled students who did not know the subject well enough and criticized them openly for incorrect answers. These teachers had a special emotional effect on timid students, deepening their fear of answering in front of classmates. For example, one narrator described how the bad experience of answering orally in a harsh teacher's lessons extended to fear of speaking in front of friendlier teachers.

The 'cruel' teachers never smiled. They were called metaphorical nicknames such as 'angry tiger bush' or 'reign of fear'. Rather than the topic of the lesson or its content, it was its emotional connotations that lived in the memory of students:

> I don't remember what the organizational side of the lesson was or how she taught us math. However, it is certain in my memory that she was cruel and, to some extent, derogatory. /…/ I remember the discomfort and fear that tended to impair normal brain activity and hence the ability to learn. I also clearly remember the big and beautifully drawn 2 grades [Fs] in my math book.

The 'cruel' and 'strict' teacher was a reminder of the fear in a child of going to class, getting bad grades or asking for explanations. Students preferred to remain silent because they were afraid even to ask the simplest things:

> In English class, I had a strong need to sniff, but I didn't dare to go to the sink at the other end of the class to take some tissues because I was afraid of the teacher. I sat there with my runny nose, not able to concentrate nor talk, because I couldn't breathe well.

The narrators remembered crying and being afraid of failure when studying the subject of a 'cruel' teacher whose classes were distressful, and the acquisition of the subject was rather difficult. According to one narrator, such people should not work as teachers. In sum, the 'cruel' and 'strict' teacher demotivates and creates fear. The co-agency of setting aims and working together is unbalanced and inhibited.


*Emotionally engaging teaching methods facilitate co-agency*

Students remembered, as emotionally positive, those teachers who used many active learning methods and created feelings among students of being actively involved. They enjoyed open discussions and shared ideas. The narrator, who liked to talk about social issues in a social studies class, justified writing this memory as follows: *"Why I relate that class with happiness is because I felt listened to."*

In the memorable lessons the narrators valued teaching of general life wisdom in addition to providing academic knowledge. In retrospect, they liked teachers who enriched teaching by telling exciting stories about (their) lives giving instructive examples, while avoiding admonition. Funny stories set common mood and created a perception of the teacher as an equal partner and co-agent. In the following quote, a narrator describes a teacher whom they remembered because of her simplicity and understanding of students, in addition to thoughtful and interesting classes.

> She did not /…/ give moral lectures, but her whole conduct and equal communication with pupils was a real transmission of the wisdom of life. How she reacted to her own little failures, such as spilling food on her chest during lunch break, or recounted how ice cream was eaten in her youth, why do I still remember these things after such a long time? /…/ The teacher's positive attitude towards pupils, talking to them on everyday topics is much more important for a young person than the curriculum. I probably remember situations like this much better than what was said in the classes, and these have been more important lessons in life.

The above shows that a learning environment that allows students to actively participate and be listened to and understood increases their sense of value and confidence, broadens their worldview, offers new enriching experiences and provides them with courage to act independently. Communicating with students on an equal basis shows the teacher as a human being and as a partner rather than a person in power. All these aspects made the narrators happy to go to school and increased their sense of togetherness.

*Teachers in troubled situations*

The narrators recalled situations that put their teachers' ethics and tact to the test, for example, telling students about their problems in studies. In 'happy' stories, the teachers communicated the shortcomings in a subject in a way that did not hurt or cause a feeling of failure. For instance, a music teacher explained with kindness and humour that the narrator could not carry a tune and did not have to attend a kids' choir if she did not want to. The narrator remembered the feeling of *immense happiness* and even pride that there was no pressure to participate in an unpleasant choir or to be further ashamed of the lack of singing skills.

Teachers' repeated unfair treatment of the narrator, a classmate, or the whole class was the cause of 'unhappy' memories. The 'unfair' or even 'incompetent' teacher questioned the narrator's or their fellow students' achievements (e.g., a good grade, a competition result), disregarded students' effort to achieve their goals and did not express faith in students' abilities. The 'unethical' teacher did discuss students' difficult emotional issues in private but expressed his/her assessment of someone's activities, abilities or grades in front of the whole class. Public ridicule and criticism were humiliating, shaming and offensive for the students. Frustration with the teacher and sadness replaced the initial joy of a good achievement. Agency is relational: low recognition of the child by the teacher impacts negatively on their self-concept and constrains the exercise of agency, thus also affecting practicing co-agency, i.e., setting and reaching aims, taking responsibility and changing realities.

> To this day, I remember very well /…/ The teacher read the pupils' test grades loud, and after saying my grade, she commented with a sarcastic tone of voice that it was a miracle I had got through this test with a 5, and smiled ironically. I was offended and all my joy at the successful test was ruined.

There were stories of situations where a teacher did not listen to the students' wishes, misinterpreted their behaviour without asking them for explanations, favoured some students (the more successful, more obedient) over others, and made ironic comments and jokes about non-favourites. In the following quote, the narrator recalled a teacher who expressed a negative attitude based on poor academic results of his/her family members.

I was the youngest child in my family and before me both my brothers and my father had studied there. In the first lesson the mathematics teacher said that my math grade would not be more than a 3 [C]. /…/ Since the teacher had her own opinion and it seemed impossible to change it, I started to skip school, which did not improve my math skills.

In retrospect, it seemed to some narrators that the teacher was not behaving properly in school bullying situations. There were stories where the teachers were considered a bully themselves, or unwilling or incompetent to intervene in bullying situations. In the worst cases, teachers did not believe students' reports or discussed it openly. The teachers' misbehaviour created shame and anger in the bullying victim and was a good reason for further bullying. On the other hand, in positive stories, the teachers' problem resolution in such situations aroused the narrators' admiration.

In sum, teachers' failure to deal with their own unresolved problems or negative feelings and lack of respect towards students as subjects caused frustration and mistrust in the students and reduced their self-esteem and interest in learning. Moreover, the teachers' lack of social competence could affect the educational paths of the students.

*Students*

In the recollections, fellow students were most likely to be involved in school bullying, but they were helpers, nice companions and comrades, too (Figure 2).
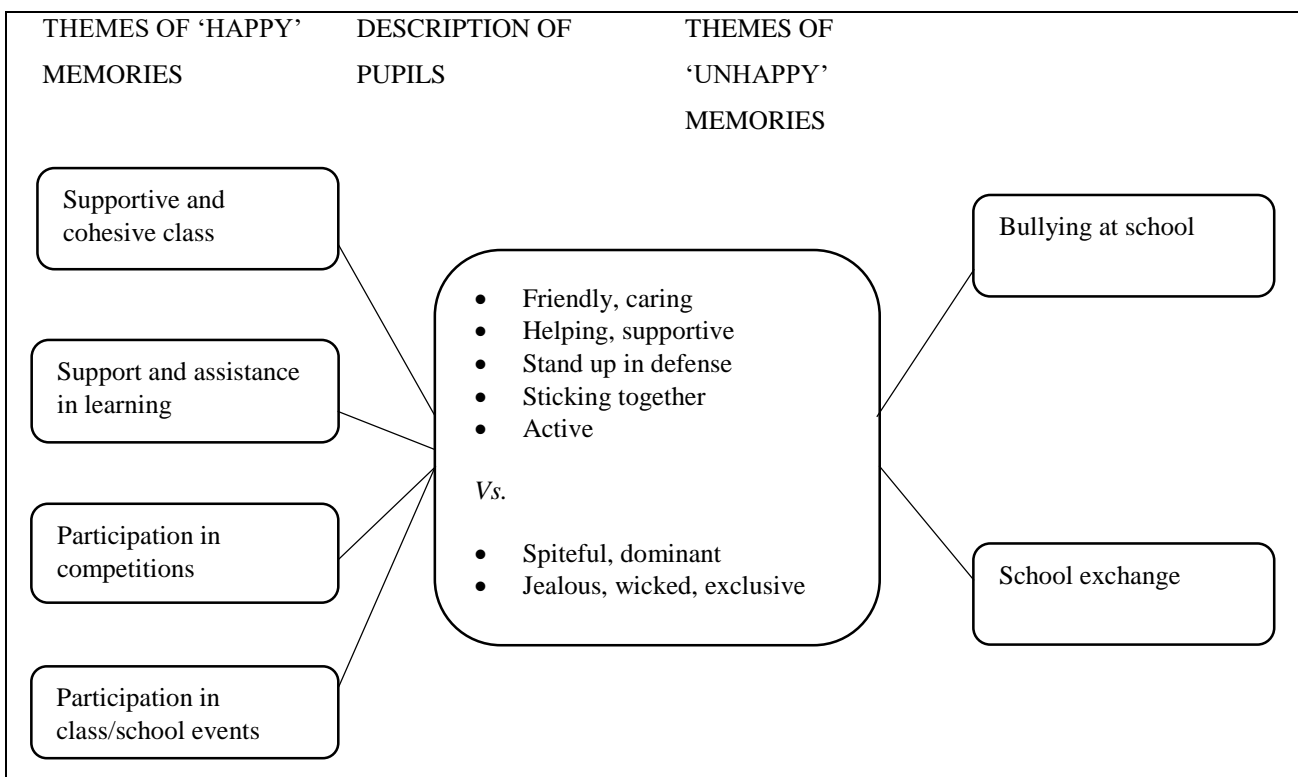


Figure 2. Themes of memories related to students and description of students

*Interconnected classmates contribute to feelings of togetherness*

The narrators who studied in small or medium-sized schools recalled helpful, cohesive and friendly classmates. In such schools, the number of students in the class was small enough to develop personal relationships with classmates and teachers. Sharing concerns united classmates, formed the basis of classroom spirit, and created a feeling that they were not alone in their difficulties:

> My companions were friendly, and we were very close. /.../ in times of trouble, we always rushed to the aid of our companions. We never betrayed each other, we would all rather keep silent and undergo the punishment with the whole class when necessary.

Shared jokes, participation in class events and competitions, and lack of spiteful and overly dominant peers, contributed to the friendliness and sense of togetherness. The latter made going to school and learning a pleasant experience, taught tolerance towards each other and to value relationships. The cohesive classmates were the ones who stayed in touch for a very long time even after graduating from school.

*School bullying constrains and promotes a sense of agency*

The stories showed that bullying was less spread in cohesive classes. Narrators mostly recalled their own incidents, but some of them described bullying from a bystander's position. Those who spoke of personal experiences considered themselves successful students who valued education, who were shy, humble, and afraid to stand up for themselves. A few students stated that they grew up as a single child, did not attend kindergarten and had difficulty with socializing in school. One narrator admitted to being a bully in a primary school, but later was a victim in secondary school. The bullies were 'cruel', 'jealous', 'dominant', and 'manipulative' classmates or slightly older schoolmates, both boys and girls. Appearance, the financial situation of the family, belonging to a minority group, and a quiet and shy nature, were motivating reasons for bullying. Good grades and success, as well as poor results in subjects and poor reading skills were also mentioned as causes for bullying behaviour.

> My biggest misfortune in education /.../ was years of school bullying. /... / I remember how my classmates and the pupils of the older classes called me ridiculing names and made fun of my, at that time, crooked teeth. I was excluded from joint activities and often placed in embarrassing situations. /.../ ... my diary was glued to the table or rumours about me were spread. /.../ I was the most successful student in the class, providing even more creativity to come up with different nicknames.

The narrators described various forms of psychological and physical bullying, such as scolding, mocking, beating, breaking things and excluding peers from joint activities. Victims were locked in the toilet or had their backpack hidden in the other gender's toilet, or stabbed with a needle, causing pain and bleeding. Sometimes bullying took a form of a game that degraded the victims because of their disadvantaged background. Perpetrators referred to the victims as the source of a bad smell when touching the desk, things or the victim's body. The instigator then touched also other students saying that they now had a bad smell. To get rid of it, the fellow students had to touch someone else. The involvement of fellow students in bullying

was recalled as being particularly unpleasant. There was probably a fear of becoming the next victim if refusing to join.

In the stories of bullying, the fellow pupils were not only bad (bullies) or passive spectators, but there were also positive characters – active bystanders, those who condemned the aggressive behaviour and stood up for a bullying-free atmosphere. The stories demonstrate a higher level of intervention by peers compared to teachers in stopping the violent behaviour.

Bullying at school led to feelings of fear, anger and hopelessness and a decline in self-esteem, with frequent illness, the need for psychological help and a loss of the will to live (Table I). Violence at school placed victims in social and self-isolation: they kept away from fellow peers and spent days alone in the corridors. Most narrators who faced bullying were able to continue learning with good grades, while those who did not receive support from the teachers, peers, or parents dropped out of or changed schools.

*Re-constructions of the perceived past*

In 'unhappy' memories, where students' agency was constrained by a teacher or a classmate and the co-agency did not work, there was a reassessment of the experience and highlighting of positive aspects in addition to the initial negative impacts. Memories of school bullying and teachers' unethical behaviour were most often subjects of re-construction. Several narrators found that they learned from negative experiences: bullying taught them to know other people better, forced them to step out of their *comfort zone* and stand up for themselves. The experience strengthened them mentally, and motivated them to pursue previously abandoned goals (e.g., continuing education in another school after dropout). The positive re-construction of negative past experience helps to balance the unbalanced co-agents of 'then' and acts as a strategy of healing 'now'. The unpleasant and unfair teacher helped them to notice and value other good teachers, enabling them to find enough motivation and prove themselves by taking assessments and exams and continuing their education. The most eloquent was a summary of a student hoping to become a teacher:

> I consider this experience [undermining pupils' achievements and abilities] a misfortune, but still, I have learned a lot from it. I know you always have to believe in yourself! However, I also know what I would never say to my pupils. I would try to point out the aspects that need to be developed for the child and help them in every way.

The childhood experiences prompted the narrators to think about the lessons learned in terms of the future.

**Discussion and conclusions**

*Subjective memories are a meaning-making process of 'then' and 'now'*

We analysed the retrospective narratives of young adults about their school life with the aim of revealing the strengths and weaknesses of school life from a generational perspective. Feelings of happiness or unhappiness at school arise from a common lived experience, shared activities with teachers and other students. Subjective memories and present re-appraisals are anchored in a meaning-making process, constructions and re-

constructions of one's present and past, interactions between relational contexts of 'then' and 'now'. The relationality of 'then' is characterized in the teacher's ability to create a supportive learning atmosphere and acknowledge the students as subjects, and to apply inclusive pedagogical methods; or on the contrary, in situations when a teacher was confused when faced with critical situations in the classroom and compromised their professional ethics. The relationality of 'then' was empowered by other students at school with their positive and negative contribution to the common well-being (the term 'common well-being' comes from Prilleltensky, 2005). At first glance, the relationality expressed in the retrospective stories about school life seems to be related with teachers and students as external determinants of feeling happy or unhappy at school, thus as individual well-being according to Prilleltensky (2005). However, relationality, as understood by White (2017) is fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity. We find that this is so also by recalling situations from the past and setting them into interaction with the 'present'.

The 'happy' and 'unhappy' memories of young adults focused on similar issues as students' interpretations of school well-being (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Kutsar et al., 2019): relationships with teachers and peers, ethical aspects of behaviour, opportunity to express one's opinion, security and support. The physical and material aspects of the school environment remained virtually unaddressed in their memories. To a minor extent, the narrators described academic achievements – obtaining good grades and high places in subject competitions – but these stories intertwined with the stories of social relations. A good result was a joy in the narrators' memories, but its value diminished when the social environment was not supportive and caring. The secondary nature of academic success in the memories of young adults confirms the priority given to the social aspects of the school climate by supporting students' agency.

*School-life revisits uncover transitional paths to adulthood*

From a generational point of view, two hypothetical developmental paths can be outlined as to how pleasant and unpleasant school experiences can shape agency as a child (described in the memories of the events 'then') and when becoming an adult (reflected in the recollections of subsequent developments, the 'now' situation, and the reassessment of experiences). The first path shows that a cohesive and safe school climate (e.g., friendly classmates, and supportive, appreciative and inclusive teachers) is a source of high self-esteem, well-being and a sense of belonging to the school (Allen et al., 2018; Marquez & Main, 2021). Positive interactions between teachers and students as co-agents, create a sense of security in students, promotes better academic outcomes (Huebner et al., 2014) and psychological functioning (Wang & Degol, 2016) and facilitates the sense of agency 'then' and 'now'. In the memories, it was expressed in being active at school, challenging oneself, helping companions, setting goals as a remembered student (e.g., striving for a good grade, wanting to finish school and enter university) and realizing these plans, as well as in the acquired ability to influence one's life as a young adult.

The second path does not seem to be as straight as the first. Lack of co-agency between teachers and students, e.g., problematic relationships with peers and teachers' lack of support reduced self-confidence and

self-esteem, and negatively affected academic success and school belonging (see Allen et al., 2018; Hallinan, 2008). A perceived negative school environment limits the child's agency: fear of bullying and condemnation led to distancing oneself from others, the teacher's undermining attitude cast doubt on one's ability and abandonment of previously set educational goals. A student's external and internal resources can help to restore homeostasis in well-being and self-fulfilment (Cummins, 2010). In the memories, the external resources, such as a friendly classmate or a supportive teacher on one hand, and internal resources such as mobilizing one's own willpower and courage on the other, helped to overcome difficulties at school and reach one's goals (e.g., continuing their studies in higher education).

There may be a third way, where problematic interactions with teachers and students and lack of support from adults at school not only diminishes well-being but also inhibits agency so that the student loses interest in learning and schooling as well as hope for self-improvement. Our narrators did not describe such a trajectory, however, or it was not evident in their memories.

*Student life memories confirm the persistent strengths and weaknesses of the school environment*
Other studies with students (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Kutsar et al., 2019) as well as the findings of the present study highlight the importance of co-agency (e.g., teacher support and assistance, an inclusive pedagogy, safety and fair treatment) that shape subjective well-being at school forming the basis for academic success and sense of togetherness. In case of negative experience, satisfaction with school and oneself decreases and the development of agency slows down. Low self-efficacy and agency persist also in adulthood (OECD, 2019b). Despite high academic achievement (e.g., top results on PISA standards), adults' low self-confidence and agency can inhibit their creativity and the use of their knowledge potential (Heidmets, 2013). However, focusing on the students' well-being in education in the *here and now*, taking care of their agency and facilitating co-agency not only enables students to feel good and be satisfied with their school experience, but also contributes to the main goal of education – a well-performing adult in the future. The narrators highlighted in their 'happy' school memories that they wanted such school experiences for their children.

*Limitations of the study*
One of the drawbacks of the present study is that the data consisted of autobiographical memories of university students whose academic careers have been successful. We do not know how those who had dropped out of school or did not continue their education after upper secondary school would remember and re-evaluate their school experience. Secondly, the narrators of the memories were mostly women, so there was no possibility to compare the memories of female and male students. There was also no information about the broader social context of the authors of the memories.

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