

QUALITY OF SCHOOL LIFE FROM THE PUPILS' PERSPECTIVE - RESEARCH THESIS

Věra VOJTOVÁ

Introduction

There is a relatively broad consensus among the general public that education plays a decisive role for the quality of life in adulthood. People usually associate the quality of education with efficiency, success, high qualification..., with the school. On the other hand, one often forgets the pleasure gained from learning, shared experience and success, and from the other pleasant personal aspects of school life. Nevertheless, specialists pay a lot of attention to these aspects. They are believed to influence the activity of pupils, their integration and functioning within process of education (cf. WHO, 2001) and they can be crucial for school performance (Hollenweger, Haskell, 2002, Booth, Ainscow, 2002). Positive school life experience and positive signals associated with learning initiate pupils' motivation to self-development (RVP, 2005). These aspects seem to be relevant for the quality of education.

We present a tool, which makes this dimension of "pupils' school life perspective" accessible to teachers, making them more aware of some negatively perceived aspects and allowing them to actively work and develop positive environment for all pupils. The requirement of high quality school environment for all pupils closely relates to the inclusive trends of the contemporary education (UNESCO, 1993, 1994, 2005). Within the inclusive concept (WHO, 2001, 2002, 2003), individual learning problems and failure in schoolwork are believed to hinder good quality of life (Walker, Severson, 2002, Booth, Ainscow, 2002).

Delimiting the research problem

Our long-term research aims at verifying the usability of the "School life" questionnaire as a tool for the identification of risk areas of school life, which have a negative impact on the active involvement of all pupils in learning and education. We specifically focus on pupils with behaviour disorders, for whom the risk of exclusion from school and education is very high (Jahnukainen, 2001, Wearmouth, Glynn, Berryman, 2005). In this contribution we present the first results of our research, which is a part of research intent "Education of Pupils with Special Educational Needs" of Masaryk University Pedagogical Faculty.

The first phase of the research aimed at verifying the usability of a scale for measuring the quality of school life from pupils' perspective. In particular, our goal was:

- to translate and modify the “Quality of school life” questionnaire (Williams, Batten, 1981) and verify its usability in the Czech environment;
- to verify the reliability of a scale and suggest further steps;
- to analyze and describe pupils' attitudes towards the quality of school life.

The empirical research was conducted at elementary schools in the Czech Republic in the years 2007 and 2008.

We characterize the *quality of school life* in terms of individual and contextual connections of the school environment. It is defined as a list of scales which are used in the questionnaire of the evaluation of school life (cf. Ježek, 2006). Positive assessment of school life by pupils themselves is relevant for their motivation in education and corresponds to the current school concept (cf. UNESCO, 2005) and is an important factor affecting pupils' approach to learning and education (cf. Booth, Ainscow, 2002). Negative attitudes, on the other hand, contribute to the development of problem behaviour (cf. Sørli, 1997, Wearmouth, Glynn, Berryman, 2005) and increase the risk of school drop-out (Jahnukainen, 2001). The importance of understanding the attitudes of pupils themselves in the context of school environment is accentuated by many researchers (cf. Ježek, 2006); attitudes typically involve the aspect of assessment, whether explicitly or implicitly; pupils' attitudes capture the implicit curriculum as a “didactic” aspect of class or school life, which is used to instill the pupils with certain knowledge or skill (cf. Daniels, Garner, 2000, Wearmouth, Glynn, Berryman, 2005).

Selected findings

There is a number of studies concerning the influence of school environment on the performance of pupils. In this section we describe a few examples, which are relevant for our own study. One of the first large-scale research of school life quality, specifically focused on pupils' attitudes towards the school environment was published by Epstein and McPartland in 1976. On the sample of 4266 pupils (10–18 years old) they observed the significance of pupils' emotional experience for the development of their motivation to learn. Pupils that were *happy at school turned out to have a more positive attitude* towards other areas of school life, they performed and behaved better at school, and were altogether more successful (Epstein, McPartland, 1976). Williams and Batten (1981) took up with their „Quality of school life“ research. They determined the latent structure of indicators and shortened the questionnaire from the original 71 to 29 questions. The usability of this version of the questionnaire, as well as its independence of culture and nation specific factors, was tested and verified in a number of international studies (Binkley, Rust, Williams, 1996, p. 197). This international research, conducted in 8 countries of the European region, serves as an inspiration for our own study. Linnakylä with team (1996) proved the *significance of the impact of school life on the forming personal and social identity* of pupils; they

identified *school life experiences as important determinants in the process of learning, their future education, as well as in the overall attitudes towards long-life learning.* Henderson and Fisher (2008) investigated a group of 157 11–12 years old pupils of non-study classes; they were interested in the correlation between how pupils perceive the teacher-pupil interaction and how successful they are at school. They found out that pupils' perception of the *teacher-pupil interaction plays a decisive role in pupils' school performance. Clear guidance and instruction are showed to support friendly behaviour and the feeling of freedom at schoolwork, which in turn increase pupils' motivation to learn.* Dinkes, Forrest, and Lin-Kelly (2007) arrived at similar results after they analyzed data about the criminality of 12–18 years old pupils and students in the school environment and on their way to and from school. The data spanned a 10-year long period. They concluded that *school criminality and indiscipline at class work directly correlates with school failure and low level of schoolwork.* In 2000, the European Commission ordered a research on the quality of school life in the European region. This research was conducted by an international group of experts, which identified 16 indicators of school quality clustered into 4 areas: *level of knowledge, opportunity to success, education process monitoring, tools and structure of teaching.* The UNESCO experts proved a direct correlation between a bad guidance and school failure (2005). Johnson and Asera (1999) studied the relation between school quality and pupils' school success. They conducted the research in 9 schools with pupils at risk of social disadvantage. They focused on systemic aspects, functionality and strategies of school environment. Five years before the research was conducted, all these schools registered a notable improvement of pupils' school success. This was exemplified by the shift in scores at national tests, where these schools moved from bad results to results comparable with the nation's best schools. Johnson and Asera (1999) concluded that the observed improvement in pupils' school success as well as in their contentment and mutual relations is to be attributed to a *school environment with clearly defined competences and responsibilities of both teachers and pupils.* The way pupils perceive teacher's *assessment* of their own *behaviour* and the *respect* with which they are treated were pointed out as important determinants of desirable models of behaviour for all pupils of the schools in the survey. In addition, the *opportunity of teamwork, peer support and mediation* were identified as important factors for fulfilling the educative goals of the school.

As regards the Czech research activities, a number of authors occupy themselves with the context of school environment and the ways it influences pupils' attitudes towards school performance and self-evaluation. A study of Helus and Pelikán from 1984 investigates the impact of teachers' *preference attitudes* on pupils' performance at school, their self-reflection, self-evaluation, and auto attribution. They pointed out that teachers tend to project their subjective view of objective reality into the evaluation of pupils. A high amount of subjectivity (in the sense of under- or over-evaluating the performance of a certain pupil) was identified as a risk factor affecting the motivation to learn, the formation of pupils' self-confidence, and pupils' relationship to the teacher and the subject they teach. It can also induce negativistic attitudes in the behaviour of pupils. Novotný (1997) studied how teachers' attitudes towards pupils influence the school performance.

He pointed out that authoritarian teachers emphasize disciplinary requirements at the expense of educative requirements and aims. Vojtová (2001) compared pupils' and teachers' attitudes to certain selected phenomena of the school environment, focusing on the issues of pupils' behaviour. She observed the tendency of teachers to perceive pupils' attitudes in a more positive way than pupils themselves and to undervalue the work with disciplinary rules and a fair assessment of pupils' performances. School environment and its context has further been investigated by Mareš, 2003, 2007; Ježek, 2003, 2006; Smékal, 2007; and others. These authors emphasize the wide range of these problems (Mareš, 2003) and the multitude of possible approaches to the context of school environment and climate (Ježek, 2006). They stress the point that there is no universal general concept of climate which would be appropriate for solving all problems in the context of school education (cf. Mareš, 2003, 2007, Ježek, 2003, 2006).

Findings of the first research phase

The first phase of our research aimed at determining the usability of a scale for measuring pupils' attitudes towards school. In what follows we present elementary school pupils' attitudes towards education and quality of life in school. The data were extracted from the process of verifying the used scale. The background assumptions of our research come from Williams and Batten (1981) and Binkley, Rust, and Williams (1996). Our goal was:

- to translate and modify the "Quality of school life" questionnaire (Williams, Batten, 1981) and verify its usability in the Czech environment;
- to verify the reliability of a scale and suggest further steps;
- to analyze and describe pupils' attitudes towards the quality of school life and education by using a descriptive analysis.

This study does not include an analysis of the differences in attitudes of pupils with problem behaviour. We leave this for future research phase. The data have already been collected. Currently we are adding new data concerning distinct target groups.

Questionnaire

As we mentioned the construction of our questionnaire was inspired by the "Quality of school life" questionnaire by Williams, Batten (1981). Given the specifics of the Czech school environment (cf. Mareš, 2003, 2008), the questionnaire was not merely translated but also modified. We arrived at a set of 35 questions. We used the theory of Binkley, Rust, Williams (1996) and divided the questions into six topical dimensions: (i) the overall satisfaction with school, (ii) the perception of one's own success and opportunity in learning, (iii) negative experience, (iv) the teacher-pupil relationship, (v) the school status of pupils, (vi) the formation of identity.

The dimension of the *overall satisfaction with school* was delimited by the indicators: I really like going to school; I like most of the subjects; I am

usually satisfied with what I do; I know what the teacher wants from me; teachers don't take my mistakes ill of me when they see that I make effort; learning is fun; I am happy in school. The dimension of *success and opportunity* involved the following indicators: I can reach good results; I like learning; I am curious; I learn a lot; teachers show interest in my opinions and thoughts. The *negative experience* dimension made use of the indicators: I am often nervous; teachers like some pupils more; I am afraid when I hear my name; I feel lonely; teachers don't like me; I am afraid of vexation. The *teacher-pupil* dimension focused on: I can speak to the teacher when I have a problem; teachers are fair at assessment, punishment, and praise; teachers help me when I don't know how to proceed with an assignment; teachers listen to what I say; teachers help me achieve good results; teachers evaluate me appropriately. The *school status* dimension was delimited by the following indicators: people respect me; others think a lot about me; pupils with disability are showed the same respect as others; I learn to take others the way they are; schoolmates help me when I don't know how to proceed with an assignment; I feel that I am important. The *formation of identity* dimension was determined as follows: I know about many things which I do well; meeting other people helps me understand myself; I learn to understand schoolmates with different opinions; I learn more about myself; I learn to understand being a person with handicap. The respondents answered on the basis of a six-level Likert scale. The questionnaire exploits the method of self-report. This method was also used in the original research (cf. Binkley, Rust, Williams, 1996) and is still widely used in investigations of school context. It is believed to provide reports of implicit influences in the school environment (cf. Ježek, 2006, Klusák, 2004).

Data collection

A pilot study was conducted in the third quarter of 2007 on 64 respondents – 7th and 8th grade elementary school pupils, who formed a group heterogeneous as for both school performance and behaviour. The first quarter of 2008 was devoted to data collection. The fieldwork was conducted by administrators who were trained for that at two seminars.

Examined data

The examined data consists of 2069 randomly selected pupils, with an even proportion of both sexes. The data were collected in 39 schools and residential school institutions; most of them were schools and institutions from the region of South Moravia; the respondents were between 12 and 17 years old, which age-span corresponds to the original research. The smallest files of respondents (5 to 10 children) were from residential children's homes. The files from elementary schools consisted of 30 to 100 pupils. The survey included also one upper secondary school of the gymnasium type; however, only students from lower years of the more-year study program (still in the compulsory school attendance age) took part in research as respondents. In this first phase of the research we concentrate

on the file of elementary school pupils. Other files of respondents are now only considered for purposes of comparison but will get into the centre of our attention in upcoming research phases. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the full file of respondents.

	numbers of respondents	number of institutions	representation (%)	gender man/woman in %	mean age
elementary school	1649	22	79,7	52/48	14,2
upper secondary school	103	1	5	50/50	14,1
residential childrens homes	101	12	4,9	49/51	14,9
special school/residential school institution	216	4	10,4	69/31	15,8
Total	2069	39	100	54/46	14,4

Comment: pupils attending lower grades than 6th have been excluded from the analysis; total number in presenting analysis N covers 1596 respondents

Table 1: Full file of respondents – basic characteristics

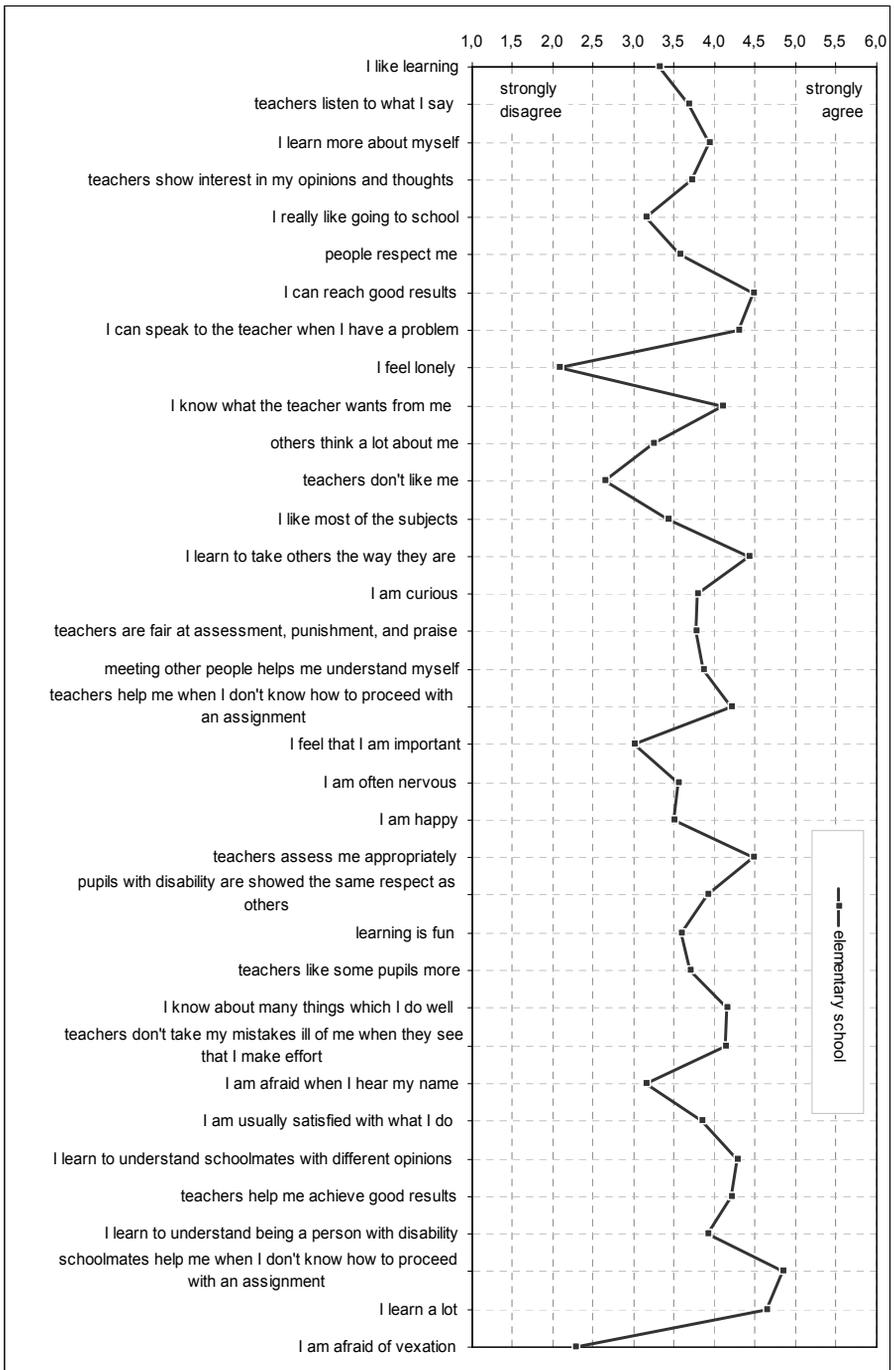
Analysis and interpretation of selected findings

In this study we focus on the first phase of analysis: we describe the distribution of the data onto particular questions concerning the school environment, looking at the file of elementary school pupils (graph 1). We summarize the mean scores in the scales of school life assessment, using the basic tools of descriptive statistic analysis. The obtained data serve for the verification of validity and reliability of the scale. The second phase of analysis will concentrate on the internal logical consistency and cohesion of choices at particular items of the scale. The third phase will focus on testing the external validity and relations between both used scales.

School life evaluation scale

The battery of school life evaluation (*School is a place where...*) consisted of 35 items. Pupils expressed their opinion about each of them via a six-level scale: from 1 = definitely false to 6 = definitely true. Graph 1 gives a summary of the mean score of all evaluated items. The evaluation profile is different for each type of school.¹ Elementary and upper secondary school respondents agree with the following statements to a great extent: *School is a place where my schoolmate helps me when I don't know how to deal with an assignment*. The biggest disagreement was expressed with the statements *where I feel lonely* and *where I am afraid of vexation*. Graph 1 summarizes the mean scores of all evaluation items in the same order as in the questionnaire. The evaluation profile is different for each type of school.

¹ Elementary schools represent the largest and the main examined data set. If not stated otherwise, the data interpretation relates to this set. Other data sets are included for comparative purposes.



Graph 1: Evaluation profile of school life elementary school

Interpretation of selected findings

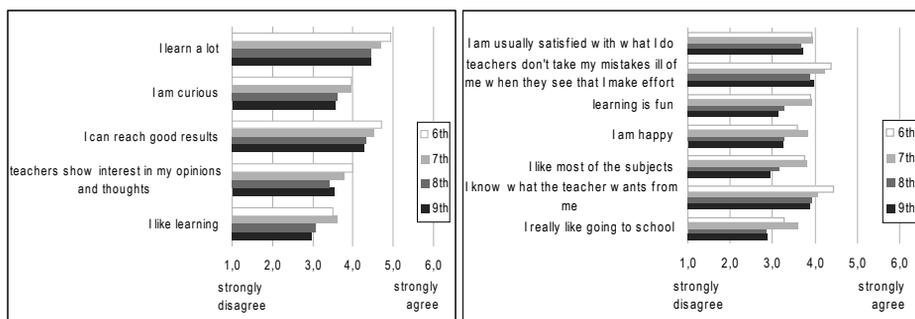
Elementary school pupils associate school with the opportunity to learn, they realize the possibilities and opportunities that school offers. Their attitude to school as a place where they like to learn is unclear; school is not a place “*where they really like to go*”. They understand the conditions and rules well and perceive school as a place where they get an opportunity and offer to develop their competences. What we find interesting and pleasing is the finding that pupils do not experience fear of failure and perceive the possibility of a repeated opportunity in case of failure. Teachers’ attitudes are generally evaluated positively.

School environment evaluation in the file of elementary school pupils

In what follows, we present the elementary school data. Answers will be compared on the basis of school years.

Evaluation in dimension A – success and opportunity and C – overall satisfaction

Graph 2 presents items from the success and opportunity dimension. On average, all items are evaluated positively, except for “*school is a place where I like to learn*”. The evaluation in the overall satisfaction dimension is close to the centre of the scale, making the data more ambivalent. Teachers’ attitude is evaluated positively in general, however, school is not a place “*where I really like to go*”. Moreover, there is a systematic decrease in the evaluation of this item with higher school years.



Source: file elementary school pupils 6th – 9th grade; N = 1596

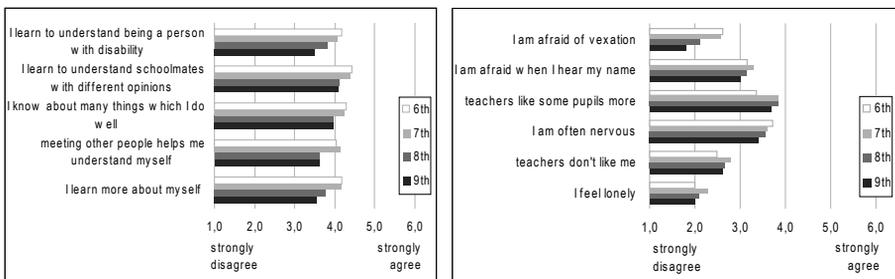
Graph 2 Evaluation profile in dimension A - success and opportunity and C - overall satisfaction

Pupils associate school with the opportunity to learn, they are aware of the possibilities and opportunities that school offers. They understand the conditions and rules well and perceive school as a place where they get an opportunity and offer to develop their competences. What we find interesting and pleasing is the finding that pupils do not experience fear of failure and perceive the possibility of a repeated opportunity in case of failure. What is worrying is the finding that as pupils grow older (and go to higher school years), their satisfaction and positive evaluation of school is decreasing. The data also suggest that the joy from learning and going to school is not

very high, with 8th and 9th year pupils even getting into negative scores. Nevertheless, it is positive that pupils experience school as a place where they are happy.

Evaluation in dimension I – formation (support) of identity and N – negative experience

In the dimension of *identity formation* (Graph 3 on the left), the evaluation is ambivalent at all items. It is again the case that the mean score decreases with higher school years and that pupils in lower years tend to evaluate items more positively. The evaluation in the *negative experience* dimension is reversed, compared to other dimensions; higher scores translate to a negative evaluation of school. Interestingly, the trend witnessed so far, namely that older students evaluate school more negatively, is not attested in this case. In some cases, most significantly in the item “*where I am afraid of vexation*”, the trend is even reversed. This is due to the fact that the oldest pupils are threatened relatively less. Another item where the score improves with age is “*where I am nervous*”. On the other hand, the item “*teachers like some pupils more*” appears to be problematic for pupils. Nevertheless, the evaluations in this dimension are generally relatively low, which is a positive result.



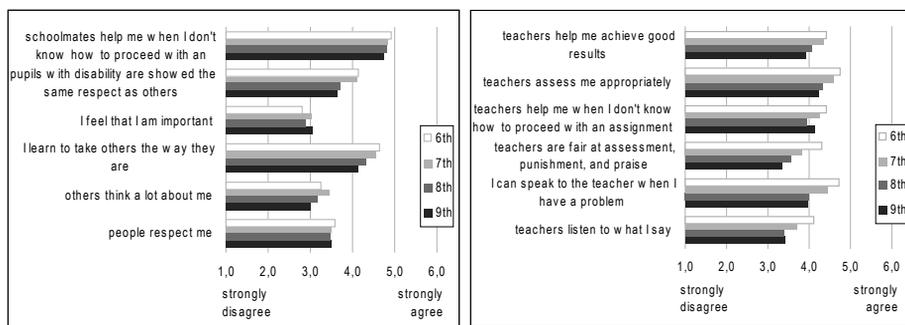
Source: file elementary school pupils 6th – 9th grade; N = 1596

Graph 3 Evaluation profile in dimension I formation (support) of identity and N – negative experience

Pupils feel safe in school, they do not feel particularly lonely or threatened by vexation, these items receive the lowest scores, accordingly. Arguably, this is due to the efficiency of prevention programs which have been systematically carried out at schools and which aim at the increase in pupils’ awareness and resistance to vexation and violence exposure (cf. Peňázová, Vojtová, 2008). It is also encouraging that pupils perceive school as a place where they learn to accept different opinions and different dimensions of human life, in the sense of health and handicap (cf. RVP, 2005, UNESCO, 1996). The positive evaluation of teachers’ attitudes towards pupils and the opportunity to develop shows a shift in the overall approach to learning in school. It appears that pupils are more confident about their possibilities to reach good results in learning (cf. Vojtová, 2001).

Evaluation in dimension S – school status and T – teacher-pupil relationship

Similarly to the *negative experience* dimension, the differences in evaluating the *school status* items are significant. While the item “*where my schoolmate helps me when I don’t know how to deal with an assignment*” is the highest evaluated in the whole 35-item battery, the statement “*where I feel that I am important*” is evaluated rather negatively. The feeling of importance slightly grows with age. Two other items are age-independent and others follow the general pattern of older pupils’ more negative evaluation. The *teacher-pupil relationship* item is evaluated in a balanced way and slightly positively. Negative evaluation is only witnessed in two items, where older pupils are skeptic towards how fair teachers are and how much attention they pay to pupils.



Source: file elementary school pupils 6th – 9th grade; N = 1596

Graph 4 Evaluation profile in dimension S – school status and T – teacher-pupil relationship

The findings from this battery of questions lead us to the interpretation that social networks in school environment are perceived positively by pupils. One’s importance, on the other hand, appears to be undervalued by pupils – they generally feel as unimportant, the attention that they receive is felt to be insufficient, especially in higher school years. Given the plans for future research, this finding is rather significant, as it points to pupils’ undervaluation of confidence in oneself and one’s own competences. We have reasons to believe that pupils that are unsure or weakened in areas that are important for a successful social interaction do not get enough opportunity in school to strengthen (compensate for) these weak points.

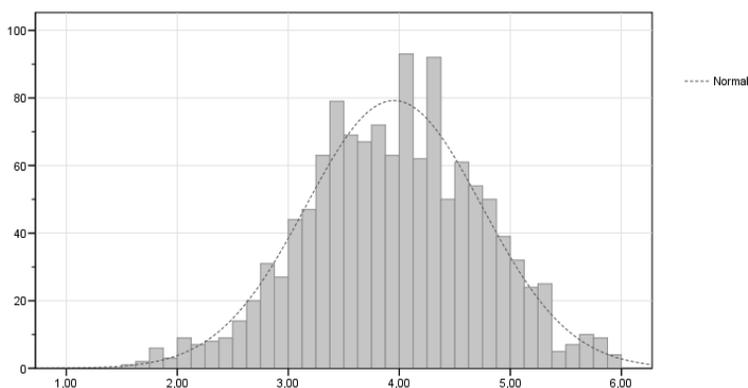
Histogram of the overall evaluation of school life

We also investigated the overall distribution of the used scale of school life evaluation, i.e. the sum score of the whole battery of questions. By summing the results of all items we arrived at a scale where each pupil can receive an amount of 35 to 210 points. The overall value was divided by the number of questions, in order to return to the original scale: 1 to 6.² The lowest score (1,0) would correspond to a pupil whose evaluation of school is extremely negative. The highest score (6,0), on the other hand, reflects an unconditionally positive view of school. The actual lowest score in the file of elementary schools is 1,57 and the highest 5,97.

² Recall that all scales consisted of 6 levels, the maximal score is therefore 6x35. In order for the summing to work properly, it was necessary to reverse the scale in the dimension *negative experience*.

The overall mean score is 3,95. Graph 5 presents the distribution of values on the scale, with a curve representing the normal distribution. The whole distribution is shifted towards the right side of the scale, which corresponds to the slight predominance of positive evaluation. **Except for a few slight deviations, the form of the actual distribution corresponds the normal curve**, which is also confirmed by other graphical and statistical tools.³ The distribution of values therefore exhibits some usual properties: the score of 68 % of all pupils is located within the ± 1 standard deviation from the average, i.e. within the span 3,15 - 4,75; the score of 95 % of pupils is not below 2,35 or above 5,55 (± 2 of the standard deviation, whose value is 0,8 in our case). If we treat the file of respondents as representative, the same holds for all pupils from 6th – 9th elementary school years.

Pupils perceive school as a place associated with happiness and feel safe in school: the feelings of being threatened by vexation and loneliness are items that appear to be the least problematic. It is also encouraging that pupils perceive school as a place where they learn to accept different opinions and different dimensions of human life, in the sense of health and handicap (cf. RVP, 2005, UNESCO, 1996). The positive evaluation of teachers' attitudes towards pupils and the opportunity to develop shows a shift in the overall approach to learning in school. It appears that pupils are more confident about their possibilities to reach good results in learning (cf. Vojtová, 2001). One's importance, on the other hand, appears to be undervalued by pupils - they generally feel as unimportant, the attention that they receive is felt to be insufficient, especially in higher school years. Self-confidence and the perception of one's own importance are crucial for a successful social interaction and integration. Our survey shows that compensating for these weaker sides by introducing opportunities in the educative process is not a usual strategy in schools. The predominance of **slightly positive attitudes in the overall scale of school life evaluation** is positive. The support of pupils' individuality and specificity with the emphasis on individual contribution to learning and teaching is an area which deserves more investigation.



Source: file elementary school pupils 6th – 9th grade; N = 1596
 Graph 5 Histogram of the overall evaluation of school life

³ The normality of the distribution is controlled graphically by the so-called Q-Q graph. Statistically, we test the distribution normality hypothesis with the help of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, which yields the value 0,20 in this case (it must be above 0,05).

Extreme values appear less with increasing distance from the average. The scale can therefore predict the proportion of pupils with very low evaluation in a given group (population, school, class). (Normal distribution of the school life evaluation scale is also attested in other subsets – secondary schools, children’s homes, and special institutions.) The distribution of the overall school life evaluation scale suggests a latent structure of the scale of pupils’ evaluation of attitudes to school life in the Czech environment. Further on, we verified the tests of scale usability, its validity and reliability by factor analysis and Cronbach’s α . The factor analysis, using all the items in the battery, indeed identifies 6 factors, which explain more than 52 % of the variance of the original variables.

Summary

In the first phase of our research we aimed at verifying the test of a measuring tool suitable for learning about subjective school evaluation. The pupils answer 35 questions, which are ex post divided into six dimensions, characterizing various aspects of school environment. The data set consists of 1596 elementary school (6th – 9th year) pupils. The results suggest that the internal consistence of the scale in particular dimensions is satisfactory, which in turn implies an unproblematic internal validity. The scale as a whole exhibits a normal distribution, which is a significant advantage for its further statistical assessment. The normality of the distribution is good to verify in any potential future research.

Pupils generally perceive their school environment in a positive way. The most highly evaluated statement is *School is a place where my schoolmate helps me if I do not know how to deal with an assignment*. This finding reveals that pupils perceive school as a place of social (peer) support.