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Preferences for various learning environments: Teachers' and parents' perceptions.

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Abstract

In the last ten years, a number of innovations, mainly inspired by constructivist notions of learning, have been introduced in various levels of the Dutch educational system. However, constructivist learning environments are rarely implemented. Teachers tend to stick to expository and structured learning environments. This consistent finding requires research in order to gain insight into teachers' preferences for learning environments and to determine the factors that support and impede the realization of these learning environments. Regarding the influence of social backgrounds on student learning, is it also important to take stock of parental views on learning environments.

This study is focused on teachers' preferences for learning environments, their reported teaching behavior, and how these match with parents' preferences. Three parallel questionnaires were developed for teachers (n=281), students (n=952), and parents (n=717), measuring preferences and behavior in different levels of education, for three types of learning environments: direct instruction, discovery learning, and authentic pedagogy.

The results show that teachers often prefer direct instruction, and seldom promote discovery learning. While teachers sometimes realize authentic pedagogy, constructive learning tasks are seldom used. Teachers' reported practice and parents' preferences for their children appear to correspond reasonably.

Results of multiple regression analyses show that the use of the three types of learning environments yield different predictors. For the use of discovery learning and authentic pedagogy, confidence in students' regulative skills is an important predictor. In predicting the use of direct instruction, the teacher's own conception of learning turns out to be an important predictor.

Introduction

Internationally, major changes in curricula have been implemented at various levels of educational systems: new mathematics, communicative foreign language teaching, problem-based learning, middle school curricula, self-regulated learning. The Dutch Advisory Council for Education formulated in its report 'Space to learn' (1994) suggested that the development of 'knowledge as a tool' was a major task of elementary and junior high-school instruction. The council formulated three principles on the basis of which this task could be realized: 1) learning as the extension and reconstruction of knowledge, 2) learning as a social process, and 3) learning how to deal with problems independently. These recommendations reflect changed views on learning and teaching.

However, constructivist learning environments are rarely implemented. Teachers tend to stick to expository and structured learning environments, as we will point out below. This consistent finding requires research in order to gain insight into teachers' preferences for learning environments and to determine the factors that support and impede the realization of these learning environments. Regarding the influence of social backgrounds on student learning, it is also important to take stock of parental views on learning environments.

In the present study, we focused on the application of learning environments that result from modern views of learning and on the application of learning environments based on more traditional conceptions of learning. In addition, we paid attention to parents who also hold certain views on learning and teaching, which may be conveyed to their children and as a consequence may or may not be in line with teachers' practices. Therefore, teachers' practices and parents' preferences were compared. Dominant views on learning and teaching held by policy makers and researchers may well conflict with parents' views.

In 1999, a research project entitled 'New Learning', commissioned by a Dutch educational advisory institute (KPC Group), was started to investigate students', teachers' and parents' views on learning and teaching within different types of education (Theunissen & Visser, 1999). In this article, we report on parents' preferences and reported teacher practices with regard to learning environments.

Conceptions of learning and teaching

Changing notions of learning and learning environments

Contemporary innovations in learning environments, such as Schools for Thought (Lamon, 1995), mathematics in rich contexts, or authentic pedagogy can be considered reactions to the type of formal school learning that has been criticized by Resnick (1987). At the same time, opposing views on learning and teaching have a longer history. Eisner and Vallance (1974) and Miller and Seller (1985) have summarized different perspectives on curriculum, which reflect opposing views: teaching as transmission, transaction, or transformation. In the first view, the goal of teaching is transmission of knowledge. In the second view, problem solving and interaction between student, teacher, and curriculum is aimed at. In the third view, students create their own knowledge in learning environments aimed at discovery and self-realization. Dewey (1902/1956) made a different distinction far earlier: education aimed at the child or education aimed at the curriculum.

The innovative learning environments mentioned above could be considered as consequences of a shift from transmission-oriented views towards transaction and transformation-oriented views on learning and teaching.

In the present study we focused on the actual arrangement of learning environments in Dutch primary and secondary education. The theoretical concepts we used were drawn from educational psychology. In general, it can be stated that psychological views on learning have had repercussions for the arrangement of learning environments. Some developments are summarized below.

De Klerk and Simons (1988) describe the development from product-oriented to process-oriented conceptions of learning. They state that product-oriented conceptions are based on behaviorist theories of learning in which the acquisition of knowledge and skills takes place through small steps, each of which is accompanied by reinforcement. Consequently, in the design of learning environments, knowledge is decomposed into small manageable pieces to be mastered by the learner. During the process of knowledge or skills acquisition, systematic reinforcement is provided for the learner. The mastery learning approach can be considered an example of product-oriented learning. Internal mental processes are not taken into account in the design of the learning environment.

In cognitive and metacognitive conceptions of learning, referred to as ‘process oriented’ by De Klerk and Simons, the importance of mental processes during knowledge acquisition is emphasized. In the design of learning environments, the deliberate activation of

mental processes is considered as vital. Learning functions such as activating prior knowledge, motivating to start learning, and regulating and monitoring learning are addressed deliberately.

In the most recent conceptions of learning, based on constructivist learning theories, the active construction of meaning is stressed even more. In addition, learning is conceived of as an interactive process, embedded in a specific socio-cultural context. From this point of view, knowledge is inextricably interwoven with the social and physical environment in which it is developed and applied. It is not an abstract entity in itself. For a large part, the context determines the structure and content of, and the connection between, the concepts used. Knowledge is related to increasing and changing insights into the culture of knowledge users. In other words, learning is 'situated'. According to this view, learning is always situated (Lave, 1991). In addition, within constructivist notions of learning, the acquisition of knowledge is regarded as a process of cooperation and co-construction of knowledge. This principle is applied in the 'community of learners'-approach (Brown & Campione, 1994; Campione, Shapiro & Brown, 1995).

In contemporary educational innovations, we notice that elements of process-oriented and constructivist-oriented conceptions are increasingly being embraced. During the last decade, international research interests have shifted towards the designs and implementation of learning environments inspired by constructivist notions of learning. At the same time, the results from school effectiveness research within the context of math and mother tongue education has pointed out that the best results are found in structured, teacher-led environments (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1990; Creemers, 1991). However, it is unsure whether these kinds of learning environments are most effective under all circumstances. Besides, learning environments may differ depending on the kind of knowledge and skills to be acquired and on the fulfillment of certain conditions on class and school level. To conduct research into teachers' preferences for learning environments, we need to gain more insight into the various dilemmas or options teachers face when designing them. In section 2.2, these dilemmas will be described in further detail.

Learning environments: Dimensions and antecedents

Recently Roelofs, Van der Linden, and Erkens (1999) distinguished six dimensions on which learning environments can differ:

1. Construction of knowledge versus transmission of knowledge
2. Learning in complete task situations versus learning by means of split tasks

3. Personal meaning versus teacher-led meaning
4. Professional or scientific contexts versus formal contexts
5. Cooperation and communication versus individual learning
6. Developing learning climate: growth in expertise versus momentary mastering

These oppositions can be considered as continua with two extremes. The right-hand extremes represent the transmission model of learning environments. In this model, transmission of knowledge is a key characteristic, along with a process of teacher-led mastering of bodies of knowledge drawn from a fixed curriculum. Mastery of isolated skills is acquired by means of individual effort.

The left-hand extremes represent the model of discovery learning in which self-realization is a central characteristic. According to this conception of learning, the learner constructs his own knowledge by means of interaction with fellow learners starting from a complete task which is drawn from a professional context and which is personally meaningful to the learner. The learning climate is adjusted to the level of development of the learner. Making errors is considered inherent to the learning process.

Differences in learning environments can be characterized by means of these dimensions. In practice, these extremes will not be seen very often in their pure form. Mixed forms are more likely.

Results from studies point out that, during the implementation of authentic pedagogy in the context of Dutch secondary education, teachers pay little attention to the knowledge construction process. Learning situations in which students work cooperatively on constructive, integrative assignments, breaking down the boundaries of the subject, the textbook, and even the situation in class, are hardly ever found. In explaining this teaching practice teachers claim that (grade 7) students and especially less able students benefit considerably from learning the basics before being confronted with complete or complex tasks. In this respect, they cover their textbooks. Another reason for not using complete tasks is lack of time, owing to an already overloaded curriculum (Roelofs & Terwel, 1999).

Apparently, different factors, in this case the perception of student characteristics, may explain the choice of certain learning environments. The choice or preference for learning environments, varying from transmission-oriented to discovery-oriented, may be determined by factors on the student, teacher, and school level.

Lowyck (1995) distinguishes at the teacher level teachers' own educational experiences, their social background, and their affinity with theories and views of learning and teaching. One well known factor is the influence of one's preferred teaching style on the choice of learning environments. Research studies have revealed opposed styles, which are related with the extremes described above (Bennett, 1976; Solomon & Kendall, 1979): formal versus open, traditional versus innovative, expository versus discovery, teacher-centered versus student-centered. In addition, teachers' attitudes towards educational innovations is repeatedly mentioned as a vital factor for choosing alternative learning environments (Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; Fullan, 1992).

On the school level, physical conditions are mentioned regarding the classroom, the timetable, group size, textbooks and media (Lowyck, 1995; Roelofs, Vermeulen, & Houtveen, 1998). In a prior study, Roelofs and Terwel (1999) reported that, according to the teachers, mathematical textbooks seldom offer room for students to develop their own solution strategies to a mathematical problem,

As stated before, student characteristics, more specifically teacher perception of these characteristics, constitute an important factor influencing the choice and realization of learning environments. Brophy and Evertson (1981) and Good and Brophy, (1984, 2000) found that teachers' expectations of students do affect instructional behavior. In addition, teachers' subjective theories about students' characteristics influence the way the learning environment is arranged (Lee, 1996).

Learning environments and parents' preferences

Changes in conceptions of learning and learning environments take place within a broader societal context, a context in which parents play an important role. Themes like the (free) choice of schools, the middle school, and multicultural education have resulted in extensive debates, in which parents have been involved. The effects of parenting styles and academic aspirations on academic achievement and school attitudes have been demonstrated in various studies (Chrispeels, 1996; Levine & Lezotte, 1995, Marjoribanks, 1995, 1996).

In studying learning environments, parents can be involved for various purposes. A search in ERIC and PSYCHLIT databases using the key words, 'parents' perceptions', 'teaching', 'learning environment', 'curriculum', and 'student outcomes' (in varying combinations) resulted in a large number of references to parental perceptions regarding

teaching. An analysis of titles and abstracts result into the following purposes to involve parents in studying learning environments:

1. Determining the degree of parents' participation in educational matters and the influence of participation on the design of the learning environment.
2. Evaluation of teacher behavior by means of questionnaires for parents.
3. Mapping parents' perceptions with regard to school improvement projects aimed at students at risk or students with different cultural-ethnic backgrounds.
4. Taking stock of parental wishes and preferences with regard to dealing with learning problems, concerning their own children.
5. Mapping parents' perceptions with regard to learning environments within curricular domains.

Within studies of learning environments, two approaches are clearly visible. First, a qualitative approach in which data are drawn from interviews, discussing cases, which enable idiosyncratic views of learning environments to emerge. In this approach, only a few a priori theoretical concepts are used. Comparisons between parents', students', and teachers' perceptions yield qualitatively different results (see Dodd, 1995).

In a second, more quantitative approach, data are gathered by means of questionnaires, administered to parents, teachers, and students. In these questionnaires concepts and dimensions are carefully operationalized and in turn results of groups are compared quantitatively (see for example Gardner, 1995; Ostrander, 1996; Zill & Nolin, 1994). In this approach, it is supposed that the dimensions are theoretically well described.

Specific outcomes with regard to preferred learning environments, combined with data about actual teacher practice, are scarce. Results from the remaining small number of studies show that parents, compared to the teachers, prefer a more traditional learning environment for their children.

Schlak (1994) explored the age-old debate of what makes a good kindergarten program by examining teachers' and parents' perceptions and expectations of kindergarten programs. The results indicated that both groups agreed that cognitive development and academic skills are of primary importance. The results also indicated that parents placed greater value on direct instruction, while teachers placed greater value on the use of a variety of materials for learning.

Wise (1993) found slightly different results. She examined parent and teacher attitudes toward developmentally appropriate instructional practice compared to traditional skill-based instruction in the classroom. The study surveyed parents and teachers of kindergarten, first, and second grade students in Marin County, California. The results of the surveys showed that most parents and teachers strongly favor a majority of the concepts of developmentally appropriate instructional practice and generally prefer such instruction over traditional skills-based instruction. Both parents and teachers believed that a student-centered curriculum is an important factor in children's education. However, a majority of the parents indicated they believed that workbooks and textbooks were valuable learning tools, which differed from teacher opinion.

Dutch studies into parental preferences were not so much aimed at the specific design of the learning environment. Cadot and Versloot (1987) examined parents' opinions by means of two scales: traditional views and modern views. Scores were related to parental school choice, but no data were available on their specific views.

None of the studies mentioned above covers dimensions of fundamentally different learning environments in detail. In the present study these dimensions have been worked out for important aspects of learning environments. The forthcoming data can shed more light on the degree to which modern educational innovations may meet parental acceptance.

Research questions

This study focuses on the actual realization of learning environments by teachers and on parental preferences in this respect. In the study, the six dimensions mentioned earlier are worked out in detail in order to describe (reported) teacher behavior and parents' views. In addition, the predictive power of some factors considered important for teacher behavior was studied. In summary the following research questions were addressed**:**

1. In what way can the arrangement of learning environments in Dutch primary and secondary education be characterized by means of a set of design dimensions?
2. To which extent does the actual learning environment reported by teachers correspond with parental preferences for their own children?
3. What is the relation between the realization of different learning environments, on the one hand, and teachers' own views on learning, their perception of student

characteristics, their attitude toward contemporary educational innovations, and their perception of class and school level conditions, on the other hand?

Method

Instruments and data collection

Teachers

Design of learning environments

The design of the learning environments, teachers' views on learning, perception of student characteristics, and perception of class and school level conditions were examined by means of questionnaires for teachers. In one questionnaire, the realization of four characteristics of modern learning environments is measured, summarized by means of the concept 'Meaningful and strategic learning environments' (MSL) scale (Roelofs & Houtveen, 1998, 2000). In two questionnaires, the use of two specific types of learning environments was operationalized: direct instruction and discovery learning.

The MSL questionnaire consists of 52 Likert-type items and contains four scales, each representing three aspects of the learning environment: instruction, learning task, and assessment. The first subscale concerns the extent to which teachers relate instruction to the students' personal worlds (14 items, α =.80). Some example items: "In my choice of subjects, I try to relate to the students' interests as much as possible" and "I choose examples that appeal to students." The second subscale represents the degree to which attention is paid to process-oriented instruction (16 items, α =.80). Some example items: "I ask students how they arrived at a solution, which steps in their thought processes were taken" and "I try to instruct in a manner which makes students think about the way in which to carry out a learning task." The third subscale (10 items, α =.79) represents the degree to which the teacher promotes cooperation and interaction in the learning environment. Some example items are: "In my class, students present the results of assignments to fellow students" and "In the event of group assignments, I assign students to come up with a joint result." The fourth subscale (12 items, α =.80) measures the extent to which teachers use constructive learning tasks which transcend the textbook. An example item: "In class, students come into contact with knowledge users outside the school." In terms of the two extremes, transmission versus transformation, the first two scales can be positioned theoretically in the center in between the two extremes. The latter two scales take a position right of center.

In addition, a questionnaire representing the use of direct instruction was developed, based on scales used in previous studies (Roelofs, Veenman, & Raemaekers, 1991; Roelofs, Veenman, & Raemaekers, 1994). The resulting scale (14 items, α =.79) can be considered as an indicator of a transmission-oriented learning environment in which many activities, including constructing meaning, are in essence teacher-led. It must be noted, however, that the model is not purely product oriented. Some example items: "At the start of the lesson, I give a summary of previous content matter" and "I give short and clear assignments, which can be carried out without serious problems."

A third instrument for learning environments was developed to measure the extent to which the teacher promotes discovery learning. The instrument is based on the concept of discovery learning as defined by Wild (1994). A learning environment in which discovery is of primary importance, that can be located on the right-hand side of the continuum, is referred to as 'transformation'. Some example items: "I have my students ask themselves learning questions so they can figure out for themselves what they need to know" and "My students decide for themselves how much time they need to spend on their learning task."

Conceptions of own learning

Based on a Dutch learning style inventory, a questionnaire for teachers, measuring own learning conceptions was developed. Based on the Inventory of Learning Styles (ILS; Vermunt, 1992; Roosendaal en Vermunt, 1995; Vermunt, 1998; Brand & Teurlings, 1998), scales for teacher learning conceptions were developed. In the original Vermunt inventory, five conceptions of learning were distinguished. In this study, reliable scales could be developed for four of the five conceptions.

The first scale measures the learning conception which is indicated as 'externally controlled intake of knowledge' (6 items, α =.68): in this conception, learning is seen as the reproduction of ideas and facts offered by teachers and books. The second learning conception, 'use of knowledge', is measured by means of a four-item scale, (α =.61): in this learning conception, learning is seen as the process of knowledge and skills acquisition with the purpose of use in practice. The third scale for a learning conception, indicated as 'stimulating instruction' (4 items, α =.78), represents a conception in which teacher directions are seen as vital in all kinds of learning processes. A fourth scale represents the conception 'learning together' (5 items, α =.75). In this conception of learning, great value is attached to cooperating with peers when carrying out learning tasks. Teachers with this learning conception think they can learn from their peers, and they prefer to share learning tasks. For

the fifth learning conception, 'construction of knowledge,' which in previous studies appeared in reliable scales, no reliable scale resulted.

In addition, we developed a scale to measure a preference for learning by discovery. This scale would make the range of learning conceptions between intake and construction more complete. The resulting scale 'preference for discovery learning' is reasonably reliable (8 items, α =.69). Some example items: 'Learning is seeking information to answer learning questions I pose myself' and 'I prefer to be enabled to solve problems in my own way.'

Antecedent factors for choice of learning environments

Finally, a questionnaire was developed to measure antecedent factors for choosing learning environments, based on instruments in previous studies (Roelofs & Terwel, 1999; Roelofs & Houtveen, 1998). After reliability analyses, three reliable scales resulted. First, 'confidence in students' self-regulation' (10 items, α =.87). Some example items are: "I think my students are capable of determining what they need to learn" and "Students should have more opportunities to decide for themselves how they carry out assignments." Second, 'acknowledgement of a changing teacher role' as a proxy for their attitude towards contemporary educational innovations (11 items, α =.73). Some example items are: "As a result of contemporary innovations, I have to change my teaching practice" and "Along with developments of information technology, the teachers' role will change from transmitter of knowledge into facilitator of learning." Third, a scale resulted measuring the 'readiness of the physical school environment for self-regulated learning and cooperative learning' (4 items, α=.81). Some example items are: "Our school building is not suited for having students cooperate in small groups" and "Our information centers and library are not equipped for self-regulated learning."

Parents

Analogous to the teacher questionnaire, a questionnaire for parents was developed in which parents are confronted with teacher and student activities that belong to different types of learning environments. Parents were asked to which extent they agree with the suggested activities, and to what extent they consider these activities suitable for their own children. Reliability analyses resulted in three reliable scales. Each of the scales represents a location on the continuum between transmission and transformation. The first is the scale: 'preference for 'instruction for meaningful and strategic learning' (17 items, α=.67). This scale contains all aspects of MSL as represented by the teacher subscales. An example item: "Lessons at

school should be connected to what students encounter in their daily lives". The second is, 'preference for discovery learning' (10 items, α=.78). An example item: "Students should get opportunities to construct own assignments to work on." The third scale was not developed parallel to the teacher scale, but nonetheless represents a preference for a teacher-led transmission-oriented learning environment. Some example items: "The teacher should model step by step how an assignment is to be carried out", "Teachers should often check the extent to which students master the content matter", and "At school, students should mainly learn factual knowledge."

Students

Finally, a questionnaire was developed to measure students' perception of actually realized learning environments. Student data were used to validate teacher perceptions of their own teaching behavior. As was the case with the parents' questionnaire, again the three main types of learning environments were operationalized. However, reliability analyses resulted in only two reliable scales. The first scale is 'realization of meaningful and strategic learning environments' (MSL; 14 items, α=.77). As was the case with the parallel parents' scale, this scale does not contain separate subscales, but all important aspects of MSL are represented. Some example items: "The assignments we carry out connect to our daily lives. In these assignments, we have to apply what we have learned" and "In our lessons we use not only text books but also other things like newspapers, the computer, or video." The second scale is 'realization of discovery learning' (7 items, α=.70), which was developed parallel to the teacher and parent scale. An example item: "We are allowed to construct assignments on our own, which can be carried out in our own way." Finally, no reliable scale could be constructed for direct instruction.

Subjects, sample and data collection

The data collection took place in the fall of the 1999-2000 school year. A total of 951 students, 285 teachers, and 636 parents participated. The respondents came from nine primary schools, six secondary schools, and four schools for secondary vocational education. 90 teachers came from primary education, 150 teachers from secondary education, and 45 teachers came from secondary vocational education. The numbers of students from these types of education were 410, 411 and 130 respectively. Parents were asked to respond to the

questions with the type of education followed by their children in mind. Thus, 304 parents directed their responses to primary education, 266 to secondary education, and 66 to secondary vocational education. The sample of teachers consisted of 42% women; 13% of the teachers were younger than 30 years, 21% between 30 and 40 years, 39% between 40 and 50 years and 27% older than 50 years. From the group as a whole, 47% had been working as a teacher longer than 20 years.

The sample of students consists of 50% boys and 50% girls. Students from primary education came from grades 5 (55%) and 6 (45%). To avoid burdening participating secondary school teachers with a large extra workload, primarily teachers and students from middle grades were asked to participate. As a result 47% of the general secondary education students come from grade 10, 19% from grade 9. For all types of education the percentages of respondents present in grade 7, 8, 11, and 12 were 14%, 10%, 5%, and 5%, respectively. Students from the two highest streams of general education were over-represented compared to the two lower types: 30% and 39% versus 4% and 13%. From the senior secondary vocational education, which students enter at about age 16, 56% came from the third course year, and 5%, 24% and 15%, from the course year 1, 2 and 4 respectively. For 85% of all the students, both parents were born in the Netherlands. In sum, the sample is not representative regarding the lower grades and course years, and for the lower types of general secondary education.

The sample of parents consisted of 71% women; 53% of the sample were aged between 40 and 50 years, 37% between 30 and 40 years. 94% of the parents were born in the Netherlands. In the sample of parents, women are over-represented. At the same time, ethnic minority parents (6.6%) are slightly underrepresented compared with population statistics (9.5%). Regarding parents' education, the sample is only representative for the share of parents who completed university education (9.4%) and parents who completed junior vocational education (14.4%). The sample is less representative for parents who completed other forms of education. All in all, generalization to the total population of parents should be done with care.

Data analyses

Characterization of actual learning environments (research question 1) took place by means of descriptive statistics. The teacher was used as the unit of analysis. Parents' preferences for learning environments are described (research question 2) in a same manner. Differences between the degrees of realization of learning environments across educational types were tested by means of analyses of variance. Differences between parental preferences were tested in a similar way.

A more sophisticated nested design, in which students answer questions about their own teacher, was not feasible for budgetary reasons. However, to match parent data and student data, on the one hand, with teacher data, on the other hand, (research question 1 and 2), all data were aggregated on the school level. To relate teacher perceptions with students' and parents' perceptions, Pearson product-moment correlations were computed using an aggregated file consisting of scale data for 19 schools.

Finally, stepwise multiple regression analyses were used to study the relation between the realization of different learning environments, on the one hand, and teachers' own views on learning, their perception of student characteristics, and their perception of class and school level conditions, on the other hand.

Results

Realization of learning environments by teachers

Descriptive statistics for the scales, representing different learning environments, broken down by educational level, are presented in Table 1. Comparing the realization of the three types of learning environments, we notice first that teachers most often pay attention to direct instruction on a regular basis (mean: 2.7). To a lesser extent, teachers realize meaningful and strategic learning environments and, even less frequently, they realize a discovery-learning environment (mean: 2.4)

Looking at the separate aspects of a meaningful and strategic learning environment, the following picture emerges: relatively often attention is paid to the connection to students' personal world (mean: 2.6) and process-oriented instruction (mean: 2.6). These two subscales consist of instructional activities which reflect a good deal of teacher control. 'Process-

oriented instruction' includes deliberate teacher activities aimed at encouraging students to reflect on their thinking process: process-oriented explanations (modeling, scaffolding), giving students time to respond to questions, emphasizing the use of strategies when carrying out learning tasks, delivering various forms of feedback aimed at processes as well as products. Most of the activities represented in this subscale take place on the initiative of the teacher, although this is not a synonym for knowledge transmission.

The items belonging to 'connection to students' personal worlds' are formulated in such a way that they represent teacher activities aimed at connecting their own program to the prior knowledge and interests of children. Amongst these are: connecting to prior knowledge and experiences of students at the start of new lesson topics; demonstrating the relation between a topic and daily life or professional life.

To a somewhat lesser degree, learning environments are characterized by cooperation and interaction (mean: 2.3). This includes learning situations in which students carry out group assignments, in which they jointly construct knowledge and, during which, they consult each other instead of the teacher. This also includes mutual presentation of results of assignments.

The final aspect of MSL, 'constructive learning tasks,' is realized least frequently (mean: 2.1). Constructive learning tasks are long-term assignments that have relevance beyond school, and in which students come into contact with professional knowledge users by means of subject-transcending projects, independent collection of information, and performing research. In the accompanying learning environment, media other than the textbook are used, including modern media, magazines, journals, and materials brought from home. Assessment is a continuous process and has the form of portfolios. This kind of learning environment comes close to a discovery-oriented environment, but differs from it in such a way that students neither choose their own learning goals nor the object, which is studied. The teacher plans these in advance.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for teacher scales concerning the realization of different learning environments, broken down by educational level

Scale	Educational level	Mean	*SD*	Min.	Max.	*N*
a. Meaningful and strategic learning environment	Prim. ed.	2.5	.3	1.6	3.2	78
(52 items, α=.89)	Sec. ed.	2.3	.3	1.6	3.6	146
	Voc. ed.	2.5	.3	2.0	3.3	43
	Total	2.4	.3	1.6	3.6	267
a1. Connection to students' personal worlds	Prim. ed.	2.7	.3	2.0	3.4	78
(14 items, α=.80)	Sec. ed.	2.5	.4	1.3	3.5	145
	Voc. ed.	2.8	.4	1.9	3.6	43
	Total	2.6	.4	1.3	3.6	266
a2. Process-oriented instruction	Prim. ed.	2.7	.3	1.4	3.4	76
(16 items, α=.80)	Sec. ed.	2.6	.4	1.5	3.9	145
	Voc. ed.	2.7	.5	1.4	3.6	43
	Total	2.6	.4	1.4	3.9	264
a3. Constructive learning tasks	Prim. ed.	2.2	.4	1.3	3.1	76
(12 items, α=.80)	Sec. ed.	1.9	.5	1.1	3.4	144
	Voc. ed.	2.3	.4	1.4	3.2	43
	Total	2.1	.5	1.1	3.4	263
a4. Cooperation and interaction	Prim. ed.	2.4	.5	1.2	3.5	79
(10 items, α=.79)	Sec. ed.	2.2	.6	1.1	3.7	145
	Voc. ed.	2.4	.4	1.6	3.4	43
	Total	2.3	.5	1.1	3.7	267
b. Direct instruction	Prim. ed.	2.7	.4	1.7	3.8	79
(14 items, α=.79)	Sec. ed.	2.6	.4	1.7	3.8	145
	Voc. ed.	2.6	.4	2.0	3.5	43
	Total	2.7	.4	1.7	3.8	267
c. Discovery learning	Prim. ed.	2.2	.5	1.3	3.5	80
(13 items, α=.82)	Sec. ed.	2.0	.4	1.1	3.3	147
	Voc. ed.	2.0	.4	1.4	3.1	43
	Total	2.0	.5	1.1	3.5	270

Note: frequency of use for all scales: 1= (almost) never; 2=every now and then, 3= often, 4= (almost) always.

Analyses of variance were used to test differences in realization of learning environments between types of education. The results indicate significant differences for the following scales: Meaningful and strategic learning environment as a whole (F(2, 264)=11.2, p=.000), connection to students' personal worlds (F(2, 263)=17.0, p=.000), constructive learning tasks (F(2, 260)=14.2, p=.000), cooperation and interaction (F(2, 264)=6.0, p=.003), discovery learning (F(2, 267)=5.2, p=.000). Post hoc analyses (Scheffé) indicate that teachers from general secondary education attained lower scores on these scales than teachers from primary education.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for student scales concerning the realization of different learning environments, broken down by educational level

Scale	Educational level	Mean.	*SD*	Min.	Max.	*N*
Realization meaningful and strategic learning environment (14 items, α =.77)	Prim. ed.	2.2	.4	1.0	3.5	403
	Sec. ed.	2.0	.4	1.0	3.6	405
	Voc. ed.	2.2	.3	1.3	3.4	130
	Total	2.1	.4	1.0	3.6	938
Realization of discovery learning (α=.70)	Prim. ed.	1.8	.5	1.0	3.7	398
	Sec. ed.	1.7	.5	1.0	4.0	401
	Voc. ed.	1.7	.4	1.0	3.1	128
	Total	1.8	.5	1.0	4.0	927

Note: frequency of use for all scales: 1= (almost) never; 2=every now and then, 3= often, 4= (almost) always.

The results on two scales representing students' perceptions of learning environments are displayed in Table 2: meaningful and strategic learning environments and discovery learning. In general, the results confirm the teachers' own perceptions of their behavior. However, students allocate teachers from their schools lower scores than the teachers do for themselves (mean: 2.1 versus 2.4 and 1.8 versus 2.0). Analyses of variance and post-hoc comparisons again show that teachers from general secondary education hand attain significantly lower scores than teachers from other school types (F(2, 935)=24.1, p=.000 and F(2, 924)=3.8, p=.000).

Results from the teacher questionnaire, on the one hand, and the student questionnaire, on the other hand, aggregated on school level, correlate rather strongly. A correlation coefficient of .75 was found between the MSL teacher scale and the accompanying student scale and a coefficient of .59 for the discovery-teacher scale and the accompanying student scale. These results can be taken as indications of the validity of the teacher scales.

Parents' preferences

The results on three scales for parents' preferences regarding learning environments are displayed in Table 3: meaningful and strategic learning environment, discovery learning, and traditional teacher-controlled learning environment. The first two scales were developed parallel to the teacher scales; the third comprises a broader range of activities than direct instruction. 'Traditional teacher-controlled education' involves a preference for learning environments in which the teacher sticks to his textbooks, in which student progress is tested frequently, and in which the teacher determines the pace of learning.

In addition, preference for traditional education means that parents attach value to individual work, instruction delivered in small steps, grading of students' efforts, and emphasis on factual knowledge.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for parents scales concerning preferences for different learning environments for own children, broken down by educational level

Scale	Educational level	Mean.	*SD*	Min.	Max.	*N*
Agreement with meaningful and strategic learning environment (17 items, α=.67)	Prim. ed.	3.1	.3	2.1	3.8	303
	Sec. ed.	3.1	.3	1.8	3.9	260
	Voc. ed.	3.2	.3	2.3	4.0	65
	Total	3.2	.3	1.8	4.0	628
Agreement with discovery learning (10 items, α=.78)	Prim. ed.	2.5	.4	1.3	3.9	301
	Sec. ed.	2.5	.4	1.1	4.0	258
	Voc. ed.	2.6	.5	1.4	3.9	65
	Total	2.5	.4	1.1	4.0	624
Agreement with traditional teacher controlled learning environment (10 items, α=.73)	Prim. ed.	2.8	.4	1.6	4.0	295
	Sec. ed.	2.8	.4	1.9	3.9	260
	Voc. ed.	3.0	.4	2.0	3.9	63
	Total	2.8	.4	1.6	4.0	618

Note Range of scales: degree of agreement with use of instructional activities 1=fully disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4= fully agree

From Table 3 we can infer that parents consider it important that their children learn in meaningful and strategic learning environments (mean: 3.2), but at the same time, they also value to some degree traditional teacher-controlled learning environments (mean: 2.8). Parents are clearly less positive about a learning environment involving discovery learning (mean: 2.5). In general, parents value aspects of meaningful and strategic learning, but the learning environment should not turn into self-discovery.

Analyses of variance and post-hoc comparisons point out that parents of students in secondary vocational education attach significantly more value to traditional learning environments than parents from children in different types of education ($F(2,615)=4.15$, $p=.02$).

Looking at the correspondence between (reported) teacher behavior and parental preference, the following picture emerges. In absolute terms, the two data sources cannot be compared because they come from different types of questions (behavior perceptions and agreement with suggested activities). However, the infrequent use of discovery learning environments, compared with direct instruction, is mirrored by parents' preferences. The great value parents place on meaningful and strategic learning environments (mean score well

above scale center) is not so clearly retrieved in teacher behavior (mean score below scale center).

Inspection of the correlations between school means for all learning environment scales and the corresponding parent preference scales shows the following picture. Parents' preference for meaningful and strategic learning shows a positive correlation (r=.64) with what teachers actually realize in this respect. No significant correlations were found between parental preferences for traditional learning environments and self-discovery, on the one hand, and actual realization of direct instruction and discovery learning, on the other hand.

Predictors of learning environments

Results of three stepwise multiple regression analyses are reported in table 4. The dependent variables in these analyses were: the realization of meaningful and strategic learning environments, discovery learning and direct instruction. In each analysis, three blocks of predictors were entered in the regression equation, using a stepwise procedure: teacher characteristics (age and gender), school characteristics (type of education, school building suitable for cooperative and self-regulated learning), teachers' perceptions and attitudes (perceptions of student characteristics, attitude towards contemporary educational innovation, and teachers' own conceptions of learning).

The results point out first that the selected teacher characteristics and school level conditions do not account for a significant portion of variance in the realization of different learning environments. Apart from that, different predictors result for the three different types of learning environments. With regard to meaningful and strategic learning environments, three equivalent predictors appear: confidence in students' self-regulation (β=.22), acknowledgement that contemporary innovations require role changes on the part of the teacher (β=.21), secondary education (β=-.22). These results can be interpreted as follows: a meaningful and strategic learning environment is more often realized when teachers show more confidence in students' self-regulation, acknowledge that a role change is needed, and if they are not working in general secondary education.

Realization of a discovery-learning environment is predicted by only two factors that partly coincide with the predictors of the meaningful and strategic learning environment: confidence in students' self-regulation (β=.40), and preferences for learning together (β=.15).

Interestingly, the realization of direct instruction can be predicted by mutually different learning conceptions on the side of the teachers. The strongest predictor within this

set is the teacher's own preference for externally controlled learning (β=.22). In addition other preferences are predictive for direct instruction as well: preference for learning in order to apply knowledge (β=.14) and a preference for discovery learning (β=.13). The last learning conception mentioned can be seen as opposites to the first one. Possibly, teachers applying direct instruction may form a broad group.

Table 4 Predictors for the use of learning environments; results of multiple regression analyses

Dependent variables	**Meaningful and strategic learning environment**			**Discovery learning**			**Direct instruction**		
Predictors	*B*	*ß*	*t*	*B*	*ß*	*t*	*B*	*ß*	*t*
(constant)	1.56		10.44	0.76		4.09***	1.4		5.92***
Individual teacher characteristics									
Age[1]									
Gender (0=male, 1=female)									
School characteristics									
Teacher works in secondary education (0= no, 1=yes)	-0.15	-0.22	-3.77***						
School building suitable for cooperative and self regulated learning									
Perception of student characteristics									
Confidence in students' self-regulation	0.16	0.22	3.74***	0.39	0.4	6.84***			
Attitude towards contemporary educational innovations									
Acknowledge role changes as teacher	0.36	0.21	3.44**						
Own conceptions of learning									
Preference for learning together	0.10	0.16	2.71**	0.13	0.15	2.56*			
Preference for externally controlled learning							0.18	0.22	3.43**
Preference for learning to use knowledge							0.11	0.14	2.08*
Preference for discovery learning							0.13	0.13	2.04*
$\mathbf{R^2}$	.22			0.18			.10		

N.B. 1: dummy-variables for three age categories: 1=21-30; 2=31-50; 3= 51+; Range of scores for all scales 1-4, unless stated differently; *B*=unstandardized regression coefficients, *β*= standardized regression coefficients

Conclusions and discussion

Looking back at the results, we may conclude that learning environments are more often oriented at transmission than at discovery and negotiation. However, looking at the realization of different dimensions of learning environments, one cannot speak of a pure transmission model.

Teachers do use direct instruction, but in doing so, they do not restrict themselves to presenting knowledge products. They pay attention to the process of knowledge acquisition, although they do so on their own initiative. The responsibility for the acquisition process is not often delegated to their students. In addition, teachers address students' prior knowledge, interests, and personal worlds, insofar it is feasible within their curricular program. Cooperation and interaction sometimes take place in the learning environment, but again learning activities are teacher controlled, leaving little responsibility to the students. In terms of the dimension individual learning versus co-construction of knowledge, the learning environment falls between the two extremes.

Teachers seldom choose learning environments in which discovery of knowledge is aimed at. Learning environments characterized by knowledge construction, using complex learning tasks, in which research activities and independent information collection take place, seldom occur. These findings support the findings from previous studies in the Netherlands (Kuiper 1993; Terwel, Vermeulen and Volman 1996; Withagen, Oud-de Glas, Smeets and Buis 1996; Roelofs & Terwel, 1999; Roelofs & Houtveen, submitted) and in the USA (Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996).

In addition, we found that the situation differed along the type of education. All types of learning environments, ranging from direct instruction to discovery learning, are realized less frequently by secondary school teachers than by primary school teachers and vocational teachers. Apparently, primary teachers more deliberately create learning environments than their colleagues in secondary education. A possible explanation for this finding is that the secondary school curriculum is characterized by a split-subjects approach. The various subjects are taught by different teachers. The ideal of constructive learning environments may be hard to attain as long as learning activities do not transcend subject boundaries. In primary schools, the curriculum is also split into different subjects. However, these subjects are taught by the same teacher in the same physical classroom, which may form a supportive condition for creating a learning community. In secondary vocational education, the curriculum is

structured along a system of specific vocational qualifications, which may foster learning environments that aim for authentic learning, involving complex vocationally oriented learning tasks.

Although parental preferences and teacher behavior cannot be compared directly, there are indications that there is no large gap between them. Parents do not attach high value to discovery learning. Teacher-controlled learning environments, including frequent testing of students' progress, is valued more by parents. From the results, we may infer that parents consider as most valuable, those learning environments that consist of a mix of measures that are partly teacher-controlled and partly student controlled and relate to the use of constructive learning tasks, the connection to students' personal worlds, process-oriented instruction, and cooperative learning.

Scores on the teacher scale measuring perceived practice on these aspects correlate significantly with the matching parent scale. Parental preferences for the extremes of discovery learning and direct instruction hardly correspond to teachers' reported practices. There are no clear indications that parents attach greater value to transmission-oriented learning environments compared with teachers, as might be expected on the basis of the Schlak (1994) and Wise (1993) studies. The difference in results may be attributed to cultural differences between US parents and Dutch parents. Besides, the focus in these quoted studies is on kindergarten contexts, whereas we focused on grades 6 up to 12.

Considering parental preferences in more general terms, we may conclude that parents show a favorable attitude towards process-oriented, constructive, and collaborative learning environments, as long as teachers keep a strong grip on the learning process.

Apart from that, not the all parental data were analyzed in detail. In a follow-up article, we plan to analyze differences within parental preferences and the factors that may held responsible for these differences. More in-depth analyses show that different groups of parents can be distinguished with different types of preferences.

The results regarding predictive factors for the realization of learning environments (research question 3) largely confirm our expectations. Predictive factors for a discovery learning environment and a mixed learning environment are the teachers' confidence in students' self-regulation' and their acknowledgement of a changing role within contemporary learning environments. The predictive power of teachers' preference to learn in cooperation with peers may reflect a more general preference to cooperate with colleagues. The willingness to collaborate with colleagues appears to be of major importance for the implementation of

modern learning environments (cf. Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996).

What is remarkable, however, is the finding that the realization of direct instruction is predicted by various conceptions of one's own learning. Possibly, direct instruction is generally valued within teaching practices. A different explanation might be that one's own conceptions of learning, from the point of view of experts, are seen as different from the way novices should learn within a given domain.

With regard to the predictive factors, it must be noted that many other factors on the class and school level were not involved in this study. Among these are own (perceived) competence and quality of staff development. These omissions may have influenced the results of our multiple regression analyses.

Regarding recommendations for follow-up study, we would distinguish two themes: variants of learning environments and studying parental preferences.

Future study of dimensions of learning environments would enable a more transparent view of the options and conditions regarding different variants of learning environments. To that end, a more detailed descriptive frame should be developed which covers additional characteristics of learning environments and conditions under which these can be realized. More specifically, a distinction should be drawn between the types of learning outcomes to be attained. Possible aspects of learning outcomes are: the stability and flexibility of knowledge use, the authenticity of contexts for use, the level of mastery, and the tolerance for errors in performance. Recently, Elshout-Mohr, Van Hout-Wolters, and Broekkamp, (1998/1999) distinguished eight different types of instructional-learning episodes in which different goals stand central, each requiring qualitatively different learning processes to be realized in qualitatively different learning environments.

In addition, follow-up study should shed more light on the way the design of a learning environment is influenced by the content and the structure of a knowledge domain. In addition, conditions for the use of different types of learning environments can be a fruitful direction for further theory building and teaching practice. Among them are: the educational context (type of school, formal or informal schooling context), the possibilities and boundaries of the physical learning environment (rooms and furniture, media, technology, group composition), and finally, conditions on the teacher and school management level.

Different scenarios of learning environments within well-defined domains and contextual constraints could be developed and tested in (quasi-)experimental designs.

The second theme involves the study of parental preferences for learning environments for their children. Research into these preferences is useful to come to grips with parental involvement with schooling in general and with learning environments in particular. The influence of parents' involvement on students' academic achievement, their academic self-concepts, and their school attitudes has been demonstrated in a number of studies (Chrispeels, 1996; Levine & Lezotte, 1995, Marjoribanks, 1995, 1996). It may be expected that in future educational innovations, parents' views will play an important role, as parents are an important linking pin between the school environment and the world outside school. Specifically, more detailed qualitative data can be acquired about specific family opportunity structures (cf. Marjoribanks, 1995), in terms of the way parents perceive and facilitate strategic and meaningful learning activities for their children. After all, not only students' and teachers' roles develop along changing views of learning, parents' roles will do so too.

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