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Good Learning Environment

Perceptions of Good Quality in Comprehensive School by Pupils, Parents and Teachers

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Introduction

In my article I discuss the good quality of learning environment from various physical, psychological, social and pedagogical points of view. The opinions of pupils, parents and teachers will be in the focus in this article, instead of defining good learning environment from the factors and challenges which are generally seen as pillars of good learning environment. Therefore, the article will differ from the traditional studies of learning environment, which are usually concentrating on the use of information technology in school environment. (see Ahvenainen, Ikonen & Koro 2002; Koun-tem, Yuan-cheng & Chia-jui 2008; Tapola & Niemivirta 2008). In this article, information technology is seen as a tool used in a good learning environment, and it is a part of physical, psychological, social and pedagogical learning environment (see Koun-tem et.al. 2008, 1412).

The thoughts of pupils, parents and teachers about the principles of good learning environment, despite of some variation in respective groups interests, support the notion of Koun-tem et.al. (2008, 1412 - 1421.) how so called "new" learning environments and their positive learning results are in fact based on old and familiar factors: in environments that are safe and take care of basic human needs, in practises that support pupils' own learning strategies and give immediate response, all of which together produce and support individual learning motivation (see Tapola & Niemivirta 2008, 291 - 292).

This article gives voice for opinions and visions of pupils, parents and teachers, and helps forming a picture of what a good quality in learning environment is from different perspectives of various user groups. Through these opinions and visions I try to create a larger picture of what a good quality is in this context, and discuss various notions of importance in developing school and in preparing for change in school.

School as a learning environment

Anyone, who has ever been at school, has some kind of an idea what kind is a good learning environment. It is an everyday environment for those who attend to school themselves, or it comes close through their children. For some, it is just a distant memory. In any case, most people have an opinion about it.

More and more attention is being paid to the quality of learning environment nowadays. In teaching profession, this means more and more courses and projects that are bringing school and society together. In developing the learning environment, also the students have been able to voice their thoughts. A national example for this has been the matriculation exam in psychology in 2007, where students were able to discuss the good quality of learning envi-

ronment. With a broader discussion, the idea what *learning environment in school* is, has been widening. Learning is not something merely happening inside the school walls. We have got closer to the ideas of Åhlberg (1998) about multi-layered connection between learning and environment. According to him, learning and environment are in connection with each other through three different aspects: growth and learning can be about learning from environment, in environment and with the help of it, and it can be learning for the environment and for solving its problems (Åhlberg 1998, 26 - 28). At its best, there are each and every one of these aspects in learning and in environment itself - they are not just individual factors, they are intertwining, supportive things. Learning is thus seen as something happening in connection with an individual and his or her environment.

School as a learning environment has distinct educative goals, guided by national, municipal and individual school assessed curricula. According to these, a pupil should be able to find his or her place in the society as an individual and as a member of the society after finishing the school. Learning environment should support pupils' growth and education based on his or her individual background: it should help in obtaining a positive self-esteem and support the idea of life-long learning. (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004, 14.) School reflects the society of today at the same time when it is a basis for the society of tomorrow (see Greig & Taylor 1999, 4 - 5; Heppell et al. 2004, 14 - 15).

Finnish schools and learning environment have received lots of international attention during the last few years. In PISA - researches¹ Finnish pupils have been performing well in various subjects. According to PISA - results, pupils learn in the Finnish learning environment, they know things and teachers know how to teach. Good results still do not necessarily correlate with a good learning environment. A research made for the Finnish child ombudsman about pupils' school worries is indicative of this (Arponen 2007) as well as UNICEF report of well-being of children. (Unicef innocenti research centre report card 2007; Unicef-information note 2007; compare Kääriäinen, Laaksonen & Wiegand 1997, 43 - 45, 83.) In both of these reports the special area for worry has been the social field of school environment. Children spend a large part of their day at school, where strict timetables, school bullying, deficient accommodations, limited time for pupils' social contacts and teachers' frugal resources to support their pupils all limit the perceived well-being at school environment.

¹ PISA-research (The Programme for International Student Assessment) is an international research, where reading, mathematics, and science skills are assessed for 15-year-old pupils every three years. The first part of this study (in 2000) assessed reading skills, the second part (in 2003) mathematics, and the third part (in 2006) science skills. PISA-research finds out to what extent young people are in control of the central knowledge and skills of the future society, working environment, and their personal life. The principle is not to assess the basic goals of curriculum, but the real-life skills and abilities in everyday environment. 57 countries took part in the previous research (of 31 OECD countries), 4500-10000 pupils in each of the countries. (OECD programme for international student assessment 2006; Arinen & Karjalainen 2007, 9-11.)

Good quality of learning environment as a subject for research

There is a clear contradiction with PISA-results and reported school atmosphere, because in many researches good learning results are especially in connection with motivation, which is maintained by supportive, relaxed, safe and child-centered atmosphere, and accommodations and materials that support learning (Gallagher 1992, 181, 184; Kääriäinen et.al. 1997, 201; Nuikkinen 2005, 61; compare Tapola & Niemivirta 2008, 291 - 293, 303). If Finnish school is a success-story in international researches, what could be achieved by having a learning environment that was perceived as good and having an enjoyable atmosphere? And what kind of learning environment could have these multi-layered factors of quality? These questions were the basis for my research, for which I searched for answers from the primary users of learning environment. I qualified pupils, parents and teachers as primary users of learning environment, because I considered them to be those who are, directly or indirectly, somehow in connection with learning environment every day. In my study I wanted to find out what kind is a good learning environment as perceived by pupils, parents, and teachers, and to what extent their perceptions differ from each other and how could we define a common basis for the development of a better learning environment? What are the building-blocks for this? What are the criteria for good quality? And on the other hand, who has the power, responsibility, or right to define the various factors of good quality in learning environment?

I chose a subject for my research to be a school of c. 350 pupils in 1.-6. -grades. In addition to pupils, a questionnaire evaluating perceptions in good quality in learning environment was given to their parents, teachers, and adult teacher trainees, who were practising at the school at that moment. The perceptions of those students and teachers were collected under the "teachers' perceptions", because many students had in fact as much practical teacher experience as qualified teachers. It is relevant to take these student answers into account, because they balanced the relatively small amount of teacher answers, when compared to those of all the pupils, and it was possible to have a broader view on teacher answers through these teacher trainees.¹ For the trainees, the school environment in question was in fact familiar from their previous practise courses. The questionnaire given to these research groups contained mainly open questions, where the quality factors of learning environment were surveyed from different angles. The questions included the good points at the school, things that needed change, and how the school could become "the school for future", among other things. The questionnaire encouraged people to think about learning environment from a wider perspective than just the immediate schoolyard, and discuss the future challenges for pupils, school and learning in general. The questionnaire for the pupils included a drawing part,

¹ There were following results in the answers: pupils gave 261 written answers, of which 54 1:st graders, collected by their teachers, 315 drawings by pupils, 21 answers by teachers or teacher trainees and 30 answers by parents.

where they were able to draw a learning environment to their liking. Teachers and students had a question where they were asked to discuss the notion of learning environment and the mutual hierarchy of its physical, psychological, social and pedagogical divisions.

Instead of the scientific truths, the focal points for my research were the different commonplace perceptions and variations of experiences based on everyday thinking. These are then described, generalised and arranged into a hierarchy (Marton 1981, 177 - 200; Patton 1990, 70 - 71; Pramling 1994, 227 - 239; compare Hargreaves 2007, 35). In my research the good quality of learning environment was understood as something coming from everyday experiences of its users, and by interpreting these experiences, users form their perceptions (e.g. Heidegger 2000, 33 - 34, 80, 84; Marton & Booth 1997, 13; Bell 1991, 216 - 218). Every person who is in contact with a learning environment creates his or her perceptions of it by relating it to other phenomena: people experience an intentional world, which appear to them as meanings. (see Brentano 1973, 137, 153; Rauhala 1995, 43 - 44). Because of this, the human reality, in this case the good quality of learning environment is very ambiguous, even if one cannot consider it as wholly subjective: cultures, historical factors and social communities guide the creation of meanings and interpretation of experiences for the individuals (Laine 2007, 29).

My research is based on the notion that by describing the various perceptions of teachers, parents and pupils, we could acquire highly accurate overall impression of the good learning environment. This overall impression then functions as a basis for the development of school and its learning environment.

When studying the perceptions, it is inevitable to take into account the context where these perceptions are formed. In this research, the context is understood as a learning environment and society around the individuals, where they form their perceptions. *Learning environment* is defined in my research, by means of goals and targets for learning and supportive environments, as a place, accommodation, community or a method, where people can draw upon resources to make sense of things and construct meaningful solutions to problems (see Wilson 1996, 3). From this point of view, any interactive environment may function as a learning environment. Therefore, it does not necessarily need to be a school environment.

According to the curriculum for the comprehensive school (2004, 16) learning environment integrates physical, psychological and social aspects. A natural aspect, when we consider a school learning environment, is a pedagogic one, because school's principle is to teach and educate pupils to grow up as individuals and members of society to promote general well-being (see National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004, 14; compare Hargreaves 2007, 34 - 35). Based on this division e.g. Brotherus, Hytönen and Krokfors (1999, 77), Lodge (2007, 150) and Nuikkinen (2005, 14), learning environment will be interpreted in my research as an entity encompassing pedagogical, social and psychological dimensions, where social and psychological dimensions are brought

together to represent a single aspect². The reason why this has been done, lies in difficulty to separate these answers in questionnaires: there the social and psychological dimensions were often discussed with common terms, and they were considered as representing the same things. A common factor was especially the notion of "school atmosphere", which reflects both the social and psychological aspects.

In researching and developing learning environment it is important to divide it into different theoretical sectors and terms. This makes it easier to focus on the essential matters, and it also allows seeing the primary target for development on a small, realistic scale. In practise, however, learning environment is an indivisible entity, where every part is in connection with another, partially overlapping others. This is also why we need to discuss the good quality of learning environment from the point of view of all the various dimensions it has: every sub-category must meet the criteria for good quality if we want to give the learning environment a label of excellence.

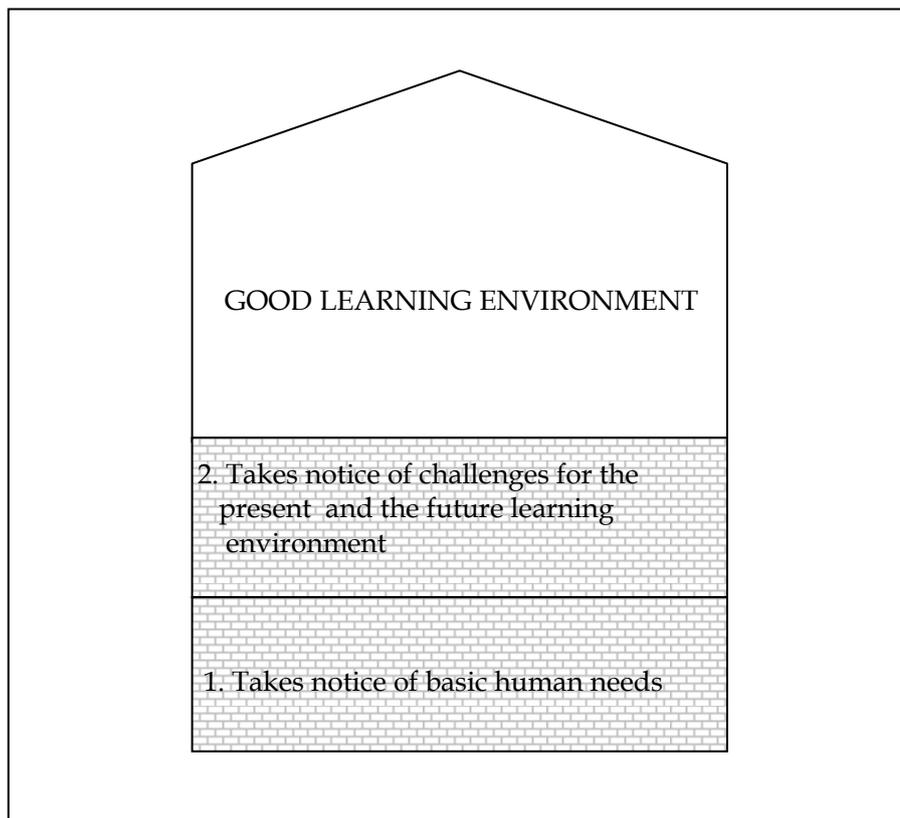
Good learning environment as understood by pupils, parents and teachers

In my research I emphasize that learning environment today cannot be separated from the historical factors that are on the background, neither can it be separated from those expectations it has in front of the future. Learning environment is a part of a long historical continuum that reflects the ideals for teaching and education of a prevailing era and the general spirit of it. Through the orientation to the future, it combines the challenges for the individual, school, and teacher education. At the same time it brings with the pedagogical principles and sociological factors that have formed the learning environment in each particular era. In researching the perceptions of good quality in learning environment, it is reasonable to notice that every individual evaluates the quality based on his or her personal school experiences, at least to some extent. Therefore, when learning environment is such a multidimensional thing, and variables within it are numerous, it is clear that the challenges are enormous and changes take time to realize.

What are the criteria for good quality today? On what basis can we define learning environment as being good? In the questionnaire answers of my research, the good quality was defined as having two different basic criteria (fig. 17). To start with, all the basic needs, as well as necessary functionality of learning environment must be covered, which include among other things; food, adequate accommodation, hygiene, ergonomy and other proponents of health,

² Dimensions of learning environment encompass the following things: physical environment refers to accommodation, equipment and other reachable environment, social dimension refers to interactive and communicative elements for individuals and environment, psychological dimension refers to various cognitive and emotional aspects of concept formation and thinking. School atmosphere is a common factor for the social and psychological dimensions, both of which are based on social and psychological aspects. A pedagogical dimension unites physical, psychological and social dimensions, which are examined through the goals of education and learning.

safety and stamina (compare Hargreaves 2007, 34 - 35; Nuikkinen 2005, 15). On the other hand, good learning environment should be able to answer to those challenges the present time and the future put up. If learning environment repeats the same outdated habits and methods decade after another, how can we expect the users of the environment be able to adjust to the future society and its new requirements?



Kuvio 17. The basis for good quality in learning environment

These common criteria show us that requirements for good quality in learning environment are defined somewhat similarly in all the research groups. Despite this, there could be seen clearly differing opinions in subcategories between the groups. Pupils emphasized the physical dimension of learning environment, their parents stressed the social and psychological dimensions and teachers had mainly pedagogical point of view in their consideration. (figure 18).

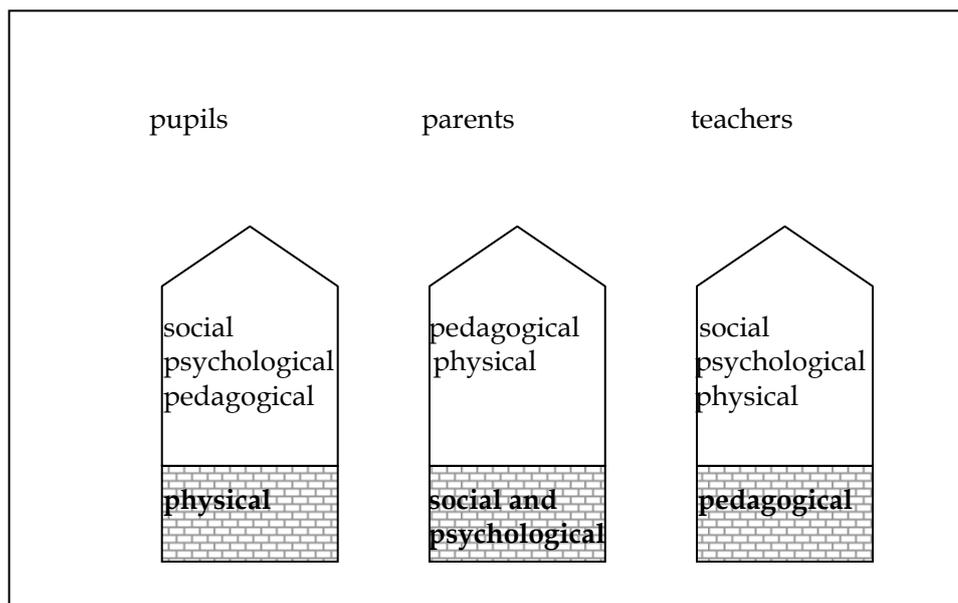


FIGURE 18. Emphasized subcategories according the study groups

In pupils' answers, the good accommodation and good equipment were seen as a basis for learning and school atmosphere (compare Lodge 2007, 148 - 152). Pupils hoped for the school environment which would be homelike. School interior should remind of home with familiar colours, curtains, carpets and sofas. Besides this homelike accommodation, pupils hoped for adequate interior space, which would also be modern and versatile - it should be possible to use different methods for work. Good school was thought to be a center for various activities, where pupils could spend their time even after the school hours, if it only had the space and interesting, supervised activities. Pupils' answers didn't separate schoolyard and immediate environment around it from the actual learning environment. Instead, they were experienced as a seamless extension for the learning environment inside the school. Pupils also had hopes for more field-trips and getting acquainted with environment near the school. Pupils also hoped for the development of their schoolyard, where they wished for more activities, such as playthings and game equipments, as well as more suitable areas for these activities (compare Wood & Attfield 2005, 81). All in all, pupils had more specific requests than any other group, this behaviour partly being a result of their more concrete thinking, and partly a result of their being in contact with their environment every day. To some extent, one can discern a media propagated modern trend, which highlights interior design and free-time activities.

The basis for good learning environment for parents was a good psychological and social atmosphere. A good environment let children learn social skills in interaction with other pupils, but it also gives him or her privacy to work alone when needed. Parents stressed the psychological and physical safety for the pupils, regardless of their background or their age. With safety,

they specifically pointed to the policy of stopping all kind of bullying, they valued physical integrity and attempts of making childhood safe in general. For the parents, the future school was mainly understood as a resource for education and learning. This was to be realized bearing in mind the individual needs for every child, and remembering the social expectations for the school (see Hargreaves 2007, 34 - 35). Parents hoped for the leisurely and relaxed learning environment. By wishing respect for the individual pupil, parents hoped for peaceful atmosphere, where everyone could have privacy for learning. Parents emphasized leisurely atmosphere by thinking that pupils need individual timetable to grow up, develop and learn. (compare Aaltola 2003, 19; Gallagher 1992, 181, 184). These same ideas were used when parents compared school with modern society in general: if a child only learns a habit of doing things in a hurry, how can we tell them to calm down and concentrate on things? Parents' answers reflected in many ways their worry about the demands for efficiency in the modern society: on the one hand they hoped for the school that is up-to-date, but on the other hand they had hopes for the leisurely pace in its work. This contradiction often originated from the school of the past: parents' own time at the school was remembered in a positive way, and as more peaceful and simpler than modern school. On the other hand they realized that the school of the past does not meet the challenges of the future.

Teachers discussed learning environment especially from the point of view of good *teaching environment* (compare pedagogic learning environment). According to the teachers, pedagogic learning environment incorporates physical, psychological and social dimensions, but the discussion centres around these factors especially from the point of view of education and teaching. Pedagogical factors of learning environment by teachers were among other things: basic material and equipment and quality of environment taking notice of pupils' various sensory functions. Besides adequate accommodation, convertibility was important for different uses, e.g. for different subjects, themes, functions and varying group sizes. It is beneficial for both pupils and teachers if learning environment supports them by being a resource for activities and taking good notice of all kinds of pupils with varying needs. For these different learners and learning abilities, teachers stressed for adequate support and resources: pupils need enough well-focused support and time for their learning. Teachers also recognized a close connection with learning environment and their pedagogical skills and how they experienced their role as a teacher: the focal point of their role and pedagogy is formed through teachers' own observations and construction of concepts (compare Fullan 2007, 35 - 36; Värri 2000, 145 - 146). Good pedagogy isn't thus assessed just by terms of formal education or by certain external factors, accommodation or equipment. The main definition for pedagogical quality comes from teachers' pedagogical skills (compare Hargreaves 2007, 36). Naturally, teachers need various equipment and materials to support teaching and learning, and adequate accommodation, but the mere existence of these external factors do not improve the quality of pedagogical environment, if teachers do not have the skills to utilize them.

Safety – interpretation for a basis of good learning environment

One of the most important results in this research was that even if each of the groups considered learning environment as important, they nevertheless had different opinions about what is their point of view to it. These different viewpoints of pupils, parents and teachers create challenge, especially if we strive for common goals and reaching the good quality of learning environment. Each of these groups stressed their own viewpoint regarding the development of school and expected their criteria be taken as the one to be developed further in the future. The goal of my research, to develop learning environment on a common basis, made these varying criteria a critical problem: it would be necessary to find a common factor among these research groups which could create a basis for development of a good learning environment. Without a common basis and common goals, any kind of commitment to the development of learning environment would be impossible, and possible good results might eventually be compromised.

A closer study of the research groups showed that despite the stressing of different sub-categories, it was indeed possible to find a common factor in search of good quality in learning environment. The questionnaire answers of pupils, parents and teachers expressed a strive for safety. This search for safety in school was evident in that all the groups defined basic needs and future challenges as criteria for making good quality a reality at school. Taking notice of basic human needs is necessary in experiencing safety, and this is obligatory when we are striving for something new. On the other hand, when we are facing the unknown future, it was considered important to prepare for it through foreseeable challenges, which in itself creates safety. This point of view makes it easier to understand why these two safety creating factors were considered as common criteria for good quality in learning environment. (Compare Hargreaves 2007, 34 - 36.)

A link for striving for safety was also seen in all the research groups in their various answers, which stressed for different sub-categories of learning environment, even if they didn't mention the word "safety" very often. In the answers, *Physical safety* was in connection with safety in accommodation and equipment, in preventing possible hazardous situations, and in connection with personal physical integrity. Traffic near the school and other safety considerations of the school environment were understood as vital parts of physical safety. Considerations of safety in *Social and psychological learning environment* were in connection with individual mental and intellectual health, as well as the general experience of safety and being paid attention to by other people. Those people who were seen as important by the questionnaire answers, are the individuals who interact with each other in a learning environment. The positive things in this particular interaction were the support for pupils' growth and learning, as well as prevention of bullying among pupils or school staff. Social and psychological safety meant also adequate time for personal growth and learning. *Pedagogic safety* was mentioned in research answers as a concern for the quality of learning, for the support of learning and for adequate resources

for these. Pedagogic safety was also mentioned as a worry for the school staff and their strength and commitment under the brist for resources. One point of view for pedagogic safety could be the challenges the teachers and school environment must face. They are made tangible from the point of view of professional qualifications, as well as from a point of view of teachers' everyday work – how much can you demand from a teacher (see Hargreaves 2007, 36)?

In the study, one of the most important things among all the sub-categories in answers was how people should feel happy at school. That is a very interesting result, because various researchers and state officials have been concerned about the unhappiness among the pupils. Pupils' happiness at school has rarely been connected with safety though, instead it has been discussed from the point of view of how much activities the environment provide, or what kind of general atmosphere (e.g. esthetic environment and social relations) the school has. The answers in the research showed that although safety is a part of pupils' happiness, it may disappear if amicable atmosphere is understood as mere entertainment. Feelings of peace and continuity could be interpreted as signs of happiness and safety at school. If we remember that school environment contain educational goals, happiness at school could be understood as *target oriented happiness at school*. School and education in general have targets and goals which they try to reach. Different sub-categories of learning environment also try to reach this objective, either alone or together, so that pupils could feel themselves happy, safe and good.

To the safer future

Why safety is a crucial part of developing good learning environment, is explained from human inner strive for safe environment. Stability creates basic feeling of safety and changes stagger the faith in it – at least temporarily. Individuals are striving for safety, to the extent that they even instinctively behave that way. (See Fontaine et al. 2006, 159.)

When we are developing learning environment, this natural strive for safety creates another kind of problem, which is not always understood clearly: development always requires discarding some of the old behaviour patterns and requires being ready to receive new ideas and models. The familiar behaviour will be staggered, and the individual must organize the new information and structures with their former experience. This is why development at school is often seen as a threat to all the previous good, and therefore resistance for change is automatic (see Fullan 1993, 104; Hargreaves 2007, 36; Johnson 2006, 141 - 143; Kääriäinen et al. 1990, 94). Resistance might not actually be against development, but it is a subconscious reaction for fear of losing safety – the old methods are safer, because they are far more familiar. This duality concerning the change clearly manifested itself in the research answers: people wanted that school and its learning environment should be developed, but almost without exception the developers were seen as some outside parties, or the ideal learning environment was seen as a complete and finished unit. Good learning environment was not understood as a process, which is characteristically unfinished

and incomplete and where people should commit themselves, sometimes even taking some risks. This shows that development and changes require concrete goals and targets, as well as commitment to the process by people. It is important to understand where and why we need changes, and accept the changes in everyday methods, which always require individual adaptation to the new way of thinking. (Fullan 2004, 1 - 2; Fullan 2007, 35 - 36)

Dalin et al. (1993, 14) state that safety cannot be searched from stability in a world that is continuously amidst the turmoil and change. Instead of that, the feeling of safety must be reached with one's ability to face the challenge. While doing this research, I have many times been convinced that it is important to review all those opinions the different groups have – if we do not know where people expect good quality in learning environment, how can we prepare them for changes in developing it? Or how can we even know which direction to choose? Pupils, parents and teachers all have varying viewpoints when they assess the good quality in learning environment, and even their expectations differ to some extent. Because of this, the clearly defined goals and targets, planning in cooperation and overall awareness of the process are crucial if we want to reach the common goals in developing school (compare Fullan 2007, 35 - 36). Being aware of common goals helps us to understand those solutions which the development process brings with it, because then you do not have to take any unknown turns, and the process and its goal are hopefully clear to all.

What is a good learning environment, then, and who should be its primary developer? Hargreaves (2003, 18 - 19) and Fullan (1993, 85) state that the deep cooperation of school professionals, pupils and parents is a key to success in developing learning environment. I find the same results in my own research. The basis for development should always be the primary goal for school to educate pupils and give them space and time to grow. Heppell et al. (2004, 14) and Nuikkinen (2005, 61 - 66) state, referring to this, that school should be built for good learning first of all, and it happens best when study environment supports the goals for education, its content and its learning environment. From this point of view, we should primarily listen to them who are professionally responsible for all school activities and who have the qualifications for the main task the school has, i.e. education and teaching. This is how we could best reach the learning environment which makes it possible to acquire modern and future-oriented quality education and teaching. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't listen to other parties that are closely in connection with learning environment, like pupils and their parents are in my research. If we study these different groups and their perceptions for good quality, we will find it easier to understand the various parties, and find which are the most important criteria to them. Then we might reach for development which is the most important of all, a process for increasing safety at school, and then we will find it easier to commit ourselves to this goal (compare Fullan 2007, 35 - 36; Hargreaves 2007, 35 - 36).

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