WHAT ARE QUALITY EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS? CONTRIBUTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES FROM PORTUGUESE PUPILS PARTICIPATING IN THE SCHOOLS2030 INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME

S.C. Martins, A.R. Coelho, A.R. Capucha

Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIES (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

Schools2030, promoted by Aga Khan Foundation, is an educational programme working with 1,000 schools in 10 countries, aimed at identifying the most effective ways to improve learning and access to quality education for all children and young people. This is being done by implementing a bottom-up model in schools that empowers and encourages teachers to create innovative solutions to the learning challenges faced by children and young people in their classrooms. In Portugal, the programme is being developed in 17 school clusters, involving around 100 schools, and the research team represented by the authors is responsible for the programme's monitoring and external evaluation.

A central concept of Schools2030 is the quality of the educational environment. In this sense, the aim was to (re)create the elements comprising a quality educational environment as an essential dimension in the relational and educational development of all those who "inhabit" the school, particularly its pupils. This is a key object of analysis and intervention - improving the quality of educational environments - within the programme itself.

In order to better understand the different perspectives on this concept, we conducted focus groups with head teachers, regular teachers and pupils. In this paper we choose to focus on the pupils' perspective and their perceptions of school and their relationship with school. Our data came from four focus groups held in 2023, two with 10-year-old pupils and the other two with 15-year-old pupils, covering a total of 19 pupils from 3 school clusters participating in the programme in Portugal. The aim of these focus groups was to obtain in-depth information and contributions to the analysis of learning processes and educational environments, based on reflection and debate among pupils.

Accordingly, we emphasise the 'voice' of the pupils, which allows us, among other things, to enrich the definition of what quality educational spaces should be. Some of the dimensions of this characterisation, based on these findings, can be summarised as spaces of well-being, spaces of autonomy and involvement, and spaces of participation and equity. The focus groups with pupils also allowed us to explore the meanings of educational outcomes at schools, more specifically about learning at school and with teachers, time (for learning), evaluating what has been learnt, and emotions and attitudes.

One of the most important conclusions is that pupils perceive the importance of the way teachers manage to build close, empathetic relationships and pay attention to their problems in their school results. The pupils' awareness of this dimension in their performance and relationships at school is very high. The pupils also feel that curricula and teaching content should be made livelier and more illustrative, using examples and stories that are more in line with their own experiences. They also emphasise the need for more personalised educational models, activities that are participatory, practical, in contact with nature and innovative compared to lectures, and the teaching of values and socio-emotional skills in addition to cognitive skills.

The collected testimonies will enable establishing a more precise baseline for the intervention. The analysis of the results should contribute to a deeper understanding of the perspectives of 10 and 15-year-olds on school, its functions and educational environments that are conducive to better learning and provide indications for possible changes.

Keywords: Quality of educational environments, educational models, learning, focus group.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Goals, framework and methodological design

One of the key objectives was to (re)create the elements that comprise a quality educational environment as an essential dimension in the relational and educational development of all those who inhabit the school, with particular emphasis on the pupils.

In order to identify different perspectives around this concept, we focused on the pupils' perceptions on school and their relationship with school, based on testimonies collected during two focus groups held in 2023. The aim of these focus groups was to obtain in-depth information and contributions to the analysis of learning processes and educational environments, based on reflection and debate among pupils.

Accordingly, we emphasise the 'voice' of the pupils, as an additional and highly relevant contribution to the definition of what quality educational spaces should be. The characterisation of these findings can be summarised in three dimensions: spaces of well-being, spaces of autonomy and involvement, and spaces of participation and equity. The focus groups with pupils also allowed us to explore the meanings of educational outcomes at schools, specifically in relation to learning at school and with teachers, time (for learning), evaluating what has been learnt, and emotions and attitudes.

1.2 A brief theoretical framework

The concept of quality of educational environments is difficult to define. Its nature is complex and multifaceted, yet it is known to have direct impacts on the pupils' academic performance, as well as on teaching practice and on the quality of the learning outcomes. Indeed, this notion stems from conceptions of 'education quality', reflecting historical frameworks of thought about the social role of education, which tend to change over time [1]. As we enter the 21st century, the quality school or educational environment is not the same as it was 40 years ago.

In recent years, a series of guiding principles have been promoted by a number of organisations and agencies acting in the field of education and socioeconomic development of countries (including OECD, World Bank, UNESCO, the European Commission, among others), aim to reach a more consensual idea about what should constitute a quality educational environment or quality learning outcomes for this century and its challenges. This model, which eschews the notion of a 'closed school culture' and its associated mechanistic and standardising educational frameworks, which are predicated on the primacy of results, instead advocates an institutional culture of greater openness, focused on innovation, diversity, inclusion, autonomy, social recognition and learning in a broader sense [2] [3].

At a first analysis, this concept immediately leads us to the quality and sufficiency of the physical infrastructures thereby prompting reflection on the accessibilities, security and comfort of the learning spaces. The World Bank's report "Learning to Realize Education's Promise", published in 2018, pinpoints precisely the relationship between investment in infrastructures, resources and school spaces, and educational performance and outcomes. However, this concept encompasses a much more extensive and complex reality, as previously noted, involving various dimensions. These include the school organisational culture, the teaching/learning practices, the type of educational resources mobilised, the educational offer and curricula, the characteristics of the school population and the interpersonal and institutional relationships within the school community [4]. Ultimately, the capacity to mitigate and overcome the barriers impeding the learning process, which are currently still strongly tied to the social inequalities reproduced in the school context, and echoed in the pupils' results and performance [5]. The emphasis has been placed on the need to upgrade school organisational and pedagogical models, in order to address the diversity of pupils and educational actors, and meet their needs [6]. Similarly, the school's mission has evolved to encompass not only the traditional objective of ensuring educational attainment, but also the more contemporary goal of ensuring the equitable distribution of educational opportunities among all pupils, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and individual characteristics. This entails providing more tailored responses to each pupil's unique circumstances, while also aligning with the demands of a globalised and knowledge-based society, which is undergoing profound transformations in terms of new information and communication technologies.

The present qualitative study, which stems from an ongoing main monitoring study on the results and impacts of the international Schools2030 programme operating in Portugal, seeks to put forward various considerations on the concept of 'quality of educational environments'. These considerations are based on the reflection and ideas shared among pupils heard in focus groups conducted under the main

research. Thus, the aim is not to present a closed conceptualisation of this notion, but rather to raise an exploratory discussion of some of its comprising elements.

Schools2030 programme, funded by the Aga Khan Foundation, is an action research initiative that is working with 1,000 schools in 10 countries. Its objective is to identify the most effective ways to improve learning and access to quality education for all children and young people. This is being achieved by implementing a bottom-up model in schools that empowers and encourages teachers to create innovative solutions to the learning challenges faced by children and young people in their classrooms. In Portugal, the programme is being developed in 17 school clusters, involving approximately 100 schools. The research team represented by the authors is responsible for the programme's monitoring and external evaluation.

This programme offers a holistic perspective for improving the quality of educational environments, with a particular focus on collaboration with schools, as well as with local communities and other stakeholders. It is clearly aligned with the most contemporary vision of the school's mission and with the principles guiding the designation of quality education, as previously outlined. One of the key strategies involves fostering pedagogical innovation and reflective practice. The participant schools are encouraged to experiment with new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, adapting to the needs of their pupils and to local circumstances. Furthermore, the programme values the assessment and monitoring components, enabling the schools to identify factors of success and disseminate this knowledge throughout the national educational network. The objective of establishing partnerships between schools and other entities, and collaborative work, is to create enriching spaces of learning that enhance pupils' agency [2] [3] [7]. This is achieved by fostering cultural and socioeconomic diversity, equipping pupils with the skills to navigate the challenges of the 21st century [8]. By aligning with global agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Schools2030 places itself in line with more extensive goals which contribute to inclusive and equitable education for all.

One of the key findings of this research points precisely to the exercise of agency of the pupils and to their reflective ability [9], revealed in how they conceive what represents quality educational environments. Some of the dimensions discussed can be summarised as spaces of well-being, spaces of autonomy and involvement, and spaces of participation and equity. The focus groups also allowed us to explore the meanings attributed to educational outcomes at schools. More specifically about learning at school and with teachers, time (for learning), evaluating what has been learnt, and emotions and attitudes. The findings indicated that pupils are calling for new educational models, based on more innovative pedagogical strategies, more practical, non-academic components, and curricular diversity.

According to the most recent guidelines, which indicate clear impacts on the improvement of the countries' performance [2] [3] [10], the pupils should be encouraged to assume active roles and assume responsibility in the actual learning process. Our results indicate that the young people and children heard, do not relinquish that agency. At the same time, these pupils are aware of the need to recognise and value the diversity of experiences, skills and their needs, in a manner that ensures equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for all [10]. Conversely, the collected discourses indicate that interpersonal relationships with teachers and expectations are of significant importance. This suggests that the 'school climate' [11] is a key factor in creating safe educational spaces where pupils feel warmly accepted and motivated to express their opinions, collaborate with their peers and even with their teachers. The importance of making a mutual commitment to the pupil's success, both by the teachers and by the actual pupils, cannot, therefore, be underestimated [2].

2 METHODOLOGY

The study employed an essentially qualitative methodology, although a mixed or multi-method methodological approach is pursued under the main research [12].

Four focus groups [13] were conducted in 2023: two with 10-year-old pupils (4th year) and the other two with 15-year-old pupils (9th year), covering a total of 19 pupils from 3 school clusters participating in the programme in Portugal. The directors and the Schools2030 programme team of each school cluster were asked to select 4 to 5 pupils of the defined age cohorts, from class groups engaged in the programme, ensuring some diversity of the participants: girls and boys, with different characteristics as pupils (academic results, socio-emotional skills, ...), if possible, from different class groups within the same year, etc. Consent forms were completed with the help of the teachers and signed by the pupils' parents and guardians. The obtained information was then subjected to a process of content analysis, which identified a series of dimensions as detailed below in the results section.

3 RESULTS

The dimensions that were discussed in the pupil discourses are in alignment with a significant portion of the existing literature on this type of debate and in-depth analysis. According to Lewno-Dumdie, et al. [4], quality in educational environments encompasses a number of dimensions including those related to relational issues – pupil-pupil, pupil-teacher, acceptance of and respect for diversity; safety – physical, socio-emotional, standards and rules; the institutional environment – connection and engagement, physical context and environment; school improvement processes – parent involvement and support in improvement efforts; teaching and learning – civic and citizenship learning environment, academic orientation and guidance. This dimensional mapping emerges to a large extent in the pupil discourses, although with another configuration and organisation closer to their discursive feelings and meanings.

3.1 School as a space for interpersonal relationships

School is valued by the pupils who participated in the focus groups due to being a space where they can learn, but also due to the sociabilities. The importance of personal relationships, of friends, in the school context is evident. When asked what they most like about school, both fourth-year and ninth-year pupils answered that they enjoy being with their friends. This is associated with the playground, among those younger, as a space of free play and interaction with schoolmates.

The dimension of relationships – not only with their peers, but also with their teachers – was one of the most present in the pupil discourses, as something they value highly, and which affects them both from a positive and negative angle.

In this dimension, the importance of specialised technical staff and socio-cultural moderators should also be highlighted. Their role seems to be extremely relevant in the school context, providing emotional support to pupils who experience greater difficulty in integrating or exhibiting behavioural issues. This was a point that the pupils themselves highlighted.

3.2 The role(s) of the teacher

When invited to reflect on their best teachers, the 9th year pupils cited teachers of different subject matters. But what do these teachers have in common? Then, we questioned them about the reasons why they had thought about those teachers, asking them to consider the characteristics that differentiated them. The teachers who are most frequently recalled as the "best" are those who taught them in a more fascinating manner (not strictly following the curriculum, but interweaving the subject matter with current affairs and issues of daily life, taking them to a specific reality, connecting the subject matter to the pupils' life, not just abiding by the manual, and developing "different" activities). They are also those who forged a close relationship with the pupils, paid attention to their problems (they are friendly, show empathy, are open to their opinions, seek to boost their self-confidence and self-esteem, value them, motivate them, praise them rather than just criticise).

> *The teacher has something I really admire that few teachers do. Because, normally the teachers always send e-mails to the parents when the pupil does something naughty. This teacher (…) also sends e-mails to the parents praising the pupils.*
>
> *Pupil, 9th year*

The characteristics that the pupils identified as those that distinguish the most effective teachers contribute, from their perspective, to increasing the pupils' interest in the subject matter and elevating their participation in classes.

> *This makes us all interconnect, share our opinions (…). [Classes] are not just for gaining information, they are for exchange, sharing thoughts (…).*
>
> *Pupil, 9th year*

The pupils participating in the focus groups highlighted the importance of the relationship between teachers and pupils, describing it as an aspect that affects them and influences their life at school.

> *Of course, the [teacher's] work is to teach, educate youngsters, but the issue of the relationship that is created is extremely important. (…) I trust the opinion of someone whom I like and with whom I have a better relationship more than that of someone with whom I feel I have a cold and more distant relationship.*
>
> *Pupil, 9th year*

According to the 9th year pupils, in order to have a good relationship with the pupils, it is crucial for teachers to know how to deal with adolescents and show empathy, to try to understand their problems and their motives for acting in a particular manner.

3.3 Learning and participation at school

Activities/classes with a stronger practical component and which provide learning outcomes related to everyday life, in a less abstract and more specific form, are those most appreciated by the interviewed pupils, and those they most remember (even indicating what they learnt with them). The pupils also highlighted activities of contact with nature or outside the traditional classroom and study visits.

> *A forestry researcher appeared (…) and we went outside to see the trees that were at our school, it was great fun, and I learnt (…).*
>
> *Pupil, 4th year*

Furthermore, during the focus groups, the pupils also highlighted the following activities: those that stimulate creativity; those that are interactive, in which the pupils participate more directly (for example, by talking, engaging, giving their opinion, or touching); group activities or work (more prevalent in the fourth year than in the ninth); competitive activities, such as competitions; games that are enjoyable but can simultaneously draw on skills worked in the classroom and curriculum contents; and activities using books (literature, etc.), apart from the manual, or digital resources to address an issue or subject matter.

The pupils' most direct participation at school takes place in the classroom. While not all teachers foster that form of participation in the same way, not all pupils show the same propensity and willingness to participate, which could be for different reasons. If pupils who are experiencing greater difficulties 'are frightened of being wrong' in the presence of the teacher and their classmates, who might tease them, then pupils with the highest grades, who are held to high expectations, may also feel similarly inhibited. This indicates that the class climate and the teacher's attitude are relevant in this dimension. The pupils tend to associate participation with asking questions or clarifying doubts with the teacher or answering the teacher's questions on the matter being taught.

Participation in certain activities that are held at school sometimes does not include all the pupils, being perceived as a reward for the best, as an incentive for work and good behaviour, but also as a means of closing the door on opportunities for those experiencing more difficulties.

3.4 Relational difficulties, integration and diversity

In the 4th year, pupils reported the presence of situations of conflict at school. The younger pupils expressed disliking the aggressive and disruptive behaviour of some classmates. In the 9th year, some difficulties in interaction with classmates were reported, for example in accomplishing group work. Some pupils admitted that it is not always easy to work with people with differentiated personalities, interest in participating, and work methods.

The transition from the 1st to the 2nd cycle of primary education was mentioned as a 'complicated' period in the youngsters' educational pathway. The 9th year pupils recalled that stage and profound change upon no longer having classes given by a single teacher and the exclusive attention of that teacher.

Additionally, various 9th year pupils mentioned the extensive academic curricula and fast pace of the classes required to accomplish them. This was perceived as negative and restrictive, creating anxiety among the pupils. The pupils said they prefer and gain more in terms of understanding the subject matter when the pace of the classes was slower and the atmosphere more tranquil. From their point of view, when teaching, it is also important to consider the different rhythms of learning between the pupils.

> *- In Portuguese (…) all the subject matter we are currently doing has always been at that very fast pace, the tests are all one after the other, we don't have time to study (…).*
>
> *- The anxiety we feel sometimes during tests, during classes…*
>
> *Pupil, 9th year*

The concept of 'pressure' is a pervasive theme in the discourse of the pupils of the last year of the 3rd cycle. The pressure to study and perform to the standards expected of them, to be responsible, achieve good grades and strengthen their future, weighs heavily on them at this stage of their life.

As the level of difficulty is progressively increased … (…) we have to start studying, we have more worries, so … I think that's the pressure. We have to get good grades because it's our future that's at stake …

Pupil, 9th year

Another aspect mentioned that complicates the ability to follow the classes, is the difficulty in maintaining concentration that occasionally is experienced by the pupils, which is associated with their phase of adolescence. According to the pupils who participated in the focus groups, generally speaking, there are not many opportunities at school, or a particularly favourable environment, to discuss problems and emotions. This is particularly the case during adolescence, when such discussions are perceived to be necessary.

Their integration is another hurdle experienced by some pupils coming from other countries. Some problems of integration and discrimination were reported by the 9th years pupils.

Gender differences are perceived from a very early age at school and persist in different forms in more advanced years. If, in the 4th year, the girls commonly report with indignation that they are not always welcomed in activities such as football by the boys, or treated "as equals" by them, in the 9th year, this inequality could be related to differentiated expectations associated with girls and boys concerning, for example, the expression of emotions.

The participation of parents and guardians at school was also addressed, more associated with preschool and 1st cycle of primary education, where the pupils state that their availability is variable.

3.5   What the pupils would change at school

One of the aspects that the pupils would change at school, to increase their interest and motivation, would be to improve their relationship with the teachers and the teaching methods employed. The traditional teaching method, which is characterised by a passive learning environment (presentational, focused on the manual, lacking in more practical and unusual activities) and a focus on the teacher as the primary source of knowledge, was criticised by the majority of pupils interviewed. Furthermore, some pupils emphasized the importance of the teachers' conveying values and socio-emotional skills, in addition to cognitive skills and the more substantive contents of the curriculum.

- I think I would [change] the way they give the classes. It shouldn't be about all of us seated on a chair, the teacher starting to talk, dumping and us sitting there almost wasting away. (…)

- By the end of two classes, sometimes were aren't even hearing anything.

- We find ourselves staring at the wall. "Oops, I've just missed everything."

- It's a bit like hurling subject matter and us catching what we can.

Pupil, 9th year

(…) apart from knowing all the cantos of the Lusíadas or what stone this one or that one is, also growing for living, because they are teaching us to be the adults of the future. And things we need to know about life, ways of thinking, ways of being, we also learn about that with the teachers.

Pupil, 9th year

The pupils also identified the manner in which they are assessed as an aspect in need of change at school. From their viewpoint, the assessment is not really continuous, the tests carry an excessive weight and cannot comprehensively capture what the pupils know, as there are a number of reasons that could constrain their performance at any given moment.

If I could, I would change the way some teachers assess us. (…) there are certain subject matters in which the teachers only care about the tests (…). (…) I don't think they should comprehensively assess us based on the result of that unit.

Pupil, 9th year

The need to upgrade the school's physical space was also mentioned by some pupils. Some would change features like the colour of the walls or outdoor space, while others emphasised the importance of renovating and updating the technological equipment and services. The use of digital means in the classroom is discouraged because the computers are frequently obsolete and the internet is slow. In order to foster more participation of everyone and interaction with the teacher, both the 4th year and 9th pupils would choose classrooms structured in a U-shape or with group tables.

I like the way that we work, because in most schools, at least the ones I know, they have little desks for two people with everyone facing the blackboard. It's not like that at our school, we are in groups of six, we all help one another (…).

Pupil, 4th year

4   FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper presents the findings of an exploratory and qualitative research study developed under the ongoing assessment of the Schools2030 programme in Portugal. The key goal was to discuss the concept of 'quality of educational environments', based on the reflection of a set of pupils heard in focus groups. The Schools2030 programme aims: to promote new parameters for assessment of learning outcomes at schools; to give value to extracurricular skills; to encourage and provide support to the creation of innovative tools and instruments developed by the teachers at the schools; and to disseminate good practices in a more overarching manner. One of key aspects of the programme implementation, and which is also addressed in our research, is the opportunity to 'listen' to the pupils, empowering them with greater agency.

The collective testimonies establish a more precise baseline for the intervention. The results of the focus groups contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of 10 and 15-year-olds on school, its functions and educational environments that are conducive to better learning, unveiling clues for possible changes.

The pupils who were interviewed during the study demonstrated a clear grasp of what constitutes quality educational environments, linking their perceptions to their personal experiences at school. They were able to identify positive factors and difficulties, related to learning outcomes and school, and manage to express their motivations and aspirations. We found that they tend to associate the "quality of educational environments": with the degree of quality of interpersonal relationships, valuing their relationship with and the role of the teacher, as well as the level of empathy and connection created; with the teaching models and with participation, in which high value is placed on practical components, on more individualised teaching and opportunities for active participation in learning processes; with the type of difficulties and less positive aspects that emerge, related both to improper behaviour, bullying, etc., and to the curricula, their extent and learning contents; with higher valuation and exploration of non-academic skills, especially socio-emotional components; and with the school's physical spaces, where value is given to its condition, maintenance, functionality and potential as a space of formal and informal learning.

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