Students' Engaging School Experiences: A Precondition for Functional Inclusive Practice

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Abstract

Basic education strives to provide an equal education for all students, whether the students attend regular or special education. In this study, we explore seventh grade comprehensive school students' (N=119) experiences of engaging and disengaging events at school and the points at which these events occur in their school career. The students represent Finland-Swedish-speaking students in Finland, and 95 of the participants attend general education, while 24 students have received special educational services. Two aspects of the students' school experiences were empirically examined: (1) determining the point in the students' school career at which critical incidents occur and (2) identifying the primary contexts of critical incidents. The results show that critical incidents occurred during the students' entire school career with an increase in sixth grade. Students perceived peer interaction as being the most positive as well as the most problematic part of their school career. In conclusion, both students in regular education and students receiving special educational services experienced the sense of belonging as an inclusive school experience in their learning path. Results indicated that no differences in experiences that were found between general education students and students who received special educational services. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: students with special needs; general education students; school engagement, school experiences.

Introduction

School provides a central developmental context for children (Eccles, 2004; Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008). School experiences have a significant impact on student well-being (Pyhältö, Soini, & Pietarinen, 2010) and on students' health, behavior, and interpersonal relationships (Ma, 2007). The quality of school experiences also contributes to learning outcomes (Martin, Anderson, Bobis, & Way, 2011; Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2011). However, we are lacking sufficient understanding of the school-related experiences contributing to students' school engagement, in particular among students with special needs. This study explores lower secondary Swedish-speaking school students' engaging and disengaging school experiences, by analyzing significant positive and negative school experiences among seventh graders. The study also focuses on the sense of belonging as a crucial ingredient of the engaging school experience. Moreover, a comparison is made between the school experiences of students with special needs and general education students in Finland.

In Finland, remedial instruction is provided primarily through inclusion in mainstream education. This means that students with special needs are studying in the same classroom as general education students (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). To be able to create learning environments in which all students can flourish, a better understanding of the anatomy of engaging school experiences among a variety of student groups is needed (Sabel, Saxenian, Miettinen, Kristensen, & Hautamäki, 2011). Especially, more in-depth analysis of an engaging school experience and its antecedents, from the viewpoint of students with special needs is needed.

School Engagement

School engagement refers to active student involvement in various activities provided by the school (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Faircloth, 2009; Kirkpatrick Johnson, Crosnoe, & Thaden, 2006; Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011; Marks, 2000; Nickerson, Hopson, & Steinke, 2012; Oelsner, Lippold, & Greenberg, 2011; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010). Lopez (2011) proposed that engaged students are highly motivated and enthusiastic about school, and are also likely to promote learning readiness in those around them. In turn, those students who were actively disengaged were more likely to undermine the teaching and learning process not only for themselves, but for others too.

In the literature, school engagement is typically perceived as a meta-construct comprising three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Appleton et al., 2006; Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004; Furlong & Christenson, 2008 & Lam et al., 2012). *Behavioral engagement* entails student attendance, active participation in classes, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Finn & Rock, 1997; Furlong & Christenson 2008). *Cognitive engagement* refers to the extent to which students put effort into their studies, manifested in their interest in learning, goal setting, and approaches to studying and learning, for example in the number of credits the student has accrued and the amount of homework completed (Finn & Rock, 1997; Furlong & Christenson, 2008). It has been suggested that cognitive engagement is key to improving student learning outcomes, especially for those students at high risk of educational failure (Appleton et al. 2006). *Emotional engagement* refers to affective factors such as a sense of belonging and the perceived connectedness and support from parents, teachers, and peers. Student engagement has been shown to peak during elementary school, decrease through middle school, and then increase through the rest of high school (Faircloth, 2009; Nickerson et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2012; Lohre, Lydersen, & Vatten, 2010; Oelsner et al., 2011).

Research on school engagement has traditionally focused on student behavioral engagement in the academic tasks provided by the school (Appleton et al., 2006; Fredricks et al., 2004). In addition, the focus has often been placed on exploring outcomes such as dropping out, rather than on the process of engagement (Finn & Rock, 1997; Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Less attention has been paid to the emotional and cognitive dimensions of student engagement (Appleton et al., 2006). It has been suggested that the sense of belonging provides a mechanism, linking students' school experiences to their engagement in academic activities provided by the school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). However, the complex interactions contributing to students' school experiences, and further to school engagement, are not sufficiently understood (Kirkpatrick Johnson et al., 2006; Reschly et al., 2008). For example, knowledge on how teacher–student relationships contribute to peer relations and how teachers can support students´ emotional engagement in peer–group relations in the school context is scarce. (Hughes & Chen, 2011). In this study, the focus is on exploring meaningful everyday school experiences that enhance or reduce emotional and cognitive engagement among seventh graders in Finland. Thus, engaging and disengaging episodes vary in terms of the quality of the teacher–student interaction and peer relations, i.e. sense of belonging in the school community.

Antecedents of Engaging School Experience

Prior research on school engagement has identified multiple individual and environmental factors contributing to school engagement, such as the educational goals, and the parents' and students' aspirations (Gonida, Voulala, & Kiosseoglou, 2008; Reschly & Christenson, 2006). In particular, interpersonal relationships and social and academic support (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2011), including teacher support (Carmen, Waycott & Smith 2011; Faircloth, 2009; Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle, & Murray, 2011; Kirkpatrick Johnson et al., 2006; Nickerson et al., 2011; Perry et al., 2010; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010; Yunus, Wan Osman, & Ishak, 2011) are suggested to be determinants of an engaging school experience. A supportive student–teacher relationship is shown to be important for cognitive engagement, particularly among boys, which, in turn, has been found to contribute to school achievement (e.g. Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014; Lohre et al., 2010).

Hence, social interaction, including the sense of belonging, is found to be a central antecedent for an engaging school experience (Finn & Rock, 1997; McDonald & Marsh, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). More specifically, in peer interaction the sense of belonging is shown to be the core of the engaging school experience. However, maintaining the functional peer relations and engaging effectively in school's academic tasks seem to form social tension for students (e.g. Ulmanen, Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2014). Constructive and reciprocal interaction within the school community, and positive acknowledgment by others, has been found to be a significant determinant for emotional engagement (Grotevant, Wroebel, Dulmen van, and McRoy, 2001). The quality of peer interaction has also been shown to play a role in school engagement (see also Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Kunnari & Lipponen, 2010; Ulmanen et al., 2014). For instance, a high level of social optimism, combined with a low level of social withdrawal has been shown to reduce burnout and increase student engagement (Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen, & Nurmi, 2011). Furthermore, social competence may serve as an important base for students´ sense of belonging in social relationships (Salmela-Aro et al., 2011). There is also some evidence that students who feel unimportant or rejected are more likely to be frustrated and to experience alienation from learning activities (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

Accordingly, emotional engagement reflecting the quality of relationships with teachers and peers is suggested to contribute to cognitive engagement, and to further result in

increased engaged behavior (e.g., Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Li & Lerner, 2012). However, significant school experiences and their consistency along the educational path, which contributes to both students' emotional and cognitive engagement, have not been studied extensively by comparing general education students' school experiences and school experiences among students with special needs.

Engaging Students with Special Needs in School Attendance

Surprisingly little research has considered the school career of students with special needs, even though they represent a significant minority group of students who study together with general education students, and thus represent a crucial student voice for developing an inclusive school community. Hence, students with special needs are largely under-represented in the literature on school engagement. We know, for instance, very little about the process through which disengagement influences school dropout rates among students with special needs (Fredricks, et al., 2004; Milsom & Glanville, 2010; and see also Hasher & Hagenauer, 2010).

Furthermore, the degree to which students' individual needs mediate contextual factors and engagement is not examined in most studies (Fredricks et al., 2004; Salvatore, Nota, & Wehmeyer, 2011). For instance, some studies have shown that the students' need for autonomy and the support provided by the school correlate with emotional engagement (e.g. Reschly & Christensen, 2006). However, Reschly and Christenson (2006) have shown that students with mild disabilities and their average achieving peers had small but significant differences in terms of their engagement at school: within these groups misbehavior and a lack of preparation for classes, such as coming to class without a pencil, paper, or book or with uncompleted homework, were significant predictors of dropping out and staying in school. Moreover, there is evidence that certain forms of inclusive practices, such as studying integrated with other students and simultaneously receiving extra support, seem to promote school engagement by generating positive school experiences in terms of the sense of equality and being acknowledged (Matzen, Ryndak, & Nakao, 2010; Pitt & Curtin, 2004). This implies that students' school engagement is at least partly regulated by students' self-assessed academic skills and their achievement compared to others (Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

The social and cultural contexts also play a role in an engaging school experience among students with special needs (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). For instance, good quality teacher relationships and a supportive climate in the classroom appear to be the factors behind school satisfaction among Finnish students attending special education classes (Uusitalo-Malmivaara et al., 2009). Peer support and approval is shown to be an important issue for all students, but it is suggested to be especially important for students with special needs, who may feel rejected by other students (Lovitt, Plavins, & Cushing, 1999). For example, in some studies (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2012 & Langher, Ricci, Reversi, & Citarelli, 2010), loneliness among children with learning disabilities in public elementary and middle schools is shown to be linked to difficulties in peer relationships in class compared to students with no disabilities. Moreover, the social support received outside of the school, especially from parents, is central in terms of school engagement for students with special needs (Szumski & Karwowski, 2012).

Finn and Rock (1997) proposed that positive forms of behavior combined with high self-confidence may serve as protective factors that hinder disengagement. When students hold a positive self-view and exhibit these behaviors in their positive forms, meaning that they attend school regularly, participate in extracurricular activities, and complete required work in and out of school, these may serve as protective mechanisms that improve students'

chances of school success in spite of being a member of a risk group. An inclusive environment is not, however, in and of itself, a protective factor against the risk of isolation (Farrell et al., 2007; Langher, et al., 2010). Instead, the quality of interaction that fosters, reciprocally and inclusively, all students' social skills, relying predominately on the strength of the students and their families, seems to be an important predictor of school engagement and academic success for students with special needs (Lappalainen, Savolainen, Kuorelahti, & Epstein, 2009). More specifically, the sense of belonging that refers to the extent to which the student feels personally accepted, respected, and supported both by the teachers and his/her peers seems to be crucial not only for engaging school experience, but also in terms of reasserting the strengths of the individual student, and further, constructing inclusive practices in the school community (Goodenow, 1993, Ulmanen et al., 2016a; 2016b; Lappalainen et al., 2009).

This calls for building a more coherent understanding of the students' significant school experiences in which school engagement is constructed along the educational path. Our understanding on differences or similarities of the school experiences contributing to school engagement among the general education students and students with special needs is still scarce (e.g., Lewis et al., 2011). However, studies have identified several factors contributing to school engagement, that are suggested to be particularly important for students with special needs (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). For example, positive school experiences in terms of the sense of equality and being acknowledged (Matzen, Ryndak, & Nakao, 2010; Pitt & Curtin, 2004), good quality teacher relationships and a supportive climate in the classroom (Uusitalo-Malmivaara et al., 2009), the significance of peer support and approval (Lovitt, Plavins, & Cushing, 1999), support from parents (Szumski & Karwowski, 2012), preventing misbehaviours and being prepared for classes (Reschly & Christenson, 2006), preventing loneliness associated with difficulties in peer relationships (Bossaert et al., 2012, & Langher, et al., 2010), have been suggested as enhancing engaging school experience. Accordingly, cognitive and emotional engagement are socially constructed premises for meaningful learning and school related well-being (Milsom & Glanville, 2006; Pietarinen et al., 2014).

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to understand school engagement by exploring the positive and negative school experiences of seventh graders. We presume that better understanding of school engagement can be attained by analyzing students' negative and positive school experiences, i.e., critical incidents that either promote or reduce emotional and cognitive engagement in activities provided by the school. Moreover, the experiences of students with special needs are compared with those of general education students. The following research questions are addressed:

1) What kinds of emotionally and cognitively engaging and disengaging critical school experiences do students report?
2) When do these school experiences, occur in their school career?
3) Are there differences between the experiences reported by students with special needs and those reported by students attending general education?

The present study is part of a larger national research project on learning agency and pedagogical well-being in comprehensive schools 2009–2014 (Pyhältö et al., 2010), which focuses on undivided basic education reform in Finland. The project aims to identify preconditions for successful school reform from the point of view of different actors in the school.

Method

Finnish Comprehensive School

The school career of Finnish children typically starts with pre-primary school (not compulsory) at the age of six. At the age of seven, the children start compulsory comprehensive school, which includes the primary (grades 1–6) and secondary (grades 7–9) school phases. Finnish schools are publicly funded, including free lunch and dental and health care. There is no private school system. Moreover, no ability-tracking structures or other structures separate comprehensive school students early on into either academic or vocational education. The Finnish school system is decentralized, meaning that it has flexible accountability structures that place a strong emphasis on allowing schools to regulate themselves (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006). The main objective of Finnish education policy is to offer all citizens an equal opportunity to receive an education, regardless of age, domicile, financial situation, sex, or mother tongue. The right to free basic education is guaranteed for all pupils. Public authorities are obligated to provide for the educational needs of both the Finnish- and Swedish-speaking populations. The Finnish comprehensive school offers a nine-year comprehensive curriculum for the whole age group (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2016,). In Finland, Swedish language speakers in Finland, have a special and strong status, i.e. Finland-Swedish students have the same rights as the majority Finnish students to study in their mother tongue (Vincze & Harwood, 2015).

General educational support for all students includes guidance and counseling, social welfare services, cooperation between home and school, the use of a learning plan, and remedial teaching. Each student of compulsory school age has the right to receive remedial instruction and special needs education, where necessary. If learning difficulties are minor, special needs education is provided as part-time special needs education (remedial teaching) in conjunction with mainstream instruction. In other cases, when students cannot cope in mainstream education, they may be transferred to a special education program, where special needs education is provided in a special group, class, or school. In Finland, the ideology is to provide special needs education primarily in mainstream education. According to the legislation amendment in 2011, all students of compulsory school age have the right to general support, that is, high-quality education, guidance and support. Intensified support must be given to those students who need regular support or several forms of support at the same time. If students cannot cope with mainstream education in spite of general or intensified form of support, they must be given special support. Special support is often given in special classes. The purpose in this form of education is also to assist students to complete compulsory education (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). After the legislation amendment in 2011, the share of pupils having received intensified support has grown (Statistics Finland, 2016). In the PISA studies, the gender gap in reading literacy is the widest in Finland; boys are over-represented among weak readers (PISA, Program for International Student Assessment, 2012).

Participants

This study uses data collected from the students of all Finland-Swedish middle-schools (n=5) in Helsinki, the capital city of Finland. The criterion for selecting the five case-study schools was that they represent the Swedish-speaking language minority schools. The data was collected from Finland-Swedish students because Swedish is the second official language in Finland and they represent the most significant language minority group in

Finland, although their PISA-results are slightly poorer than the native Finnish speaking students´ PISA- results. The schools had both general education students and students with special needs, which represented a minority of the students in the sample. The schools were of various sizes and situated all around the city.

Seventh graders were chosen as participants because they had just undergone the transition from sixth grade, from the elementary grades to the secondary grades. All the students with special needs were diagnosed as having minor learning difficulties, and they were included in mainstream education. The nature of the learning difficulties varied among the students, ranging from speech disorders, reading or writing disorders, learning difficulty in mathematics, learning difficulty in foreign languages, difficulties with adjustment or emotional disorder, or learning difficulties in the school language (Swedish). The students were 12–14 years of age. Altogether, 119 seventh graders responded to the survey (boys=55%; girls=45%). 95 students following mainstream education (the term general education students will be used in the results) and 24 seventh graders attending special education participated in this study. The total response rate was 38%.

Data Collection and Instrument

The data were collected using students´ written responses to the open-ended questions. The data were collected in the time period between the late spring of 2011 and January 2012. The open-ended questions mapped the educational path in terms of students´ significant school experiences. The instrument was translated into Swedish by the first author, and it utilizes an open ended questionnaire protocol developed by the research group (Pyhältö et al., 2010). The correctness of the translation was verified by another researcher.

Students were given verbal and written instructions for completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and the parents were informed about the date of the questionnaire and were asked for their consent for participation. Students were provided with assistance if they needed it. The researcher was present in all schools to collect the data. The students with special needs completed the questionnaire with the other students in group format, meaning that all students wrote down the information by themselves. In this study, we used three items from the questionnaire. It took from 15 to 35 minutes to complete the task.

Open-ended questions on significant (negative and positive) school experiences throughout the school career were analyzed. The seventh graders' perceptions of critical incidents occurring between grades 1 to 6 were gathered using a semi-structured qualitative instrument that contained the following questions: *Describe a positive school experience. Write what happened. What was the situation about? What were you thinking and feeling at that time? Describe a negative school experience. Write what happened. What was the situation about? What were you thinking and feeling at that time?* Students were also asked to place the two types of experiences on the timeline of their comprehensive school path, using the question: *When did this event take place? Please mark both the highly positive (with +) and the negative (with -) experiences on the timeline below, which describes your school career from the first to the sixth grade!* In addition, the background variable of group attachment, that is, students with special needs (marked further as group A) and those students attending general education (marked further as group B), was included in the instrument. Accordingly, the purpose of the questions were to encourage the students to describe their overall school experience and to identify significant episodes (critical incidents) in their school career that contribute to the process of school engagement. The written answers were decoded into text files by the researcher. All 119 students´ answers to

the three open-ended questions were analyzed. One student could have mentioned more than one positive or negative experience although they were asked to mention just one positive and negative experience.

Analysis

The open-ended questions were about significant experiences that students face during their school careers. These experiences were seen as critical incidents in which the events crucial for student school engagement become observable. The critical incident technique was utilized to identify students' positive engaging and negative disengaging school experiences (Tripp, 1993). The students' answers were independently content-analyzed (Haig, 2005).

The units of analyses were constructed on the basis of the students´ answers of the open-ended questions: Describe a positive school experience. Write what happened. What was the situation about? What were you thinking and feeling at that time? Describe a negative school experience. Write what happened. What was the situation about? What were you thinking and feeling at that time? The analysis included three phases: 1) the analysis of the time frame in terms of positive and negative school experiences, 2) the categorization of contexts in which the antecedents of emotional and cognitive engagement occurred, and 3) the comparison of general and special education students' experiences in terms of engaging school experiences.

In the first phase, all the text segments in which students described their involvement, including descriptions of themselves, their attitudes, behavior, or activities in different school contexts that they considered highly significant, were coded into the same *critical incidents of school engagement* category that was further divided into two sub-categories: *positive engaging and negative disengaging school experiences* encountered in grades 1–6.

At the second phase, both *the positive engaging* and the *negative disengaging experiences* were categorized into three exclusive main categories using an inductive strategy: a) *peer interaction*, b) *student–teacher interaction*, and c) *studying*, according to the context in which the positive and negative school experiences occurred. The category *peer interaction* included descriptions of school experiences with peers in informal and formal situations during the school day. In this category, the reported school experiences described the classroom climate, and activities inside and outside of school. For example, "A positive episode was when we, peers in the class had a good time together". The category *student–teacher interaction* included the characteristics of the teacher and the quality of social interaction, such as equality and feedback in teacher-student interaction. The *studying* category, involved students' descriptions of academic activities, their evaluations on their success in studying, and their adaptation to the pedagogical practices in various subjects was reported, including credits and doing homework. Researcher triangulation was used in confirming the findings i.e., the first author discussed every step of this research with the three other authors (Cohen & Manion, 1990).

Finally, at the third phase the context and student group-specific differences were identified by analyzing and comparing the occurrences of positive engaging and negative disengaging school experiences for students with special needs and students attending general education. A chi-square test was carried out to explore the frequencies produced by content analysis, i.e., to explore the relations between the student experiences and student groups (regular/special educational).The statistical relationship between context and group specificity of these critical incidents of school engagement was measured with the chi-square test (significance level of $p<0.05$). The chi-square test was used, because of the

small sample size (n=119 students). The data used for the chi-square were in the form of frequencies. A hypothesis involving more than one set of data can be tested for significance (Guilford & Fruchter, 1985).

Results

The Trends of Significant School Experiences During Primary School

The results suggested that the critical incidents of school engagement reported by the students occurred throughout their school career at primary school (see Figure 1).
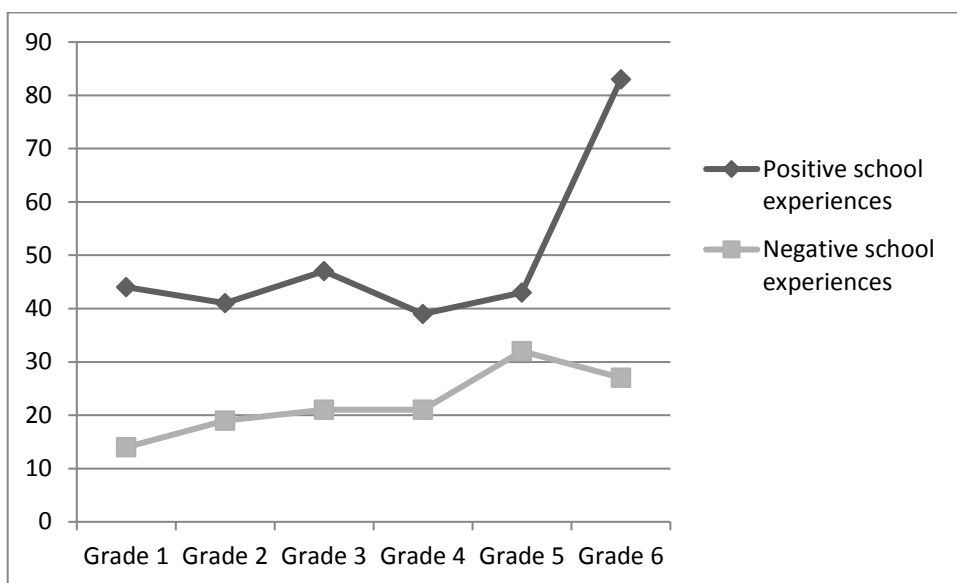

Figure 1. Frequencies of seventh graders' significant positive and negative school experiences during their school career from first to sixth grade

The students consistently reported twice as many positive engaging as negative disengaging experiences, almost in each grade, from the first to the sixth grade (see Figure 1). However, the pattern of negative school experiences increased only slightly toward the end of primary school, whereas the number of positive experiences peaked toward the end of primary school. The phase of entering the school (grade 1) and the phase of transferring to secondary school (grade 6) seemed to be central in terms of school engagement.

The Trends of Significant School Experiences Among Students with Special Needs and General Education Students

Further investigation showed that the critical incidents of school engagement reported by both students with special needs and general education students differed slightly throughout their school career (see Figure 2).
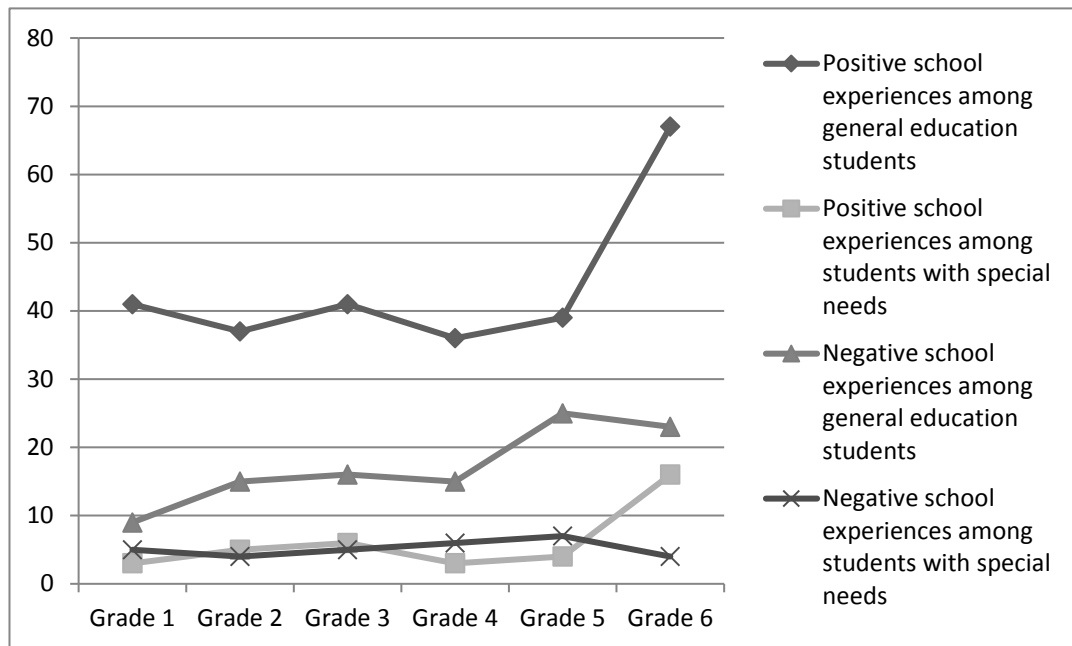
Figure 2. Frequencies of significant positive and negative school experiences among students with special needs and general education students, from first to sixth grade.

The results showed that for all students, the forthcoming transition to secondary school triggered positive engaging as well as negative disengaging school experiences, though the former ones were emphasized. However, entering the school seemed to be a more contradictory phase of their school path for students with special needs than for their general education classmates. The frequencies of positive engaging and negative disengaging experiences followed similar pattern of growth within both group of students.

The results also showed that students reflected their emotional and cognitive engagement through their positive and negative school experiences. The primary contexts in which the emotionally and cognitively engaging school experiences were embedded were (1) peer interaction, (2) student–teacher interaction, and (3) studying (see Table 1). Pedagogical activities in school and special events outside school were also described. However, the critical incidents of school engagement were primarily concerned with how the students perceived the quality of interaction between the members of the school community.

Emotional Engagement in Peer Interaction

The results showed that emotional engagement in peer interaction was the dominant element of school engagement both in the positive engaging (66%) and negative disengaging (57%) school experiences (see Table 1). Reports of positive experiences (59%) were slightly higher than the negative experiences (41%) in this category (see Table 2). All students emphasized the importance of having friends, of a constructive classroom climate, and of participating in common events within and outside school as positive sources for their sense of belonging. The critical incidents that triggered the emotionally engaging experiences were socially constructed premises for engaging school experience. For instance, a girl attending special education recalled about her school path: "*We had camping school and we got to know our classmates better*", and a boy attending special education raised as a critical episode: "*I got new friends*".

Table 1.
The primary contexts of students´ school engagement within the category positive and negative experiences

	Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences	Total
Emotional engagement in peer interaction (n)	68 66%	47 57%	115
Emotional engagement in student–teacher interaction(n)	16 15%	22 27%	38
Cognitive engagement in studying (n)	20 19%	13 16%	33
Total	104 100%	82 100%	186

Table 2.
The emphasis between positive and negative experiences in peer interaction, student–teacher interaction and studying

	Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences	Total
Emotional engagement in peer interaction (n)	68 59%	47 41%	115 100%
Emotional engagement in student–teacher interaction(n)	16 42%	22 58%	38 100%
Cognitive engagement in studying (n)	20 61%	13 39%	33 100%
Total	104	82	186

Moreover, a girl with special needs recalled and recognized the meaning of the transition to the next school level as a significant school phase: "*Because we were the oldest and were going to middle school next year*". Likewise, a girl attending general education raised the significance of the phase of entering school as an emotionally engaging school experience with peers: "*When I started school (grade 1) and got more friends and learned to read, write, swim, and to sing*".

In turn, the experienced isolation, consisting of a lack of trusted friends, bullying, and social conflicts in the classroom, was perceived as a disengaging negative school experience. A girl attending general education reflected a disengaging episode like this: "*It was very noisy, and there were conflicts in the classroom, and the girls were mean to each other*", and

a boy with special needs recalled from his study path: "*I was aggressive toward everyone*". Moreover, a girl attending general education reflected on the prolonged disengaging episode in more depth: "*In fourth grade there were unresolved conflicts between my friends and in the sixth grade I got bullied and depressed, and did not want to go to school, and I was always afraid that someone would have comments about me*".

Emotional Engagement in Student–Teacher Interaction

Student–teacher interaction formed another significant context for the students' emotional engagement (see Table 1). However, the results showed that emotionally engaging student–teacher interaction was a moderate element of school engagement, in both the positive (15%) and the negative (27%) school experiences reported by students (see Table 1). The number of students´ negative disengaging experiences (58%) involving their teachers was slightly higher than the positive engaging experiences (42%) concerning their relationships to their teacher (see Table 2). The significant experiences were often related to social conflicts in the classroom and the ways in which the conflicts were solved, or to the characteristics of the teacher. For instance, a girl with special needs described constructive student–teacher interaction in terms of social optimism: "*We had a fun teacher*" and, in turn, a boy attending general education described a disengaging experience by recalling: "*I was unfairly treated by my teacher*". A girl attending general education also stated: "*I was not bullied, that was a positive school experience, and we had a good teacher*". Hence, the results suggest that the students did not perceive encounters with teachers to be as significant as their interactions with peers in terms of their emotional engagement in the school community. However, the results indicated that the students valued a constructive student–teacher interaction, such as teacher support, not only as a facilitator of their own emotional engagement in school attendance, but also as a crucial intermediary force that facilitated and sustained emotional engagement in peer interaction, or namely the sense of belonging. In other words, the teacher was perceived as a regulator of social interaction within the school community, who reasserted the sense of belonging among students.

Cognitively Engaging Studying

The results showed that cognitively engaging school experiences were brought up by students slightly more often than the student-teacher interaction (see Table 1), but were not brought up by students to the same extent as emotional engaging peer interaction. However, being cognitively engaged to one´s studies was also a moderate element of school engagement. In both positive (19%) and negative (16%) school experiences (see Table 1), the personal success or failure in subjects (school achievement), the effort put into studies, or the lack of it, were the focus of the cognitively engaging or disengaging experience. Reports of positive experiences (61%) were higher than the negative experiences (39%) in this category (see Table 2). Personal success in studies was perceived as a cognitively engaging experience, as a girl with special needs stated: "*To get 9s, good grades*". In turn, an experienced failure in studies, and further, a sense of being continuously less competent than others in studies was also reflected. For instance, a boy with special needs commented: "*I was bad at school*".

All in all, the results showed (see Table 2) that the emotional engagement in peer interaction (59/41%) and cognitive engagement in studying (61/39%) were perceived more positively than the emotional engagement in student-teacher interaction (42/58%).

Group Differences in the Primary Contexts of School Engagement

Table 3 and table 4 show that engaging school experiences did not statistically differ between students with special needs and students attending general education (χ^2 = 2,85, df = 2, p = .240). (see Tables 3 and 4). For all students, emotionally engaging experiences with peers were emphasized almost the most, i.e., general education students (61 %) and students with special needs (80%). Within both groups students with special needs (10 %) and general education students (17 %) rated quite in similar ways the significance of positive engaging student-teacher interaction, i.e., a moderate positive experience. Moderate experiences were also found in the category of cognitively engaging studying, i.e., students with special needs (10 %) and general education students (22 %). However, general education students found being cognitively engaged (22 %) slighter more than being engaged to teachers (17 %). (see Table 3). Table 4 shows that general education students had more positive experiences considering peers, teachers and studying in comparison with students with special needs, However, engaging school experiences did not statistically differ between students with special needs and students attending general education.

Tables 5 and Table 6 show that the students' disengaging negative school experiences did not differ statistically significantly between the student groups (x2 = 2,14, df=2, p=.343) (see Table 5 and table 6). Students with special needs reported similarly emotionally disengaging experiences (74 %) in peer interaction as general education students did (54 %). Both groups´ negative experiences were greatest in this category. Moreover, the number of cognitively disengaging episodes was similarly reported by both groups (see Table 5). Table 6 shows that general education students had more negative experiences considering peers, teachers and studying in comparison with students with special needs. However, disengaging school experiences did not statistically differ between students with special needs and students attending general education (see Tables 5 and 6).

Summary of Results

The primary contexts in which emotionally and cognitively engaging school experiences took place were (1) peer interaction, (2) student–teacher interaction, and (3) studying. The critical incidents of school engagement were primarily concerned with how the students perceived the quality of interaction between the members of the school community. Emotionally engaging peer interaction was the dominant element of school

Table 3. The primary contexts of engaging positive school experiences among students with special needs and general education students

	Group A*	Group B**	Total
Emotionally engaging peer interaction (n)	17 80 %	51 61 %	68
Emotionally engaging student– teacher interaction (n)	2 10 %	14 17 %	16
Cognitively engaging studying (n)	2 10 %	18 22 %	20
Total	21 100 %	83 100 %	104

Note * Students with special needs   ** General education students

Table 4. The emphasis between students´ engaging positive school experiences in peer interaction, student– teacher interaction and studying

	Group A*	Group B**	Total
Emotionally engaging peer interaction (n)	17 25 %	51 75 %	68 100 %
Emotionally engaging student– teacher interaction (n)	2 13 %	14 87 %	16 100 %
Cognitively engaging studying (n)	2 10 %	18 90 %	20 100 %
Total	21	83	104

Note * Students with special needs ** General education students

Table 5. The primary contexts of the groups´ disengaging negative school experiences

	Group A*	Group B**	Total
Emotionally disengaging peer interaction (n)	11	36	47
	74 %	54 %	
Emotionally disengaging student– teacher interaction (n)	2	20	22
	13 %	30 %	
Cognitively disengaging studying (n)	2	11	13
	13 %	16 %	
Total	15	67	82
	100 %	100 %	

Note: *Students with special needs **Students attending general education

Table 6. The emphasis between students´ disengaging negative school experiences in peer interaction, student– teacher interaction and studying

	Group A*	Group B**	Total
Emotionally disengaging peer interaction (n)	11	36	47
	23 %	77 %	100%
Emotionally disengaging student– teacher interaction (n)	2	20	22
	9 %	91 %	100%
Cognitively disengaging studying (n)	2	11	13
	15 %	85 %	100%
Total	15	67	82

Note: *Students with special needs **Students attending general education

engagement both in positive and negative school experiences. Both students with special needs and general education students emphasized the importance of having friends, social skills, and a good class spirit, as well as participating in common events within and outside school and obtaining good grades, as positive sources for their school engagement. Negative school experiences, reducing school engagement, mostly concerned social conflicts, bad relationships with peers and teachers, negative experiences of not being able to do well in exams, and negative attitudes toward homework. Few of the students' experiences related to a commitment to learning in the sense of having fun learning new things.

Moreover, the critical incidents of school engagement reported by the students occurred throughout their school career in the primary school. Yet, students consistently reported twice as many positive as negative episodes in almost every grade, from the first to the sixth grade (see Figure 1). At the same time, the number of positive and negative experiences increased in the sixth grade. However, the pattern of negative disengaging school experiences increased slightly during primary school. The phase of entering school (grade 1) and the phase of transferring to secondary school (grade 6) seem to be crucial in building an engaging school experience. For all students, the forthcoming transition to secondary school triggered engagement to school attendance. However, for students with special needs, entering the school seemed to be a more contradictory phase of their school path than for the other students.

Cognitively engaging school experiences were not brought up by students to the same extent (see Table 1) as emotionally engaging peer interaction – but slighter more than engaging student–teacher interaction. Engaging school experiences did not statistically differ between students with special needs and students attending general education (see Table 3 and Table 4). However, being cognitively engaged to one´s studies was also a moderate element of school engagement (see Table 3).

Discussion

Methodological Limitations

In the present study, an open-ended questionnaire was utilized to capture the positive and negative school experiences of seventh graders in Finland-Swedish middle schools in Helsinki. The written responses gave us an opportunity to explore school experiences retrospectively among both students with special needs and general education students in inclusive educational practices at the school level.

In this study, a retrospective research design was used to capture significant experiences on the students' learning paths. There are some challenges in using a retrospective approach (Cox & Hassard, 2007). The students' experiences are always situated in time, context, and their overall life situation, which are often challenging to recall and sum up afterwards. Accordingly, retrospection is likely to cause some memory effect on the data, as well as generalization of the experience. Moreover, significant negative episodes might be challenging or painful to recall for some of the students.

Using a retrospective approach and open-ended questions also had its advantages (Cox & Hassard, 2007). The reflective and process-oriented design gave the students an opportunity to reflect on their school career and the antecedents of engaging school experiences. This resulted in rich data, including themes the researchers could not have anticipated. Retrospection also ensured that the students recalled and reported only significant events and episodes. However, further research is needed to explore the differences between students with special needs and general education students, and how their experiences vary in a qualitative sense.

The low response rate among students was probably due to practical aspects, such as challenging timing (at the end of the school year) and the practical difficulties of contacting parents (by letter or e-mail) to obtain permission for their children to participate. Because of the low response rate and the small number of participants in both student group (students with special needs and general education students), the results cannot be applied to other schools in Finland. However, the representativeness of the sample was sufficient among both student groups, and especially in terms of Finnish-Swedish schools. Hence, these findings contribute to further studies on school engagement related to middle school students in general, especially students attending special education. However, further research to generate more in-depth understanding of the students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement in inclusive school settings, for instance by conducting classroom and school observations and focus group interviews, is needed.

Results in the Light of Previous Research

The results confirmed the findings of previous studies (for example, Lovitt et al., 1999; Milsom & Glanville, 2006), showing that sense of belonging; good relations with peers and opportunities to participate constitute the core of positive school experiences. Accordingly, the critical incidents supporting school engagement were often related to good relationships with peers and teachers. However, studying did not constitute the primary source of enjoyment and being happy for the students (see also PISA, 2012). Yet, students consistently reported twice as many positive episodes in almost in every grade, from the first to the sixth grade, as negative ones. However, the pattern of negative school experiences increased slightly toward the end of primary school. The results are in line with findings by Lopez (2011), indicating that student engagement peaks during elementary school.

The results implied that school transitions provide an opportunity for building an engaging school experience. The meaningful school experiences that mold students' engagement in terms of school attendance occur especially when students are challenged to reflect on their success in school in relation to the tasks and expectations provided by the school (see also Pyhältö et al., 2010). For students with special needs, entering the school seems to be a more contradictory phase of their school path than for other students. This indicates that entering school is a crucial phase for negotiating the student–school environment fit. This may reflect the special education students' sensitivity to the contextual factors of the school environment, and therefore the anticipation of change in the social environment during the transition, such as losing friends, may be a more crucial factor in school engagement for them (Jindal-Snape, 2008).

Moreover, the importance of teacher–student relationships for students' school engagement was confirmed in our study. The critical incidents reported by the students often related to social conflicts in the classroom and teachers' competence in resolving conflicts. The results indicate that the students value a constructive student–teacher interaction as such, but also as a supporting element for their sense of belonging in their peer group. This indicates that students valued inclusive educational practices in terms of taking care of the quality of social interaction within the school community. This is in line with earlier findings, showing that fair treatment and emotional support from teachers are central determinants of students' experiences of peer relations (e.g., Hughes & Chen, 2011; Luckner & Pianta, 2011). Students with special needs seem to have more positive teacher–student relations, which might reflect the greater time and emphasis given to this relationship in remedial teaching (Habel, 1999; Pitt & Curtin, 2004; Lovitt et al., 1999). Hence in developing inclusive pedagogical practices, such as designing appropriate teacher support for students with special

needs, student – school environment fit should be facilitated by providing intentional support on building strong sense of belonging especially in peer group.

Contradictory to some prior studies (e.g., Pyhältö et al., 2010) in our study students did not emphasize the significance of studying related experiences for their school engagement to same extent. However, the students´ peer interaction was highly emphasized as a source of engaging school experience by the seventh graders. Previous studies have shown that such inclusive practices of integrating students with special needs into the general education context and providing support for them to master better their studies foster emotional engagement in forms of positive experiences of sense of equality and being acknowledged (e.g. Bossaert et al., 2012; Langher et al., 2010; Matzen, Ryndak, & Nakao, 2010; Pitt & Curtin, 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2006). However, in our study no statistically significant differences between students with special needs and general education students in critical incidents of school engagement were found. Perhaps one reason is that in Finland mainstreaming is common, i.e. students have possibilities of more easily feeling accepted and getting a positive identity; requiring thus that they receive enough individual support on their learning path.

Educational Implications and Need for Further Research

We argue that by exploring the complex interactions among students and the various contexts provided by school, and identifying and acknowledging the positive and negative experiences of all the students, it is possible to build an engaging school environment that not only prevents loneliness and dropping out, but enables a variety of students to flourish (e.g., Kirkpatrick Johnson et al., 2006; Salvatore et al., 2011). As we have shown, both students with special needs and students attending general education emphasize social relationships as the most important source for engagement or disengagement at school. However, we need deeper understanding of the process resulting in the positive and negative school experiences, and the possible differences between the groups. Moreover it would be important to study the role of emotional aspects of engagement, and especially the experiences of joy of learning, contributing to students' learning capacity (Tulis & Fulmer, 2013; Ulmanen, 2016). Moreover, in the future, research on school drop-out among minority groups should also take factors such as the school's social environment more seriously, and should try to identify optimal experiences in the classroom environment for a diversity of students (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Schweinle, Turner, & Meyer, 2008).

Moreover, the school transitions should be taken seriously in designing learning environments and planning the learning path. Results suggest that entering school and the transition to upper grades form crucial phases for relations between the student and the school environment and the development of inclusive pedagogical practices, such as designing appropriate teacher support, would especially benefit students with special needs. Moreover, students value good quality relationships with their teachers as facilitators of their emotional engagement in school, but also as support for sustaining emotional engagement in peer interaction, or namely the sense of belonging. This implies that taking care of the quality of social interaction in the whole school community is vital for designing functional, inclusive educational practices. More specifically, in this study, according to the students, school engagement and doing well at school is primarily dependent on the extent to which they feel personally accepted, respected, and supported both by the peers and teachers, i.e. the sense of belonging. This inclusive student voice should be seriously taking account when innovative pedagogical practices for constructing the school for all are developed.

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