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School is for Meeting Friends: secondary school as lived and remembered

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ABSTRACT *The present article discusses young people's manifold and ambivalent feelings towards school as an institution, and towards their own school in particular. The questions are explored using different kinds of data: associations and metaphors that students provided on 'school', their reflections on an ideal school and their own school, as well as memories of secondary school a few years later. It draws on an ethnographic research in secondary schools and on a longitudinal life-history study in which the transitions of the same young people to post-16 education are traced. The empirical conclusions concerning students' perceptions on school are presented with four interlinked themes: students' lack of autonomy, the importance of informal relations, the importance of space and time in school, and the complexities of gender patterns. The article also raises a methodological question on nostalgia in memories—especially in ethnographers' memories.*

Introduction

It has sometimes been argued that the school has lost its importance as a source of meaningful learning experiences for young people. It has lost its 'aura' in relation to the more tempting information delivered by media, youth cultures, etc. that surround school students (Ziehe, 1991; Aittola *et al.*, 1995). Going to school is, yet, a powerful experience; the time spent in schools is considerable, and the informal relations during the school years are largely based on school contacts (for example, Tolonen, 2001).

The importance of school is reflected in the recurrent discussions on students' poor satisfaction in schools. It has been argued that boys, especially, feel miserable in secondary schools. But what is the 'school' that girls and boys have in mind when they reflect their feelings towards it? In the present article, I discuss young people's manifold and ambivalent feelings towards school as an institution, and towards their own school. Ethnographic accounts and interviews are discussed in relation to young people's memories, and the memories of myself as a researcher.

The article draws, first, on an ethnographic research project 'Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in School—with special reference to gender' in two secondary schools in Helsinki. Second, I use school memories of the same young persons at the age

of 17–19, re-interviewed in a follow-up project ‘Tracing Transitions—follow-up study of post-sixteen students’ [1]. In both projects I have worked jointly with Tuula Gordon, and I also use her data and analysis in the present article.

Exploring Secondary School and Beyond

The starting point for our ethnographic study was the complex relationship between schooling and society. National education systems have been established in order to educate citizens on their rights, duties and responsibilities. Schools are expected to exert regulation and to confirm social relations, but also to be sites of social change and emancipation. Schools, then, are arenas with multiple levels and practices, some of them contradictory, and within them there are spaces for agency, negotiation, avoidance, opposition, and resistance (Gordon *et al.*, 2000a).

Our research group of six women [2] traced these questions through ethnographic study in two secondary schools in Helsinki. We spent one year at the schools, followed lessons and breaks; everyday life at the schools and special occasions. We interviewed students and their teachers, collected curricular materials and students’ work, questionnaires, etc. The project was contextualised, collective, comparative and cross-cultural. We worked together with Janet Holland, who conducted with her assistants a similar study in two schools in London. We have presented elsewhere our data and methods (for example, Gordon *et al.*, 2000a, b, c). For the purpose of the present article, it is important to highlight that we collected an especially large and rich data base from two schools in Helsinki: for example, more than 200 transcribed interviews (0.5–4 hours) and thousands of pages of ethnographic field notes and diaries. We had decided that all the material would be available for all of us, but each researcher uses special sets of data for her study. For example, Tuula Gordon and the author have read and analysed the interviews of 96 seventh-grade students (13–14 years old) and 44 teachers—some of which were conducted by other researchers. We also have read through practically all field notes from the lessons of the seventh grade, but then selected a few periods of the school year for detailed and multiply layered analysis. This means that we have much data that is not analysed, but that still has its impact on our thinking and shows itself in ways that we state our questions.

We were interested in both the official and informal processes of the school and the way in which time and space affect pedagogy and practice. Inspired by Nancy Lesko (1988), we also wanted to trace a ‘curriculum of the body’. Therefore, we made an analytic differentiation between the ‘official’, the ‘informal’ and the ‘physical’ layers of the school (Gordon *et al.*, 1999, 2000a). The official layer refers to teaching and learning, the curriculum, pedagogy and formal hierarchies. By the informal layer we mean interaction among teachers, among students and between teachers, students and other staff, including informal hierarchies. The physical layer refers to spatiality and embodiment, including space, time, movement and sound/voice. These layers are intertwined in the everyday life of the school, but this distinction allowed us to observe and analyse the complexity of practices and processes at school. Also, one of the constant sources for new ways of thinking was embedded in the interlinking of the official, informal and physical layers. The following is one example from a lesson of music. The theme of the lesson was the sense of hearing:

[The teacher starts to talk about clacking of ears] [...]

Teacher: What helps? Heikki is doing just that right now.

[Heikki is chewing gum, stretching it when the teacher talks.]

Teacher: Go and throw it away.

[Heikki goes to the bin, performs, demonstrates, stretches the gum, drops it next to the wastepaper basket.]

Manu: Heikki is a stupid geezer!

Teacher: Who are you showing off to? [...]

Pete: To the girls!

Here the teacher used Heikki's gum chewing as part of the official teaching, while simultaneously making the point that gum chewing during the lesson is forbidden. Heikki used the opportunity to create a physical performance. Manu experienced Heikki's performance as informal; that is, by stepping forward, and through his comments tried to put Heikki in his place. The teacher and Pete reinforced this and combined Manu's behaviour, too, in the criticism.

This example suggests that there was much more going on during this lesson than the teaching-learning process during which students should learn about ears; the teacher, Heikki, Manu and Pete negotiated about positions in the official and informal arenas of the classroom, and physicality was used as a means towards such ends. 'The girls' formed a silent backdrop for this situation; showing off to girls can be interpreted as a laughable act in 13-year-old boys' informal hierarchies.

As people who have conducted ethnographic research are well aware, it is not only 'getting in' to the field that is demanding, but also 'getting out' of it; deep emotions are involved in the process, and leaving the field causes sorrow and ambivalent feelings of loss (Coffey, 1999; Gordon *et al.*, 2000c). The strategy of Tuula and myself to challenge this sorrow was a follow-up. We did not return to the school (apart from short visits) but in the research project 'Tracing Transitions—follow-up study of post-sixteen students' re-interviewed 63 of the young people—then 17–18 years of age—whose daily life we shared while they were 13–14 years old. Currently, we are conducting a new set of interviews with them, at the age of 20–21.

In this project, we trace the transitions of the young women and men, as well as their own interpretations of the ways in which these transitions have been accomplished. We explore the textual production of meaning as well as the materiality of their experiences. We analyse difference and commonality in the decision-making employed by them, possibilities of, and limitations in, their agency, as well as their own sense of being agentic. We also focus on resources at their disposal when pursuing their imagined futures (Gordon & Lahelma, 2002). But we also turned their gaze—as well as our own—backwards. We asked the young people to recall their years in secondary school.

Young People's Reflections on 'School'

The word 'school' evokes various images and also emotionally burdened memories from our own school years. School as an abstraction assumes concrete content from the schools that we have experienced ourselves, as well as those from cultural images that we have learned from literature, the media, etc. In our research, we used different kinds of questions in order to trace young people's feelings towards schools in general: at the age of 13, we asked them to give associations and metaphors for school, and to think about an ideal school. Their own secondary school was more concretely reflected when we

asked whether they liked it, and tried to invite them to specify the features in their school that they did or did not like. In most of the follow-up interviews, we tried to activate the memories of 17-year-old to 18-year-old young people with an open invitation to talk about their secondary school years. The latter interviews were conducted alone or in groups of two or three young men and women who went to school together and were friends at that time.

School in Associations

A list of prompt words was presented in the beginning of our ethnographic interviews, and the students were asked to write down what came into their minds. The first of the words was 'school'. Free associations, which accounted for over one-half of the responses, refer to the official school: teacher, student, studying, textbook, homework. Classmates and friends appeared in some associations, and school as something boring and compulsory, in some others. There was not one single association that reflected enjoyment or pleasure. This question did not seem to evoke students' fantasies: school is just a place to study, 'school is just school', as one student suggested.

It is easy to understand these associations in relation to observation notes as well as my own memories from the lessons. During many lessons, studying meant copying endless notes from the overhead projector to exercise books, answering teachers' questions that nobody found interesting—apparently not even the teacher. Although most of the teachers in our research schools were competent and devoted professionals and much liked by their students, the contents of the syllabus, the textbooks and the organisation of curriculum—'teaching-as-usual' (Davies & Hunt, 1994)—do not necessarily evoke enthusiasm in students (see also Harris, 1994). One of the analytic codings that we conducted in our observation notes was 'emotions'. We did not find many instances when pleasure, enjoyment or happy feelings were observed in relation to studying and learning in the official school (Gordon *et al.*, 2000a; Gordon, 2000).

School in Metaphors [3]

The familiarity of 'the school' makes it difficult to observe and analyse (Spindler & Spindler, 1982; Delamont & Atkinson, 1995). One way to grapple with issues that are seemingly self-evident is by using metaphors. Metaphors translate, invent and betray. They express much, but also lose and overlook. They clarify and confuse. They present, Lefebvre (1991) argues, the mind's eye—mental scrutiny and clarity (Gordon & Lahelma, 1996).

Drawing from our earlier work with school metaphors (Gorden *et al.*, 1995; Gordon & Lahelma, 1996), we asked the students in our research schools to fill a sentence 'School is like ...'. What was striking to us was how the same metaphors repeated themselves over and over again. Most of them were negative, often comparing schools with closed institutions. Many of the most negative metaphors, like torture chamber or jail house, came from boys from a class that was considered to be a 'problem class', but also came from girls in a class with an emphasis on art and good academic results. In the latter class, especially, many metaphors also comprised an ambivalent component, for example: 'school is like an apple which is rotten on the surface but good inside'. There were very few positive metaphors.

What do these metaphors actually express? Comparing schools with closed institutions includes, in any case, an element of the cultural genre of 'student humour'. This is what

some of the young people themselves also related, especially when we returned to this discussion in the follow-up interviews. But student humour draws from something concrete. Some of the young people, for example, gave the explanation that the metaphors derive from having to come to the school every day.

Metaphors are typically embodied (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and spatial (Smith & Katz, 1993). We suggest that the side of the school that these metaphors reveal is largely the physical layer of the school. Again, we can reflect this interpretation through our field notes. The ethnographic data is rich with examples that demonstrate the tight time-space paths of the school, the compulsory movements and immobility in the official school for example, (Gordon *et al.*, 1999) that we also experienced as researchers. Students—and researchers trying to trace their paths—move from one classroom in one lesson to the break, and then to another classroom in another lesson, from day to day. There is little leeway in the daily routines. We have suggested that metaphors criticise the production of obedient bodies in school. They reveal and exaggerate that which is difficult to verbalise, the lack of autonomy that young people feel at school. At the same time, the general ambivalence in metaphors also reflect the ambivalent relation to school: although it is compulsory and sometimes hard to stand, the school also provides possibilities for enjoyment and pleasure (Gordon *et al.*, 1995).

The Ideal School

The perception of school as something that is taken for granted received more confirmation in our interpretations when we analysed the students' thoughts about their ideal school. It turned out to be one of the difficult questions in the interview:

School can't be kind of wonderful ... it's like for studying.

I can't say what it would be like, because I can't demand anything from the school. School is, after all, always a school.

Many of the young persons at the age of 13–14 could not, or would not, tell us what they would like to change in their own school. There were some wishes for less homework, shorter school days—less but not different. It was possible to read from some of their answers, however, the same wish that we interpreted from the metaphor questionnaire: more autonomy. Although the students did not imagine a school that would really differ from their own school, they still wished to be able to make more decisions on their curriculum, working methods and daily routines.

Well, to be allowed to do what you want to during the lessons. To be allowed to decide the syllabus. And then, to be able to have lunch when you feel like it.

This answer was given by Leena, a pleasant and quiet girl. She obviously did not mean that students really should be allowed to do whatever they want to, but thought of the contents and methods used. This hope could also be read from other data. For example, from students' reflections on their teachers: students like teachers who use varied methods (Lahelma, 2000). Also, the observations and memories confirm this: the moments when students seemed to have enjoyed the learning situations were often those when the methods were more flexible and left room for some autonomy.

Although hopes to find friends and improve informal relations did occur, there were also very few references of this nature. I do not suggest that this means that the informal layer of school is not relevant for young people, however; rather, they might have

thought that it does not belong to the frame of the question. Some of the students presented hopes that relate to the physical layer of school: for example, answers reflected the dream of a beautiful school building with a sunny garden. The hopes were mostly quite realistic: students wished for features that some other schools had. For example, lockers for leaving their personal belongings. Auli, a girl with a rich imagination, took a step outside her reality when she started to think about her ideal school, but quickly returned:

Well, it's kind of, it wouldn't be real. I think of something wonderfully light, and it almost could be outside in the green. And a kind of house made of glass, kind of a beautiful palace, and it would be almost like at home [...] teachers wouldn't be kind of ... they would be more like students and like that, they wouldn't be that much like adults. And then there would be animals, and lots of plants [...] Yes, but that would be more or less impossible. You wouldn't learn anything if it were in a palace like that. People would just enjoy their living there, it wouldn't be a school anymore.

The Students' Own School

Earlier, I discussed students' reflections on the school as an abstraction—although the 'school' that the young people have in their minds necessarily draws also from concrete schools in their experience. An invitation to think about their own school evoked more elaborated reflections. Most of the students answered that they like their own school and enjoy being there. The answers did not, however, reveal very strong enthusiasm: 'quite all right' was a typical answer. The positive evaluation was often due to a comparison with their own primary school, or a school that some of their friends attended. As you have to go to school anyway, this school is 'good enough'.

Well, this is quite all right this school, there is nothing wrong in this school, kind of.

I don't know, I kind of don't like to go to school, but this is a lot better than the primary school.

When questioned further, the interviewees might suggest reasons for liking their own school. In most cases, answers were related to the informal layer of school in one way or another: having friends, getting along with classmates and not much teasing. There were very few references to the official, but some references to the physical layer of school.

Memories of School

When we asked 'our seventh graders' to remember their time in secondary school 1–2 years after they had left it, memories were rather positive in most cases. While positive emotions were almost completely absent from the stories that the aforementioned questions evoked in students who were still attending secondary school, memories afterwards often reflected enjoyment.

Lots of nice moments, at least in our group.

Always when I went to school I got cheerful [...] And when I was sick, then I was like, oh what has happened now. What kind of gossip and all [...] You belonged to the group and it was kind of a clique.

I think that it was the happiest time in my life so far. I met my boyfriend there, and kind of. I don't know, the three years was a terrific time, kind of.

In the group interviews, sharing of enjoyable memories was often followed by happy laughter. For example, a class trip was recounted with endless anecdotes. Happy memories were related in one interview after another to friends, jokes, situations when the informal layer of school invaded the official (c.f. Woods, 1990). Situations of 'having a laugh' were important in the memories of these young people—not only to 'lads', but also to girls and boys, whom Paul Willis (1977) might have labelled 'ear-holes'.

All young people did not, however, share these kinds of positive memories. Negative memories were also often related to the informal school—for example, to experiences of being bullied, to cliques in the class that did not get along with each other, or problems in personal relations.

I don't have really nice memories. It was some, well I don't know, it was kind of, I get a bit stressed when I try to think about it, a bit. There was bullying there [...] at least I have no friends left from the secondary school.

Discussions, which followed the general prompt question to remember the secondary school years, regularly started from the informal layer of school, and we often had to continue by asking more concretely about teachers or contents of learning in order to get the interviewees' reflections concerning these issues as well. What was important, enjoyable, fun in secondary school was friends; peers also may have affected the strongest feelings of sorrow and anxiety.

We asked the young people whether they remember having learned something important at school. It seemed to be a difficult question for most. Often the question was followed with long silences and embarrassed laughs, as in the following extract from Hille and Taru's interview:

Taru: Nothing comes [to my mind] like immediately.
[Pause]

Hille: Not really.

Elina: What did you find at school that you think was important to learn, in general?
[Pause, laughing]

Elina: Don't tell me that you haven't learned anything important in secondary school?
[Pause]

Elina: Well, what did you enjoy learning?

Hille: Art.

Elina: You found art nice?

Hille: Yes.

Taru: I liked, kind of, biology and history.

It seemed to be easier to express what one liked than what was important to learn. Later on, however, Hille mentioned that learning to work properly is something important that she learned at school. Some of the students mentioned some specific subjects; for example, history or languages, or general knowledge. Some mentioned certain science

lessons in which they learned through experiencing, while others remembered presentations and teamwork on some project. Sometimes an informal discussion with a teacher was remembered as important. Marika, who was often away from school without reason, remembered a metaphor that her class teacher had used after finding out that Marika had lied: 'Trust is like a match, you cannot light it again'.

Controversies and Ambivalence: some illustrative cases

I have already described young persons' relations to school in general, and to their own secondary school in more specific terms. I suggested that there is a variety of emotions involved, and that different questions evoke different kinds of answers. Associations evoke reflections concerning school as taken for granted. Friends are important when the good sides of one's own school are reflected, and still more in memories, although not mentioned in the fantasies of the ideal school. At the same time, rigid time-space paths and the lack of autonomy might cause distress that is expressed in the metaphors of closed institutions.

The layered reflections become more evident when the answers of the same persons are studied; variation in reflections 'within' a person rather than 'between' persons or groups (e.g. genders) is suggested through case studies. In the following, I present answers of two girls (Siiri and Aura) and two boys (Saku and Matti) with my own field-based reflections and memories of these four young persons.

Siiri

Siiri is a working-class girl who had severe difficulties at home and came to school irregularly. During lessons she was quiet, and in the interview withdrawn and impatient. Her association to the school was 'studying', and to the metaphor questionnaire she wrote: 'School is like a shitty cowshed that I don't manage to go to. It's kind of from ass!' [4]. When I asked Siiri about her ideal school, she answered: 'I have no idea of such.' In the interview, she expressed vaguely positive comments about her own school, and interrupted her sentence when she started to think about something that she did not like in her school:

Elina: What do you think about this school just now?

Siiri: Well, it's better than the primary school.

Elina: Do you like to be in this school?

Siiri: Yes!

Elina: What is good in this?

Siiri: I can't say. Everything. Or ... I don't know.

Elina: Is there something that you don't like about this school?

Siiri: I don't know. Well, there is something ...

Siiri was obviously much happier to see me in the follow-up interview than in the interview at the age of 13. When I asked her about her school memories, she recounted that 'at least I skipped a lot'. She did not have very negative memories about the secondary school years, but did not remember much. She talked about the school where she had gone after the secondary school, and in positive terms that reflect both the

official and informal layers. Now, at the age of 18, Siiri went to school, had friends, and seemed to be capable of taking care of herself.

Aura

I remember Aura as a girl who was liked by both teachers and class mates. She participated actively during the lessons and in the informal tasks of the class. She can be considered as one who likes to go to school, but constantly became annoyed with (male) classmates who disturbed the lessons. She is an ambitious middle-class girl who gets stressed because she wants to achieve—and she does achieve. Her association of school was ‘homework’ and her metaphor ‘school is like all right’. Her feelings concerning her own school were ambivalent, nevertheless:

Elina: How does it feel like here?

Aura: All right. A good choice [this school]. And it is always good that [...] you can choose more, so this is good too.

Elina: Yes, okay, can you say that you like this school?

Aura: Yes!

Elina: [...] and are there other things that ...

Aura: Teachers are nice, they are not kind of shouting.

Elina: [...] Is there something that you don't like in this school?

Aura: Well, our class is not so nice. They're kind of, like good-for-nothing all. But I've nothing, not anything to detest kind of. It is all right.

The discussion suggests that Aura was satisfied with the official school but was not equally happy in relation to some of her classmates, which my memories also suggested. Her ideas of the ideal school confirm this: ‘Not those who fool around. And then, a beautiful and cosy school’.

When I asked Aura to remember her secondary school years, her first reaction was that she does not remember much: ‘Oh no! Nothing comes to my mind but—it's good that it's over. I don't mean that it was anything terrible, but it's really good to get further’. Further on, she related positive memories that suggest that the informal relations turned out to be important also for her.

It was nice to go to school, because you saw people around, and there was much going on around you all the time [...] I have always thought that it is most important to see people, and learning only comes later.

Aura's memories were not very positive, however. There were not many girls in the class, and she remembers that they were in two cliques, the relations of which were not very good (see also Gordon *et al.*, 2000b). She also regrets that she concentrated too much in studying and did not understand that there is life outside of school as well.

Saku

I remember Saku as a boy who got easily excited. He was a working-class boy who took school seriously and got tired of it. His constant questions were often regarded as childish. He associated the school to ‘a place that you just have to go to and there you

have to study', and his metaphor was: 'School is like a medieval torture chamber'. He thought that his school is rather close to an ideal school, nevertheless:

Well, I can't say. It would be quite a lot like this, a bit. Because there aren't so many things here [that I don't like], apart from teachers, of course, who are a bit ... They kind of get angry quite easily.

His feelings about his own school reflect the physical layer of school, with a short comment to the informal layer.

Elina: How do you feel about your school?

Saku: Yes, it's like nicer, at least in the middle [of the term] I started to think that it's all right to be here. But now, I start to get a bit tired, waiting for the summer holidays kind of. It's like nicer than primary school.

Elina: Yes, can you say that you like your school?

Saku: Well, here you can be much freer, and we have the kiosk here, it's good that we are allowed to buy from the kiosk if we want to. And then I have friends here.

Elina: Is there something about it that you don't like?

Saku: Hmm. Not so much kind of. Well, sometimes we have such long days.

Saku participated in the follow-up interview with two friends that he met rather often, although they went to different schools. Their joint memories were happy, reflecting on situations when the official and informal school met. In Saku's memories, 'there was always something nice happening'. He also remembered that 'the class was all nice' and 'I got along with everybody all right.' He also mentioned that sometimes, during the last period of secondary school, he suddenly got interested in studying, and he felt that he started to learn—this enthusiasm did not, he said, continue in the upper secondary school. When the boys were asked to reflect school memories that were not so nice, Saku mentioned the triple periods of biology: 'It was like three hours, just work'. Saku did not refer straightforwardly to the feeling of tiredness that he told about in the first year in secondary school, but the feeling that official school was hard for him was there. In the group interview with his friends who did not pay equally much attention to academic achievements as he did, however, the happy memories from the informal school were more in focus.

Matti

Matti is a middle-class boy who tried to get an informal position of power in his class. He has read a lot and actively presented his political opinions, especially during history lessons. This often irritated both the teacher and his classmates. His association to a school was 'a big house', and his metaphor: 'School is like dog's shit. It stinks, people don't want to step on it. It is occupied by brainless bacteria and viruses and the only pleasure is to step out from it'. The metaphor is verbal demonstration, typical for him. The physical layer of school was in focus in his thoughts about the ideal school:

It's difficult to define. Here we have rather varied kinds of teachers in this school. And in some way this is an ideal school, but I liked that [primary] school a lot. There was a park close by and it was sunny in the park.

The importance of spatiality was also available in Matti's perceptions of his own school:

Matti: [...] Actually I don't care what school I go to. It is, nevertheless the same thing there. It's only teachers who change, and friends you get, nevertheless[...]

Elina: Yes, but in principle, do you like your school?

Matti: Rather an ugly building, but otherwise it is all right.

The school building instantly appeared also to his secondary school memories: 'It was such an ugly school building'. But Matti, in a joint interview with two more silent boys, also remembers his secondary school by telling stories that happened; for example, stories in which he challenged teachers' authority and won (Lahelma, 2000).

School for Girls or Boys?

The 'moral panic' concerning the findings of boys' poor school achievement is a new discussion in many countries [5], elegantly analysed and challenged in feminist research (for example, Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Kenway *et al.*, 1998). The current discussion is largely based on an assumption that boys feel unhappy in school, which is defined as a 'feminine' institution. In Finland, this discussion started in the 1980s, when the first national statistics from comprehensive school suggested that girls, on average, achieved better than boys (Lahelma, 1992). A few years ago, the Finnish discussion received new vent from results of surveys that suggest that boys' attitudes towards school are, on average, more negative than girls', and the difference is especially strong in Finland (Linnakylä *et al.*, 1996). Drawing from our data, I am tempted to argue that girls' and boys' relations to school are complicated and manifold; questionnaires cannot catch one single quantitative 'truth' in this question.

With the above analysis and case study illustrations, I try to suggest that both girls and boys may have varied emotions towards the school; moreover, both high-achieving middle-class girls and low-achieving working-class boys may share some of the emotions. Siiri obviously was not happy in secondary school, but her anxieties drew largely from home, and she was able to change her relation to the school later on. Aura seems to fit into the picture of a high-achieving girl; however, her relations to achievement as well as to class-mates were controversial (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). Saku got stressed with the academic expectations of the school, but enjoyed the informal layer of school. For Matti, both the official and the informal layers of school seemed largely to form a playground for performing masculinities. The answers of these, as well as other, young people suggest the importance of the physical layer of school, students' autonomy, and relations with other students.

Methodological Considerations: nostalgia in the ethnographic eye

The findings and interpretations in this discussion are grounded in thorough coding, analysis and interpretation of data, using well-established methods of ethnographic analysis. Without using grounded theory, we have applied and adapted principles informed by it, as Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) have suggested to ethnographers. But our data draws not only from ethnographic study, but also from follow-up interviews of the same young people. In the life history interviews, school memories were evoked, as well as my own memories from the field. The positive reflections of school in memories suggest some methodological considerations.

Memories of childhood do have some relation to the events that have taken place and

the authentic experiences of the memoriser, but the relation is complex. As Plummer (2001) suggests, all life-story work is selective, and memories are often seen as a major path to this selection. Memories are constructions of the past, and the past is seen in emotional terms; memories are shaded by nostalgia (Korkiakangas, 1996). With this notion, I do not only refer to the memories of our interviewees, but also my own ethnographer's memories from the school—memories that are not documented in the field notes. It is more than 5 years since we sat in the classrooms of these young people, now on their path to adulthood, and their secondary school years have fossilised into our field notes (Tolonen, 2001). We have written a book, chapters of books and articles, and talked about our findings again and again. When I read and re-read the narratives and discussions with our young friends from the interview transcripts, lively memories fill my head; memories from various moments in the everyday life at school, anecdotes, often situations when the informal layer has invaded the official. I can feel again my own anxieties, enjoyments and feelings of embarrassment when I tried to make contacts without disturbing the schools' everyday life, to negotiate my position as a researcher between the students and the teachers (Gordon *et al.*, 2000c; see also, for example, Thorne, 1993 Epstein, 1998). The memories were activated especially during the follow-up interviews.

Our ethnographic data is rich, and many tempting themes and seductive questions still await being analysed and written about. When we return to write something new, we—like ethnographers are supposed to—re-read and re-analyse data. But we also remember episodes from the classrooms, some student's comments during an interview, perhaps a sudden gesture that has been impossible to record in the notes or transcripts. These might invite us to return to some specific pieces of data along with the systematic analysis of some others. Those of the incidents that have been most powerful for ourselves—maybe those that have evoked memories from our own school days (*cf.* Rhedding-Jones, 1996; Hey, 1997)—are most likely to stay in our memories and lead our analysis. This happens although we tried to be conscious about our own childhood memories through collective memory work before going to the field (Gordon *et al.*, 2000b,c; see also, for example, Crawford *et al.*, 1992).

I do not present this methodological consideration in order to argue that the conclusions I suggest are not valid. On the contrary, I suggest the power of ethnographically grounded longitudinal work in the grasping of questions that are taken for granted, culturally burdened and difficult to analyse. Collecting data in different methods, in different times, is not only used as a methodological triangulation in a simple sense (for example, Cohen & Manion, 1982), but rather to unfold new layers of the manifold reality. Here also lurk some of the difficulties: no answer seems to be sufficient anymore. This becomes still more problematic when we blur our own memories as ethnographers within the analysis. Even if we regard the diaries and other field notes written while still in the field as more adequate data than our own memories, the latter still have their impact on what we pick up as relevant data. The more data we have, the more possibilities we have from which to choose.

Does this lead to a textual turn (Clifford, 1986), or to the extreme post-structural position that every narrative is equally relevant? I do not think so. In spite of the variety of perceptions concerning 'school' that these accounts suggest, there are a few themes that have repeated persistently: from the first trials to make sense of the metaphors (Gordon *et al.*, 1995; Gordon & Lahelma, 1996) and reflect them to other data (Lahelma, 1997), to the memories of the young people and ourselves. These themes stubbornly

challenge the trials to find contradictory evidence. With them I move to the conclusions of the present article.

Conclusions

The four interlinked themes that I present as empirical conclusions from the data are the following: students' lack of autonomy in secondary schools, the importance of the informal layer of school, the importance of the physical layer of school, and the complexities of gender patterns at school (see also Gordon *et al.*, 2000a). Although this article hopefully has added some nuances to the discussion, these themes are not new, but discussed earlier in sociologically informed school research [see, among many others, Delamont & Galton (1986) or Woods (1990) for inspiring discussions on some of these]. However, they are not often discussed in the mainstream educational research and politics that focus on the contents of teaching and learning and—more and more as a result of the New Right educational restructuring—on results that are quantifiable.

The first theme, students' lack of autonomy in secondary schools, might be especially visible in Finland. The external evaluators of the Finnish comprehensive school (Norris *et al.*, 1996) paid attention to the strong teacher-centredness, and our cross-cultural comparisons also suggest that teaching methods were more based on project work and students' initiatives in the London schools in which Janet Holland conducted her study (Gordon *et al.*, 2000a); school metaphors were less negative in the British than in the Finnish schools.

Moving to the second theme, getting and maintaining friendships is most vital for young people during the years that they spend in secondary school. Still in the everyday life of schools, young people do not have much leeway, or time and space for informal relationships. The invasions of the informal on the official agenda form a recurrent source of conflicts between teachers and (some) students—and, for many others, a source of enjoyment that stays in their school memories more persistently than the teaching content. Therefore, teachers are bound to fail in their efforts to maintain the boundaries between the official and the informal layers of school and to keep the informal outside of the lessons. Such efforts take the energy and time of everybody involved. The solution that I suggest is not, however, to allow the students to 'do what they want to during the lesson'—equally little, that this was really behind Leena's fantasy of an ideal school. But I suggest that educational research and practice should explore new methods for using young people's need to interact with each other as a resource, rather than as a disturbance.

With the importance of the physical school—which was the third theme—we mean, at first, that the school building and space has relevance in students' every day life. Second, young people are not happy at the school in which their daily time-space paths are too rigid; they are more rigid in the Helsinki school than in the London schools of our research. This, again, might have relevance when we compare the Finnish and the British metaphors. For a more detailed analysis of the physical layer of school, I refer to the book *Making Spaces* (Gordon *et al.*, 2000a).

The fourth theme, gender, would also need more space for a thorough discussion. But drawing from these findings, I argue strongly against the simple assumption that girls are happier at school than boys. There are differences between boys and between girls, within boys and within girls, but also culturally held ways for girls and boys to express their feelings.

The school is 'like a jail house', and it is 'all right', and most of all it is 'a place where

to meet your friends', but still 'just a school'. Everyone goes there, no other options are available.

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NOTES

- [1] The Academy of Finland and the University of Helsinki have supported this study and my work at the project.
- [2] Tuula Gordon, Pirkko Hynninen, Tuija Metso, Tarja Palmu and Tarja Tolonen participated.
- [3] This section on metaphor analysis draws from collective work and writing within a Finnish network 'Gender and Education'. I am especially grateful to Tuula Gordon and Tarja Tolonen.
- [4] 'From ass' is a phrase that was rather regularly used in Finnish by young people at this period; it is not equally powerful as a swear word as it sounds in English.
- [5] Actually this discussion is not new; Michèle Cohen (1998) refers to John Locke who, already in 1693 expressed his concern for the failure of young gentlemen to master Latin, despite spending years studying it, while young women learned French much more rapidly, by 'prating' with their governesses.

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