

Children's Perspective on Learning: the Experience of the Bulgarian Students

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Abstract - This paper presents the results of an international project “Joy to Learn” with participants from Bulgaria, Germany, Japan, Spain, Poland, Romania and USA. The research focuses on joyful and happy situations for students connected to learning in school. It is important to obtain information on the thoughts, feelings, needs, desires, and the fears of the children. This would enable to promote the improvement of the learning process in terms of the student. The survey covered 300 students (from 1st to 8th grade) from Bulgaria. The results show that most of the students prefer to be active in the process of learning, however a presence of negative attitude towards learning in general was found.

Keywords - joy to learn, motivation, interests, learning process

1. Introduction

For the organization of learning it is very important to note the opinion of students from different age groups. Very often, scientific analyzes are made without asking the main participants in learning. This served as an occasion for the present study.

Many researches that only partly affect the subject matter have been published in Bulgaria. Most of them turn their attention to the interests of students in individual subjects or topics [5, 7, 8, 13,14] Other

studies [2] show the interests of students in their free time. Few are the researches [4] that study the school atmosphere and the feelings of the students in the process of learning. Separate studies [7] tracked how interest, respectively desire of students for learning changes with age. The lack of a representative survey on the topic served as an occasion to make an extensive survey of student's attitude towards learning.

In this paper we present Bulgarian results of an international project (with participants from Bulgaria, Germany, Japan, Spain, Poland, Romania and the USA), which puts the research focus on joyful and happy situations experienced by students during the process of learning in school. The study was conducted with courtesy and funded by the Scientific Research Fund at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski", project 212. The aim is to gain more insight into the positive emotions in learning from the perspective of the children. One of the objectives of the study is to observe when students are motivated in learning situations and when they want to learn on their own initiative. Through this study, it is important to obtain information on the thoughts, feelings, needs, desires, and fears of the children. This would enable to promote the improvement of the learning process in terms of the student. Educational and teaching practices could be arranged in terms of the students.

The main research questions are: What approaches to learning are preferred by the children? What kind of feedback for learning is important for the students in the primary and the secondary school? Do students prefer the activities based on cooperative learning? What are the feelings of the students related to the learning? Do the learning activities out of school bring joy? How important is the role of the teacher for the learning process? Do the students experience joy of learning? Do the interest for learning decreases with age?

2. Method

To observe what are the joyful moments in the learning process, students must write a free text. We use the research method “Children Texts”. The

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teacher asks students to write a letter to Prof. Ivanov (in the English version Dr. Tom), describing the most joyful moment during learning in school. The teacher asks students to describe in detail their feelings and thoughts related to the narrated situation: "What exactly happened?", "How did you feel?", "What do you remember?", "What comes to your mind for this moment? and others. It is noted that the text should be associated with learning in school. If they wish, students can draw a picture of the situation, which to be added to the letter to Prof. Ivanov. In a special worksheet teacher completes some additional information for students - age, sex, social status, ethnic composition of the families of immigrants,

level of achievements, strengths or special educational needs.

The following pages will present the results of the research in Bulgaria. The survey covered children from different cities and villages in the country (Table 1.).

- Children from 10 schools, 1 Kindergarten, 1 Studio for children
- 300 children (6-14) – 1-8 grade
- 10 children (6) – pre-school group in kindergarten (“preparatory class”).

Table 1. The survey covered children from different cities and villages

Capital	Big town	Small town	Village
Sofia	Burgas Vidin	Isperih Bregovo Gramada	Drenovetz Novo selo

- Sofia (capital),
- North Bulgaria (Isperih, Vidin, Bregovo, Gramada, Drenovetz, Novo selo)
- East Bulgaria (Burgas)

The number of students according to grades and place of living participating in the survey can be seen in Table 2. The students in the first grade in Bulgaria are 7 years old.

Table 2. Number of studied persons according to grades and place of living

Grade	Sofia /capital/	Big town	Small town	Village	Total
1-2	28	21	26	13	88
3-4	0	33	19	19	71
5-6	23	16	25	10	74
7-8	13	16	28	10	67
Total	64	86	98	52	300

We wanted to follow the changes in the motivation and the learning interest of the children in the primary and secondary school. It's important to know what kind of interests children have [12]. The teachers offered the students different motivation stories – more simple for the primary and enlarged for the secondary school.

After gathering information from students and teachers, the analysis is done by the partners agreed criteria (Table 3.). Different countries have emerged additional sub criteria that give answers to the research questions. We used qualitative methods to structure the criteria.

Table 3. Number and percent of studied persons who answered as per the respective criteria
(In some categories the results show more than 100%, because the students gave more than one answer).

Criteria	Number	Percent
1. Approaches to learning	318	105,9
2. Feedback for learning	300	100,0
3. Cooperative learning	29	7,7
4. Feelings	72	23,9
5. Out of school learning	49	16,3
6. Teacher	24	7,9
7. Specials	21	7,0

Here are the main categories:

1. Approaches to learning. In this category we observe what are the preferred teaching methods and learning strategies.
2. Feedback for learning. In this category the Bulgarian results are structured in the following subcategories: feedback by successful completion of tasks, feedback by a praise, feedback by marks, feedback by reward and feedback by applying knowledge in practice.
3. Cooperative learning. With this category we analyze if the students prefer the cooperative learning strategies or they prefer the competitive learning.
4. Feelings. With this category we observe the atmosphere during the learning process, the relation between the learning and the children's emotions (positive or negative).
5. Out of school learning. This category shows the importance of the outdoor activities in the school learning.
6. Teacher. With this category we observe if the student's texts show how important is the role of the teacher for the learning process – her/his personality and the professional operations.
7. In the category “Specials” we put interesting opinions of the students, not related with the other categories.

The Bulgarian primary school is from grade 1 to 4, the secondary (in Bulgarian “main”) school is to grade 8. The “main school is obligatory. In our research participated students from 1 to 8 grade. The selection of the settlements was made so to engage in the study children with different social status, different number of students' schools.

Each of the respondents had the possibility to describe the task freely with all their experiences, emotions, memories and evaluations and without interference, a time limit and volume of written and without pressure. The processing of the data is made and 7 categories were drawn. Each text string or a single word is assigned to the category. This allowed the quantitative expression in their categories, and further comparison and analysis. Due to the uneven number of students from different classes, the data are presented in percentages and visualized in diagrams.

3. Results and Discussion

The results are displayed by category; according to texts written by students, subcategories were formed. The presentation of results is followed by analysis. A comparative analysis with data from previous studies was also made.

Approaches to learning

Methodological approach to learning

Out of all tested, 97 children expressed respect to the methodological approaches of studying. Very few of the students prefer activities in which the teacher takes the leading part. They prefer to be **active participants in the process of learning, not only listeners.**

The results show practical strategies are very important to promote active learning [16]. The experiential learning is a powerful and proven approach to teaching and learning”[9].

Most preferred among students are games (21% / 6.6% of all surveyed students). Of these, the majority (13,4%) were students of first and second grade. A study shows that children under 6 years

old, studying in preschool classes, also expect to play in school. These results confirm the results of previous surveys in Bulgaria.

Games in school have lots of fans. Considering the results from the study of Bulgarian students from 2, 3 and 4 grades [8] we find out that the “timeliness of the gaming activity is maintained throughout the whole period” [7,9] of primary school.

All students prefer participation in different practical activities - crafts, working with paper and materials from nature, painting, etc. (12,4% which is 4% out of all studied). These results confirm the results of a survey of the National Foundation for the study of education in the United Kingdom under which the students love the practical activities [3].

All students pay special attention to the illustration of the studied materials (14,4% which is 4% of all studied) which really contribute to learning. They prefer to have illustrated materials and perceive though presentations. Students show great interest to films and documentaries, which “facilitate memorizing of information and makes them witnesses of the events”(“we witnessed what really happened”, “it was easier to remember”).

Investigations of the free time of 530 Bulgarian students between 5 and 12 years old indicates that watching films is the most preferred way of spending their time at home [2]. Using the students’ preferences in studying is a possibility to stimulate their learning motivation. It’s very important to know the children’s interests [18].

There are a few students that prefer using information sources such as encyclopedias, Internet, geographic maps, etc. They are also willing to use research methods which make them explorers and form useful skills (“we feel like detectives in literature classes, studying clues and searching the hidden meaning of the works”- Mary, Sofia, 7 grade).

Very few students prefer development of projects, laboratory activities, theatre, but actually these methods are rarely used in Bulgarian schools [10]. An emphasis is on attractive activities such as holidays, theater performances which prompt creativity. Lots of student show interest to the competitive element in learning. It prevails over cooperative element and can be explained by teacher - centered way of working. Findings show that cooperative studying is rarely used in Bulgarian schools [10].

General preferences for learning content

15,6 % of all studied students have expressed general preferences for learning content. The largest part of them - 36% (5,6% of all) appreciate it when education meets their interests. Curiosity for learning of something new has been expressed from 32% of those who have shown general preferences – (5% of all studied). Besides the new knowledge children love to learn “interesting and useful things” (19% or 3% of all).

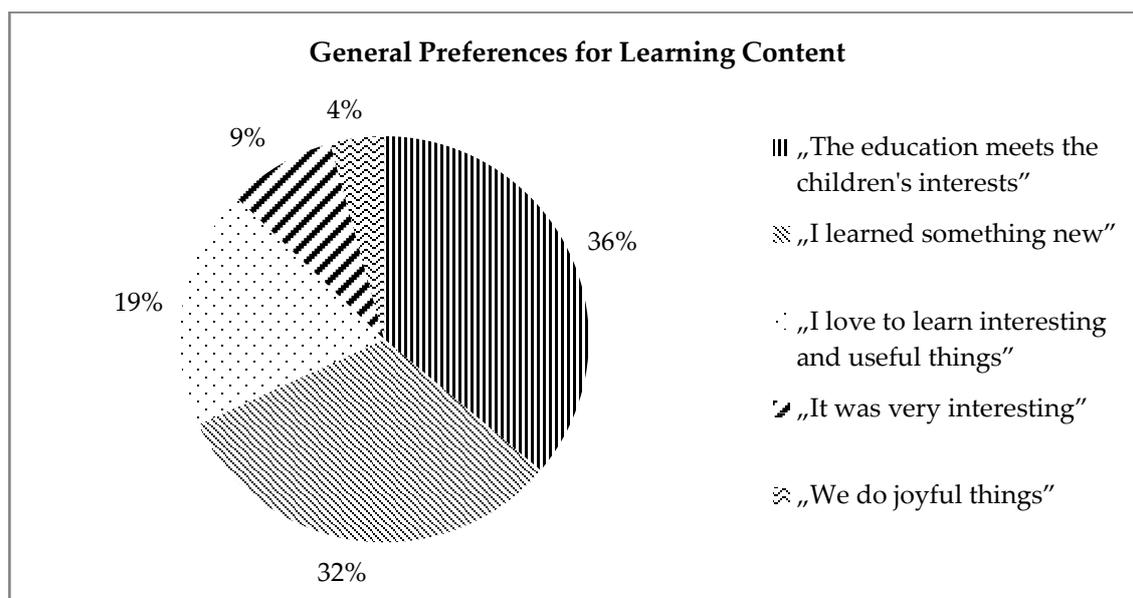


Figure 1. General Preferences for Learning Content

School subjects*Table 4. Classification of interest to different school classes /subjects/*

No	Subject	No of students	% of all students	% of all students from I and II grade	% of all students from III and IIV grade	% of all students from V and VI grade	% of all students from VII and VIII grade
1	Science	34	11,3	2,3	33,8	5,4	5,9
2	Sports	28	9,3	10,2	7,0	5,4	15,0
3	Mathematics	22	7,3	13,6	8,4	8,1	1,5
4	Bulgarian grammar, Writing	19	6,3	10,2	8,5	4,0	1,6
5	Social studies, History, Geography	18	6,0	0	15,5	0	10,4
6	Reading and Literature	18	6,0	5,7	9,9	8,1	0
7	Painting	9	3,0	1,1	4,2	1,3	5,9
8	Design and crafts	9	3,0	4,5	4,2	0	2,9
9	Foreign language	7	2,3	3,4	1,4	2,7	1,5
10	Music	6	2,0	4,5	0	0	2,9
11	IT and informatics	4	1,3	0	0	2,7	2,9
	Total	174					

174 students (58%) have expressed opinion in regard to the approaches of studying different school subjects. Most of them prefer Bulgarian language (grammar and literature) reading and writing for younger students).

12.3% of all surveyed children experience the joy of reading, listening and writing. Significant contribution to this percentage have children from first to fourth grade. 16% from students in first and second grade and 18% of those in the third and fourth share pleasant experiences with language. In fifth and sixth class 12% of students are impressed by this type of activities. Out of 67 students (22,3%) in seventh and eighth grade, only one indicated (1.5%) approaches to these subjects. In the first classes children learn shorter works with brightly presented “good” and “bad” characters with fantasy and fairy tales, using drama, in which children immerse . While in the higher grades readings are longer with requirements for in-depth analysis of more complex nature of the characters, which probably is not so

attractive for the students. The reason for loss of interest in this subject may be sought in that a large number of readings included in the curriculum are far from the world view of modern children.

If we divide the results for Bulgarian grammar and for literature, the whole classification changes. Mostly preferred - 34 students (11%) - is science and students favor different themes -11% like studying the life of animals and plants, natural phenomena, human body, etc. Largest interest show students from 2 and 4 grade. This contradicts the previous study of Bulgarian primary school students, in which interest to studying of the Human and nature subject show only 6,57% of the students in 3 and 4 grade [7].

Large interest to science subjects is rendered from students in 3 and 4 grade, and it sharply decreases between 5 and 8 grade. This finding fully complies with the studies in North Ireland where 1000 students, 8-11 years old from 44 primary schools were studied. The result is that “most of the

older children (10-11) had significantly positive attitudes than younger ones (8-9) towards science enjoyment [14]. Murphy and Beggs point out that most researchers “agree that the erosion of children’s interest in school science occurs between ages of 9 and 14” [14].

Decline in interest can be attributed to the sharp increase in the difficulty of the studied material and the excessive academic texts in the student’s books in Bulgaria. The main reason for this is the method of teaching which does not emphasize neither the practical application of knowledge nor the experiments which is seen in the results obtained in Methodological approaches to learning. It’s important to often have activity based lessons [15].

Student’s answers place sports at second position on interest. 9,3% of all asked students enjoy sports. Students from 7 and 8 grade mostly enjoy sports and mainly swimming and cycling. 39% from 28 students do not point out any special sport, but enjoy moving itself, running and jumping. These are mostly students from 1 and 2 grade. Such result can be explained by the need to move no matter what they will do. Most favored sports are football, swimming, volleyball and cycling. It is noted that only two basic activities are pointed out: sports games and water sports. Football is the favorite of all the games including the children in 1 and 2 grade in which physical activities are not included in the curriculum. From other sports only volleyball is mentioned. Basketball and handball are not preferred and the reason for this could be the poor condition of the sport facilities. In most schools they are too high for the younger students so they can not shoot. The large survey of Nikolova, E., P. Staevska, L. Lyutibrodska and V. Stoytcheva [13] among students from 10 to 18 years old shows greatest interest in sports games.

Children do not enjoy athletics and gymnastics although they are obligatory included in the curriculum of the Bulgarian schools. It is obvious that these classes are not held in an interesting way and also maybe there is respective equipment for them. Having in mind that the younger students like competing each other, and athletics provides such possibilities, it can be concluded that teachers do not try enough to make the classes interesting for the children. Grigorova [4] also writes about the

decreased interest in gymnastics. She experiments with including imitative exercises and tries to increase the interest with elements from different games.

Three children (1%) have mentioned that they enjoy cycling, but actually this an out of class activity as it is not included in schools’ program. Without mentioning a special game one of the children from grades 1 or 2 enjoys mobile games. There are results from previous studies showing that mathematics is one of the school subjects that student prefer. It ranks third among the other subjects [7]. 22 (7,3%) of all 300 asked students have pointed it out as favorite. It mostly impresses students from 1 and 2 grade. 12 of them (14% of all ages) love to solve problems in mathematics. Interest decreases with age to 8, 4 % in 3 and 4 grade, 8,1% in 5 and 6 grade and finally decreases to 1,5% in 7 and 8 grade.

18 students (6% of all asked) enjoy studying social studies such as history and geography. Students of 1 to 5 grade do not show interest in these subject. 12,5 % of the students in 3 and 4 grades and 10,4% of those in 7 and 8 grades enjoy approaching these subjects. These results could be linked to the ability of individual teachers to present the educational content.

It is surprising that there is a very little interest in arts and music and Technology and design (total 8,3%). It is expected that children will show interest in possibilities to create, but it is obvious that such possibilities are not largely provided. Children are willing but they remain unsatisfied, although these subjects should encourage their creativity. Foreign language is interesting only for 7 children (2.3%). The largest number are students of first and second grade (3 persons – 1%). This is surprising having in mind the fact that according to the school curriculum a foreign language is taught in second grade. Contrary to the expectations, only two students from 5 and 6 grade enjoy computers (ICT education).

Feedback for learning

The analysis is done by other criteria – the feedback for learning. Most of the students (249) associate the nice moments of learning with the feedback for the level of their success

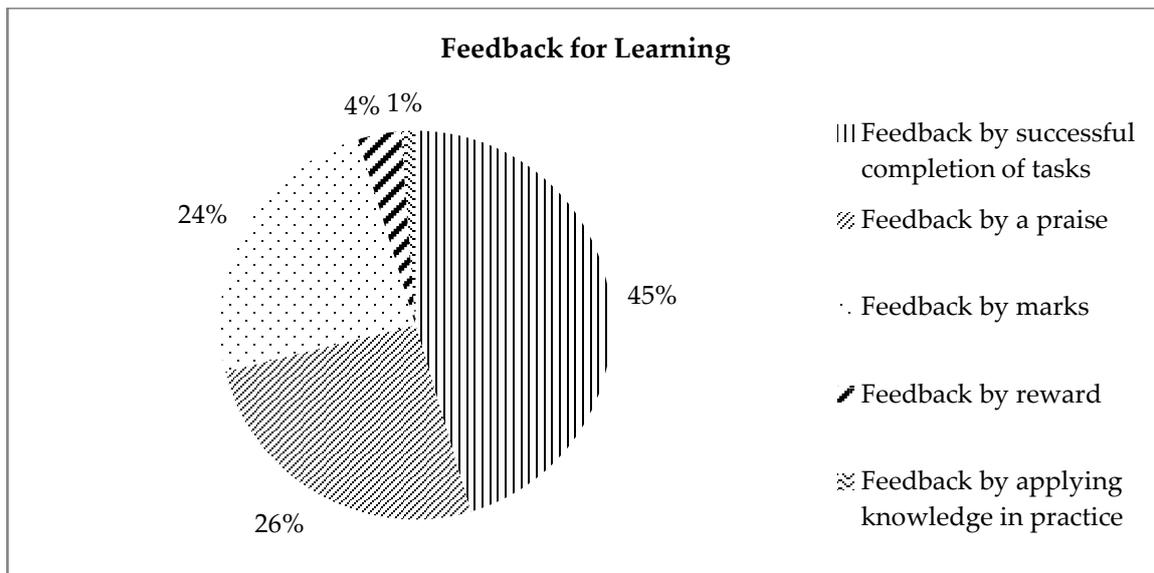


Figure 2. Feedback for learning

Feedback by successful completion of tasks

Successful implementation of tasks is significantly important for most of the children (105 – 35%). 115 children (38%) have regard to the criteria. Most active were those from the big towns-53%. In age aspect, most active were the students from 3 and 4 grade - 52%. Some of the students (6) point out the cases when they have not faced difficulties in the implementation of tasks. Others, usually creative (11 – 3,6%), are happy that their efforts have resulted in a successful piece of work. 11 (3,6%) positively evaluate their successful product. Mostly exited from such facts are the children from 1 and 2 grade - 5,7%. In all other age groups the results are 4,2% (3-4 grade), 2,7% (5-6 grade) and 1,5% (7-8 grade). Most critical of themselves are older students.

Succeeding in matters that are not their strong point or are something new or nobody else has not succeeded in is important for most of the students (33/11%). It is also important when the student handles best of all or has finished first. Competitiveness in learning is also emphasized.

Feedback by a praise

Students expect recognition and acquire confidence after overcoming the challenge. This is also confirmed from 65 (21%) students who are happy that they have presented themselves well in front of other people. Of great significance is the feedback for their success which is shown by praise from their parents, teachers and also people not from family or school. Studies show that with age students are not much impressed by the praise from their parents. Younger students are much more impressed from it.

Some children (10 – 3,3%) pay attention to the recognition they get from their classmates and to social control as general.

Feedback by marks

The joy of learning related to a feedback with marks is widely spread. This is a leading incentive among the students from the big and small towns, but is not so important for the students in the capital or in the villages. 20% out of all asked students were positively influenced from the evaluation. 52% of them are from big towns, 33% from small towns. Only 5% are from the villages. Having in mind the age of the students, marks excite mostly those from 5 and 6 grade. This can be explained with the fact that up to 4th grade the teacher is only one in Bulgaria and starting from 5th grade the teachers are different for each subject and they have different requirements for tests and class works, term and annual marks. This is a brilliant reason for the students' attitude to evaluation, and is more important than the annual results in 7 and 8 grade when children move to secondary schools. In Bulgaria profiling in schools is after 7th grade.

The words of a student "I got smarter" show what is the excitement of the excellent mark

Feedback by reward

Receiving awards is not very popular (only 9 children – 3%) and it prevails among younger students in primary schools. Most of them love rewards and diplomas from different competitions, and only few enjoy presents or sweets at home. Only students in 1 or 2 grade are impressed by such incentives.

Feedback by applying knowledge in practice

Very few of the children declare they are happy from applying knowledge in practice - only 3. They are all from villages.

Cooperative learning

Learning together

Only 16 students (5,3 %) point out that enjoy studying together with their friends. Some of them (3) are happy to find new friends in school, but this is not connected to learning, but with enjoyment of free moments in school.

Learning from each other

Students are also satisfied to help their classmates (6 – 2%). In one of the cases it is not just help but solving a dispute (Tzvetomir from Vidin). Two students are happy to receive help from their classmates. One student enjoys learning something from his friend. Of great importance is the good presentation in front of other students (4). These answers are very few as mutual learning is not largely used in Bulgarian schools [8].

The results are cause for reflection on the reconstruction of the learning process. It's important to select methods for using cooperative learning in classroom [6], because the social learning is important for the personality development [17] In the social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others" [1].

Feelings

Learning atmosphere

Only 32 students enjoy studying due to the good class environment. The amusing moments are emphasized not in connection with learning but with the happy moments with their friends during the breaks. Very interesting is the completely negative attitude of some students to school. Completely positive attitude to school have the primary school students.

Subjective feelings

There are students (40/1,13%) who connect the joy of learning with personal feelings. Negative emotions prevail. Lots of students are afraid from pouring efforts and from lack of success. This fear is found in preschool students too. Fear is shown mostly within students from 5 and 6 grades. This fear is some kind fear from devaluation or losing of their personality. Nobody fears physical violation. In her works Djambazova [4] presents the results from her survey of students from 1 to 4 grade. They show that children are afraid of ridicule or lack of success. Situations that can offend their dignity are more threatening when there is a possibility of physical violation in the sport education.

Positive emotions can be classified into several categories. Some of them are connected with entertainment ("singing", "dancing", "have fun") and creativity. Others are connected with demonstration of knowledge and self confidence from acquired knowledge and skills and also received recognition. Some children enjoy interesting process of study which wakes dreams. Some moments make children proud of the history of their country and this is a patriotic note. Fear from the unknown and the new teachers in the secondary school is connected with the grief for their first teacher from their first classes in the primary school.

Out of school learning

Teaching courses out of schools

Only 24 students (8%) share that they are happy to learn also out of school. There are students that love nature trips, /8 – 33,33%/ and enjoy visualization of the studied things (5). They prefer to see things in their natural environment. Other students enjoy learning while visiting museums and galleries (8), meeting famous writers etc. One student said he really enjoyed a trip to Romania organized by school project. Such impressions share children from 5 and 6 grades - 3% and from 7 and 8 grades - 1,3% . It is surprising that only one of the younger students share his impressions from a nature trip. No student from 1 to 4 grade likes visualization of the studied matters in their natural environment. It is unlikely that such were not organized, but clearly there is more to be desired. Only 1% of the oldest students share impressions from such visualizations and 0,6% from those from 5 and 6 grade/. Three children shared their expressions from meeting a writer trip abroad and visiting a police station.

Excursions

Studying outside school is not very popular in Bulgaria. Only 25 (8,3%) students share happy moments from it. Most of them associate such learning only with emotions not connected with school, such as picnics and trips with friends. Based on these results, our attention is directed to the desire of the children to be with their classmates and friends. The fact is that students highly appreciate joint activities with their peers. This means that the training should be reoriented to cooperative learning.

Separate statements (2) indicate that students strive toward discovering diversity and beauty of nature. For some students (mainly from 7 grade) of great importance are some nature friendly activities such as tree planting. Unfortunately activities based on experiences in nature are rarely used.

Some children have good experience from participating or watching of performance of folk customs and traditions. (For example throwing flowers in the river – “Lazaruvane”).

Teacher

Personality

Few students (8/ 2,6%) connect the joy of learning with the personality of their teacher. 6 children think that the most important thing is the teacher to be “good” or “wonderful”. These few opinions show that the positive attitude of the teacher is significant for the students, especially for those in primary schools. This is what the children from the preschool classes expect to find at school too.

Professional operation

Only 21 students (5,3%) connect the joy of learning with their teacher’s professionalism. Very important for 7 students is the ability of the teacher to make studying interesting (“to suggest interesting things”, “to tell interesting stories” or “to give fun tasks”). Of great significance for the children is the ability of the teacher “to explain well”. Very few of them expect the teacher to help and encourage them. Only one student indicated that he appreciates teacher’s rigor.

Specials (special comments)

The Special category contents comments which concern the attitude to school in general where we find unusual comments. 16 out of 21 students show completely negative attitude to learning which is shocking and should be subject to a depth commentary on the reasons for it.

Our results show there is a tendency towards reducing the joy from going to school. The same results can be found in the research of Kirilova [7]. The data were similar to the results obtained in the study of the National Foundation for Education Survey in the UK too [3]. And there stands the problem for permanent increasing of the number of dissatisfied, unwilling to attend classes of students of different ages, starting from 7-year-olds. The opinion of more than one third of the participating young people in the study is summarized in the phrase "In most cases I do not want to go to school" [3]. The study also shows that the bad behavior of the students in a class is a result of boredom, dissatisfaction and a sense of misjudgment on the part of teachers [3].

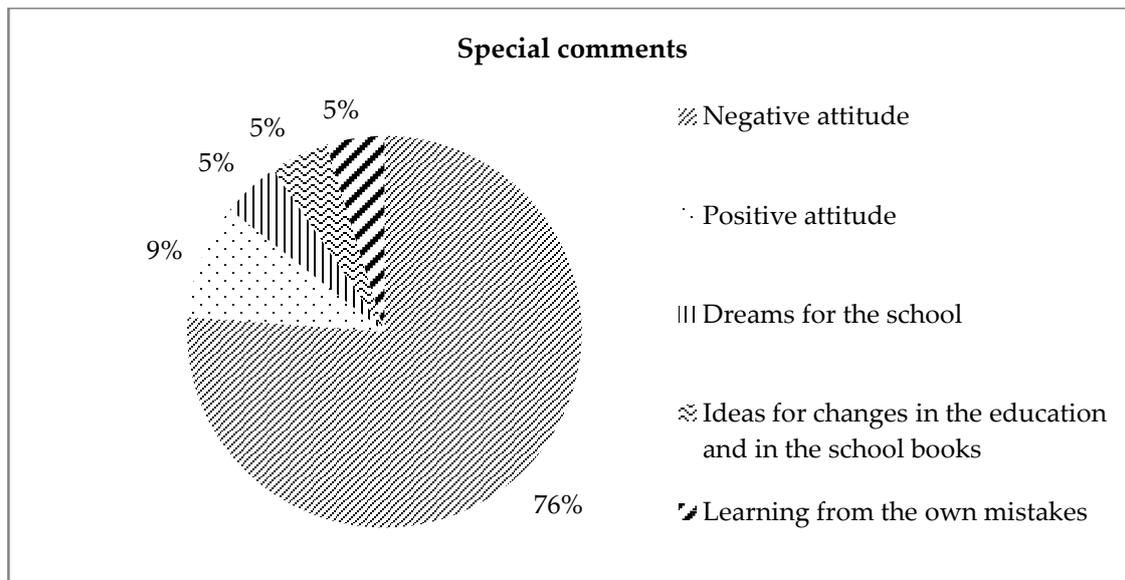


Figure 3. Special comments

There are two really positive comments in the research one of which is connected with dreams for school.

Very interesting are the advices concerning changes in the textbooks and the education as general. Our observations of school training found out other examples of students' reflections on the possibilities for transformations in school work. The students from 3 grade give their ideas for changes in the school books during an experimental training in Bulgaria conducted in 2010 too [11].

We were really impressed by the words of one student who said that he loves learning from his own mistakes.

4. Conclusions

After the analysis of the results we can do some conclusions.

- Most of the students prefer to be active in the process of learning. They don't want to be only listeners.
- Competitive learning which highlights personal qualities to cooperative learning is preferred.
- Students enjoy showing their abilities, but there are few opportunities. The performance is typically associated with participation in competitions.
- Joyful emotions prevail upon successful execution of the tasks, which increases children's self-confidence and cause for positive motivation.
- Interest on learning decreases with age.
- Presence of fear, of negative attitude towards learning in general was found, which is the cause for reflection on the reconstruction of the learning process.
- Experiences in nature are not of great importance, which indicates that steps towards outdoor school and to methods that allow sharing nature should be made.

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