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Exploring Jordanian Children's Perceptions of the Characteristics of an Ideal School and Learning Environment

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Abstract

Based on the grounded theory, this study aimed to elicit the views of Jordanian children on the ideal school and learning environment. School children aged 9–11 years participated in the study, and the data was collected through individual interviews. Moreover, 40 of the children's narratives were coded and analysed through various analytical processes. Thus, their views on the ideal learning environment were understood. This ideal school is considered as an attractive, supportive and strengthened learning environment that's been conceptualised to meet the children's physical, educational and socio-emotional welfare needs. It became apparent that children, as the beneficiary group of education, are aware of the characteristics of future schools and ideal environments that would increase their motivation and enthusiasm to learn. It was found that this could be achieved when Jordanian public schools employ various policies that ensure the holistic physical, social, emotional and educational learning and environmental welfare of the child.

Key words: *Jordanian children's ideas, future public school, ideal school, ideal learning environment*

Introduction

A close correlation can be observed between school learning environments and children's willingness to learn (Bazzar, 2014). However, schools and classrooms are mostly designed to fit adults' and professional's needs and do not account for the different needs of children (Samani, 2012). Although children are the main stakeholders of education, they are neither consulted on school issues (Ghaziani, 2008; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004) nor on the design process; they are passive recipients of adults' decisions. While education systems encourage child-centred pedagogical activities such as collaborative learning, the circumstances of learning environments that encourage such practices may not always offer the required empowering aspects (Derek & Brymer, 2012). The quality of Jordanian public education has been critiqued several times. The

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most common ones include the competence of teachers and quality of learning environments, which are significant in children's everyday learning (National Centre for Human Rights [NCHR], 2017). Both formal and public Jordanian discourses emphasise the need for comprehensive school reforms because schools are supposed to provide the required social, psychological, cultural and physical learning environments. Otherwise, the learning conditions of children may be negatively influenced (Ministry of Social Development [MSD], 2016). This study presents a holistic view provided by children of their definition of the ideal school and learning environment, which includes meeting the children's physical, educational and socio-emotional welfare needs.

Research questions

To meet the aims of the study, a group of stimuli in the form of open-closed questions, was used to help children understand the general concept of an ideal school and learning environment. A few examples are given below:

- Imagine the kind of school you would be enthusiastic to study in.
- What kind of activities would your ideal school provide?
- What things help you to learn?
- How, when and where do you learn best?
- If you could choose any location for your school lessons, which place would you choose?

Literature Review

According to Valijarvi and Sahlberg (2008), educational excellence goes beyond the statistical rates of student achievement; it also requires that children enjoy learning in school. This is an important area to examine. There is a rising concern about children who do not enjoy schooling (Spencer, Lucas, & Claxton, 2012). Children in many countries seem reluctant about gaining an education, but this has not been reported in official discourses (Burnard, 2011). Indeed, school is understood as an environment for learning that needs continuous development (MSD, 2016). Based on the socio-cultural approach, learning is seen as a phenomenon that

cannot be segregated from the activity, culture and context in which it takes place (Lafer & Tarman, 2019; Saljo, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, learning is a tool-dependent social phenomenon that focuses not only on the individual but also the school's social community wherein children share their experiences about the school environment through communication (Boutelier, 2019; Marjaana, 2010).

Learning is understood as the production of new, interesting and relevant knowledge and less as a repetition of what is already known (Saljo, 2004). Thus, schools need to concentrate not only on achieving the educational curricula but also on creating and sustaining the school culture and a functional learning environment to best enhance students' skills for the future (Claxton, 2007). According to Gilavand, Espidkar, and Fakhri (2015), this means that in addition to the role that schools play in providing children with intellectual knowledge and skills, they are also responsible for considering the holistic development and welfare of the child (cognitive, emotional, social, physical and cultural). UNESCO (2015) defines education as learning to know, to do, to live together and to be. This highlights the close relationship between education and physical, intellectual, emotional and cognitive learning environments (Burnard, 2011; Rubin, 2018).

The functioning of traditional schools has become challenging due to the rapid expansion of information, media and communication technology and their effects on people's everyday life (Lewinski, 2015; Tadeu, Fernandez Batanero & Tarman, 2019). Alongside learning in a formal setting and through formal methods, learning in various informal environments and through informal methods have also been acknowledged as important for children's knowledge acquisition (Anderson, Lucas, & Ginns, 2003; Ash & Wells, 2006; Halpern, 2017). Accordingly, the following three developments are noticeable. First, formal education and schools have lost control of the education process and imparting of knowledge to children. Second, sometimes, children have better access to information from around the world than the previous generations. Third, a gap has emerged between the understanding gained from daily experiences and the approach to understanding provided by formal education (Saljo, 2004). As a result of the rapid social changes over the recent decades, many governments have realised that the current structure of the educational systems may not be able to cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century (Anderson et al., 2003). This means that the traditional policies of education and models of thinking need serious revision to make formal education consistent with societal

developments (A. Gilavand, Gilavand, & Gilivand, 2016). Awartani, Whitman, and Gordon (2008) stressed the necessity of creating learning environments that nurture the welfare of children. Children's welfare, defined as "the realisation of one's physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual potential" (p. 51), is closely related to the learning environment.

Aims and Goals

At present, educational planners and policy makers of several countries across the world seem to be taking note of children's preferences for deciding their learning environments and how they learn. The International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) of 2010 agreed on the following statement:

> We believe that, in any educational setting, children have the right to decide individually how, when, what, where and with whom they learn to have an equal share in the decision-making as to how their schools – are run. (IDEC, 2010, p. 5)

This leads to my research topic of exploring Jordanian children's perceptions of what an ideal school would consist of. This article aims to present the children's perspectives about the features of an ideal school learning environment. The children participating in the study were 9–11 years old and attended three public schools for boys under the Amman Governorate; therefore, they had experienced several years of formal schooling and had many ideas to offer. The following was the key research question of this study: How do children impart their perceptions of the ideal school learning environments?

In Jordan, the most recent research carried out on, rather than with, children (NCHR, 2017) was based on the assumption that children are often developmentally incomplete compared to adults (Mayall, 2002). This demonstrates a gap in the research related to children; i.e. as the beneficiary group of school education, children are marginalised in the research process. This indicates that they have not been understood as competent social actors. Emerging sociological perspectives and political changes, on the other hand, view children as independent political social actors (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

The present study contributes both theoretically and practically to research pertaining to school children's opinions. It provides insights into children's ideas and expectations of a

learning environment that would make them enthusiastic and happy about learning. Examining children's own perspectives on the ideal school and learning environment is essential for identifying the children's issues regarding their current school environments. The intended benefit was to provide children with the opportunity to express their opinions on a subject in which their behaviours within the school setting is always scrutinised but their voices ignored. The reported study could also help officials and policymakers develop techniques and implement methods that would add stimuli to the school environment, making it an effective space to learn. By seriously considering the children's perspectives, this study not only serves to enhance academic knowledge but also produce new tools for defining and designing future Jordanian schools and learning environments.

Methods

Methodologically, this study draws upon the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which involves approaching the topic under investigation using data-based information. Grounded theory allows the researcher to inductively develop a theoretical account of the general characteristics of a topic while grounding the account in empirical observations. It is functional for managing and comparing concepts and is relevant in theory building. The aim of a grounded theory is not to examine existing theories but to develop new ones, and it results from a study of the subject under consideration. As Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 25) stated, "the theory does more than provide understanding or paint a vivid picture. It enables users to explain and predict events, thereby providing guides to action." By utilising the grounded theory, the present study gained an in-depth understanding of children's perspectives of the ideal school—that ensures the holistic physical, social, cultural, emotional and educational learning and environmental welfare of the child. These results will be presented and discussed in the findings section.

Data Collection

To explore the participants' perceptions about ideal school environments, both verbal and visual participatory methods were employed, namely, individual interviews that incorporated drawings and writing techniques to stimulate discussions and interactions. These tools have

previously been used in many contexts to explore children's views (Dan et al., 2011; Lehman, 2011).

Since children tend to lack experience of direct contact with unfamiliar adults in one-to-one interviews, more innovative techniques can enable children to feel more comfortable with the adult researcher (Mayall, 2002). For this reason, task-centred activities of visual and written tasks were developed (James et al., 1998). Therefore, the researcher used the visual and written activities (drawing and writing) as "child-friendly" techniques to facilitate, stimulate and maximise the children's capacity to freely express themselves, thereby aiding the discussion while enabling data to be gathered. The children were given the opportunity to choose the type of activity they were interested in to express themselves while engaging in a straightforward conversation. Unstructured interviews seeking their views were conducted with children in each school during the school day. The decision to use this method of data collection was inductively governed by the study's objective to seek the participants' perspectives about the ideal school; this is the nature of an exploratory study (Denzin, 1989).

The study participants were 40 children from three public schools— Abdullah Ibn Rawahah school, Al Norian School and Tareq Bin Ziad school, which are all located in Amman governorate, the capital city of Jordan. The children were involved in the study after gaining their consent for participation as well as their parents' permission. Individual interviews with the children were carried out over a two-month period (March 2019 to May 2019). Each interview lasted about 50 minutes. There were 12 children from school A, 13 from school B and 15 from school C. The researcher interviewed children of different ages between 9 and 11 years (classes 4–6) to obtain a variety of responses. Of these children, 10 were in class 4, 18 in class 5 and 12 in class 6. All the participants were boys, as public schools in Jordan do not allow for mixed-gender schooling. The children were encouraged to imagine the kind of school and environment they would be eager to learn in. It was observed that 11 children preferred to draw, 10 preferred to write and 19 preferred to only talk. All the interviews were tape-recorded and consequently transcribed and converted into a digital format for analysis. It was essential to ensure that no harm came to any of the participants during the field work and data dissemination stages. Therefore, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to the participants during the process of data collection, data analysis as well as the writing up and dissemination of findings. In the

reports produced as a result of this study, the participants' responses and the names of their schools have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of any identifying details.

Data Analysis

The data was coded using the NVivo qualitative research software designed for the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data was broken down, conceptualised and put back together in new ways (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, the analytic process was based on repeated data sorting, coding and comparison. Strauss (1987) described a three-stage data analysis model, involving open coding, axial coding and selective coding. This approach was used for the present study. During the initial open coding process, the data was organised into broad analytic themes, named and categorised through a close examination of the data and coded on that basis. At the axial coding stage, a second pass through the data helped develop the links between the emergent themes as well as new themes. The axial coding phase tends to overlap with the open coding process. The main categories and subcategories were extracted from the open coding categories through constant and systematic comparison, and the data was brought back together as a coherent whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The third phase, selective coding, was focused on the core concept for the identification of its key features and implications in an ideal learning environment. Relating the core concept to all the major categories was central to the procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data from the current study were analysed this way; however, this was not a linear or straightforward process, and I moved back and forth between these phases at various stages of the analytical process. During the third phase of analysis, extracts from the data which best illustrate the main themes were selected for inclusion in the final report.

Findings

Three partly overlapping elements of the ideal learning environment were identified as "physical welfare and environmental comfort", "educational welfare and cultural stimulating environment" and "socio-emotional welfare and safety environment". According to the holistic concept of the learner as part of the learning environment, there is a growing expectation that

education must take responsibility for the development of the welfare of the child holistically (Awartani et al., 2008).

Physical Welfare and Environmental Comfort

The Classroom

The ideal school is characterised by a comfortable, attractive and suitable physical environment in the classroom, which all the participants associated with the visual, acoustic, thermal, and spatial elements. The visual element is represented in providing "adequate lighting for the whole classroom ... a balance between the sun lighting and artificial lighting levels in classroom" (Ahmad, personal communication, March 3, 2019). Additionally, "there must be lockers, curtains, board … comfortable tables and seats, coloured walls, and beautiful decorations at classrooms" (Jad, personal communication, April 7, 2019). The acoustic element is represented by the absence of any internal and external noise. "Boys shouldn't make any noise in classroom. We shouldn't hear the sounds of car horns nor traffic congestion" (Saif, personal communication, March 20, 2019). The sampled children confirmed that the quieter the classroom, the higher their effective participation and concentration levels.

The thermal element is represented by the presence of adequate and suitable heating and ventilation devices in the classrooms as these affect the children's psychological status, behaviour and performance during the learning performance "There must be ceiling fan, heating system … big windows that allow much fresh air to enter the classroom" (Oday, personal communication, May 5, 2019). The spatial element is represented by the classroom size and order. As Ali (personal communication, March 10, 2019) stated, "We want big classrooms with less number of students to move freely", a statement 22 other children agreed with.

The ideal school must ensure flexible arrangements for the classrooms' furniture, which would make the educational process more effective and promote cooperation among the children. "The tables and seats must be placed in a circular manner and seats must be movable … That helps us to do group activities and interact with each other" (Ahmad, personal communication, April 1, 2019). Eight children suggested that an ideal classroom would be the one designed with dynamic teaching areas. They also insisted that there must be separate areas designated for performing individual activities, paired activities and group activities. Further, 11

of the children shed light on the significance of ensuring that their personal and educational tools are protected from getting lost or damaged by providing them with personal lockers inside the classroom.

The location, Building and Facilities

More than half of the children indicated three factors that they imagine in an ideal school that would raise their enthusiasm and motivation to learn. First, the school must be located "in a quiet place that is far away from crowded places" (Nader, personal communication, March 4, 2019) and "the school building must be built from stones and decorated with attractive rainbow colours" (Omar, personal communication, March 14, 2019). Second, a short distance between home and school is emphasized on. "I prefer going to a school that is near my house. However, there isn't any school near my house … I feel dizzy when travelling a long distance in the car to reach school. In such a case, I always reaching the school late and feeling exhausted and not capable to study" (Anas, personal communication, May 5, 2019). Third, the ideal design of the school consists of "pyramid or circular shape" and "several close units" that have the least number of partitions (i.e. open doors). "We don't want to have too many doors. School is not a prison" (Hasan, personal communication, April 11, 2019).

All the respondents preferred having school with green areas. "A garden, grass, flowers, shrub and trees in and around the school" (Ali, personal communication, March 14, 2019). Subsequently, 13 of the children suggested that having a school garden would encourage them to learn things related to the science course. "Instead of having the science teacher explaining the steps of planting, we can apply these steps through planting fruits and vegetables by ourselves … That shall make the learning process fun" (Monther, personal communication, March 22, 2019).

Feeling comfortable and satisfied inside the school environment requires "adequate and healthy drinking and wash water available constantly" (Oais, personal communication, April 8, 2019). Moreover, nine respondents stated that, "We wish to have private rooms to change our clothes to get ready for the sport class" (Mohammad, personal communication, April 25, 2019). Food and nutrition are integral elements of the school environment. Seven children highlighted the importance of ensuring the safety of saving the foods provided at school. "The chips shouldn't be placed in the sun" (Jad, personal communication, March 16, 2019). The ideal school is the one that also has "a cafeteria that providing variety of meals and must provide children

with lunchroom to set on in a manner that is safe, comfortable and healthy. Sitting on the ground is usually dirty and hurts my back" (Hasan, personal communication, April 11, 2019). More than half of the respondents said that the duration of the break time should be made longer than it currently is.

The participants also discussed the need to include playgrounds and various sports activities in the schooling system. The statement, "We would like to play football, basketball, tennis, and billiards … We want to have playgrounds, golf course and swimming pool" (Ahmad, personal communication, May 6, 2019), reflected 12 children's inclination to practice new sport activities every day.

Educational Welfare and a Stimulating Cultural Environment

Based on their imagination of an ideal school, all the participants gave their opinions about the curricula and highlighted the following. "The curricula should be easy; consistent with our age; simpler than they are; not be stiffed with too much information; and should not repeat what we learnt through the 1st grade … That's boring" (Sami, personal communication, March 12, 2019). Additionally, "The subjects in curricula must be various, interesting and enjoyable" (Sameer, personal communication, March 11, 2019). Audio and visual educational technology plays a significant role in the teaching-learning process. "Teaching through using the computer, radio, data show, and internet make us enthusiastic to learn" (Ibrahim, personal communication, March 16, 2019).

To make the learning process easier and more enjoyable, in 15 children's view, the teacher should present the information in a clear and simple manner. Two children also suggested that the teacher should promote a competitive spirit among the students. "I like to compete with others and challenge them and strive to know the answers. In this manner, the information would be difficult for me to forget" (Adam, personal communication, April 18, 2019). Feeling at ease during the learning process, according to six children, requires a teacher who does not repeat instructions and guidelines about the way of performing classroom activities. "We end up concentrating on what teacher says instead of concentrating on the activity ... time would run out without finishing the required task" (Maher, personal communication, April 19, 2019). The children also claimed that, "For stopping the teacher from rushing us into finishing the task we are working on and the duration designated for finishing a task must be

extended in accordance with the nature of the required task" (Yamen, personal communication, March 21, 2019).

Over half of the respondents said that enjoying the learning process would require the use of a variety of teaching methods. "It would be better to do activities through five-member groups or in pairs" (Ali, personal communication, May 3, 2019). For those children, adopting collaborative and cooperative teaching approaches would help them to "learn better and get new information and ideas" (Mousa, personal communication, March 16, 2019). However, nine children suggested that they preferred learning in pairs or individually because according to them, "learning in groups may not enable me to focus well on doing the activity as required" (Mohammad, personal communication, April 9, 2019). The provision of a variety of activities to enable the avoidance of routine activities would motivate the children to learn. "We must change the activities that we do from one day to another ... I don't like that" (Tareq, personal communication, May 4, 2019). In addition, 25 children agreed with the suggestion, "The duration of lesson should be short, and the number of writing activities, homework, and monthly exams should be reduced" (Ahmad, personal communication, March 12, 2019). As 11 children indicated, the ideal school would provide suitable learning conditions by preventing students from "talking to each other, messing around and doing disruptive behaviours during the lesson" (Samer, personal communication, April 16, 2019). According to one of the respondents, Ayman, "Naughty boys must be kicked out of class because we want to concentrate in lessons" (personal communication, May 1, 2019).

All the children expressed their desire to learn in various environments. "We can learn in the school garden, library, playgrounds, museum, and places around the school. We don't want to learn always in classroom. That would be boring to do" (Adam, personal communication, March 5, 2019). Scientific journeys were also suggested as an innovative method for learning outside the classroom. "It would be nice to have the teacher providing us with information about Petra while we are on the site itself" (Oday, personal communication, April 7, 2019). A supportive learning environment develops a child-centred environment. More than half the children expressed their desire for opportunities to engage themselves in the learning process as active learners. "Why do we always study through using the curriculum? For instance, in the Arabic language class, we can choose stories that we love from the library. Then, the teacher can

teach us how to identify the main ideas of the story. In this way, we can enjoy learning more" (Talal, personal communication, April 14, 2019).

The children also expressed their desire to learn by using attractive, exploratory and creative teaching methods. "Why can't we learn math through going to the supermarket and do sale and purchasing processes?" (Salah, personal communication, April 17, 2019). A respondent further stated, "We can learn math through playing with a nice computer game. Through such a game, we can do a mathematical operation" (Mahmoud, personal communication, March 20, 2019). Most of the respondents suggested conducting manual and experimental work in the science course. "It would be better and enjoyable if the science teacher makes us do experiments" (Hashim, personal communication, May 3, 2019). Apparently, teaching methods that are based on playing, creativity and exploration are more effective than the conventional teaching methods.

Most importantly, an ideal school ensures all the children's right to receive educational care. "The school must help all the children—without exception—in achieving success" (Nader, personal communication, April 11, 2019). Further, Ali stated, "Everyone must understand the information" (personal communication, March 19, 2019), and 10 other children expressed their agreement. While talking about the characteristics of the ideal supportive learning environment, 11 children who have learning difficulties provided a variety of suggestions that would help them achieve academic success. Some children with reading difficulties said, "We want help to become able to recognise words ... we want additional time to finish tasks" (Amjad, personal communication, May 4, 2019); "We wish to have the questions of the exam read by our teacher instead of reading them by ourselves because that takes much time" (Qsai, personal communication, April 23, 2019).

The respondents with dyslexia suggested being allowed to take "oral exams instead of taking written exams" (Maher, personal communication, March 20, 2019). They also added that, "The teacher should help us in writing hard words" (Mazen, personal communication, May 1, 2019). To help children with poor mathematical abilities develop them, "the teacher can use the drawing way to explain mathematical operations" (Mousa, personal communication, March 9, 2019). As for children with low academic achievement due to fear and anxiety, they suggested providing "a quiet place for doing exams" (Rashid, personal communication, April 23, 2019).

This should be done to eliminate the impacts of the noisy environment on those children. “I get tensed when hearing any sound especially if the exam is hard” (Mazen, personal communication, May 1, 2019). In general, an ideal school is one that integrates children with special educational needs into classroom activities instead of isolating them. “The teacher doesn’t allow me to participate because I read slowly. Thus, I stopped raising my hand.”

Social-emotional Welfare and Safety Environment

Promoting positive relationships between children and their teachers as well as among the children themselves enables the development of their socio-emotional welfare. “If we have a good relation with teachers and peers then we will feel with psychological satisfaction” (Marwan, personal communication, April 14, 2019). All the children suggested that a good teacher is the one who is “firm and fair; sympathetic; model; tolerant; patient; nice; kind; caring; encouraging; respectable and has a good sense of humour” (Abdullah, personal communication, March 17, 2019). In terms of teachers’ response to children’s academic achievement, “The good teacher must love all students equally regardless their marks” (Omar, personal communication, April 25, 2019). Also, teachers should have a positive attitude towards the child and accept his/her mistakes. “It’s not the end of the world if one forgot to bring a book or do homework. However, the teacher gets mad when doing so” (Khaleel, personal communication, March 19, 2019).

For 22 children, the ideal school involves a safe learning environment that is free from physical, verbal and emotional abuse against children. “The teacher mustn’t hit us or threaten us with punishment” (Ahmad, personal communication, March 12, 2019). Further, “The teacher mustn’t tell me that I am dumb if I didn’t understand the lesson” (Nadeem, personal communication, April 15, 2019). The responsibility of teachers in protecting children from getting bullied by their peers was also highlighted. “The teacher should be firm with the boys who take everything from me. Sometimes, those boys hit me” (Ali, personal communication, March 17, 2019).

Being encouraged to take part in group activities, as 19 children pointed out, provided them with the opportunity to make new friends because “we don’t have time to make new friends during the break” (Adam, personal communication, May 2, 2019). “When we learn in groups, each group will have its own leader who allocates tasks to the members of the group” (Waleed,

personal communication, May 5, 2019). Another 18 respondents recommended conducting cultural and sports competitions among the various grades. "I wish if there are competitions between various grades in terms of assessing our knowledge about subjects that we have already studied. I wish if the school can hold football matches. In this way, we'll get to know each other and love the school" (Naseem, personal communication, April 9, 2019).

Discussion

Three partly overlapping elements of the ideal learning environment were identified as "physical welfare and environmental comfort", "educational welfare and cultural stimulating environment" and "socio-emotional welfare and safety environment". The current study offers valuable information on improving the future of Jordanian schools and their learning environments. The interviewed children described their ideal school and learning environment based on several characteristics. Implementing their suggestions would greatly enhance their schooling welfare and increase their enjoyment in learning. The present study echoed previous discourses which talked about how children have valuable and realistic insights on several aspects of what constitutes an ideal learning environment (Smith & Parr, 2007; Thomas, 2010).

This study delved into children's views of an ideal learning environment in the light of the specified research questions; i.e. one that focuses on their physical, educational and socio-emotional welfare. An ideal physical classroom environment would contain mobile furniture, colourful walls, proper heating, natural lighting, pure and adequate ventilation and good indoor air quality. This acts as the "silent curriculum" of the classroom's physical environment, as Miller (2012) described it. This means that a school with a suitable and attractive environmental design and high-quality classrooms can ease and develop learning process like in an overt curriculum (Suleman et al., 2011).

To be aesthetically pleasing, the school should be beautifully structured, colourful, located in a quiet area that's close to the students' residences. The physical features of the school and its classrooms help increase the children's retention and concentration throughout the learning process. This finding resonates with Fisher's (2008) statement that the physical environment of a school can affect the students' comfort and their ability to learn. According to the results from the present study, an ideal school would provide a variety of physical sports activities as well as non-traditional sports and consist of

wider playgrounds and outdoor learning spaces. As Barrett et al. (2015) argued, traditional classrooms provide small spaces that facilitate children's listening skills but may not always be useful to empower them to achieve the contemporary aims of curricular and extracurricular activities. According to the interviewed children, an effective learning process would be linked to proper and attractive arrangements of the school's features and the physical environment of the classroom. This relates to the claims of Hussain et al. (2012).

The results of this study highlighted several aspects of educational welfare and a culturally stimulating environment. A school's curriculum should be easy to understand, suitable for the children's cognitive developmental age, presented smoothly, interesting and related. It should also avoid repetition of content and include a variety of subjects. This finding confirms Saljo's (2004) argument that learning is a production of new, interesting and relevant information and less a repetition of what is already known. Based on the results obtained from the current study, the integration of several educational technologies plays a vital role in making the learning process more interesting, successful and profitable. This emphasises the socio-cultural approach wherein the role of cultural tools and artefacts is seen as central in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). As Saljo (2004) stated, schools should employ new resources for providing knowledge as traditional textbooks have gradually become obsolete due to the availability of new information in several databases, particularly ones that are online.

Interestingly, children view the opportunity to actively participate in several learning activities and be involved in practical activities as a significant factor contributing to their enjoyment of learning in school. This finding supports the views of Hopkins (2012) and Watkins (2010) as well as the contemporary understanding of children as competent social political actors (Mayall, 2002; James et al., 1998). Specifically, motivation and enjoyment to learn are achieved under the following conditions: short lessons, minimal homework, a variety of assessment methods, a variety of teaching techniques, a variety of activities, appropriate length of activities, activities with challenging tasks, reduced expected routine and stereotypical schoolwork and the provision for more collaborative work activities. This result highlights the recommendations given by previous researchers (Lehman, 2011; Wall, 2012).

Conventionally, the teaching process occurs primarily in classrooms. In this study, children talked about the classroom as being a space to learn, but they also expected fun, creative and exploratory ways of learning; i.e. they expressed a desire to learn in multiple contexts

outside classrooms. This echoes the studies on learning in informal settings (Bekerman, Burbules, & Silberman-Keller, 2006). Learning in informal settings refers to the learning environments outside the classroom such as the playground, library, around school building, school garden and educational trips for specific curriculum subjects. In addition, children talked about outdoor playgrounds as informal learning places that could help them encompass learning and play activities. Ultimately, this would help children meet the learning requirements and would ensure their cognitive, social and emotional development. As Claxton (2002) said, schools should focus not only on delivering academic curricula but also on establishing and maintaining school cultures and useful learning environments that best encourage students' skills as future citizens.

According to the results from this study, an ideal school must employ several policies to ensure that all the children receive suitable educational care to meet the requirements of academic success. Children, specifically those with learning difficulties, stressed the importance of receiving multi-dimensional learning support by listening to their suggestions in this regard. This finding confirms that children's right to education is not simply measured by the extent of their enrolment in school but, more importantly, through the extent of educational care they receive (James et al., 1998). Therefore, as per the argument made by Hyvonen (2008) and Sajlo (2004), it can be argued that children with hard-to-manage learning difficulties may feel suspicious about what the school can offer them and view it as meaningless.

The importance of a socio-emotional environment was obvious in relation to the children's expectations of an ideal school. Teachers should be fair, encouraging, respectful, kind, nice, caring, patient, friendly and strict and should not be abusive. Several studies show that children's admiration for and the agreeability of a teacher are strongly linked to the students' satisfaction with the school (Aingeal, Kelly, Molcho, Gavin, & Saoirse, 2012; Covell, 2010). Providing a safe atmosphere and positive relationships among and between teachers and peers along with the absence of bullying and abuse have been highlighted as necessary characteristics. According to the UNESCO's recommendations, children have the right to be protected from all forms of harassment (Qvortrup, 1994).

In the reported study, the children's concept of an ideal school was linked to lovely, caring, and satisfying circumstances, which were the emotion-oriented aspects. Robinson and

Fielding (2010) highlighted the importance of building encouraging socio-emotional relationships in schools to ensure children feel happy and are eager to learn. In this study, children stressed the need to build a sense of belonging in a school community, making friendships and developing social skills. This echoes the suggestion made by John-Akinola et al. (2013).

Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to ascertain school children's (aged 9–11) views about an ideal school and learning environment. The children were considered competent social and political actors who have the ability and right to speak about learning environments that make them happy and eager to learn. Based on these children's views, three distinct categories emerged for the ideal school: ones that ensured physical welfare and provided environmental comfort, ones that ensured educational welfare and provided a stimulating environment and ones that ensured socio-emotional welfare and provided a safe environment. The creation and designation of these categories was based on the grounded theory, and the core concept along with its main aspects were derived from these. Consequently, an ideal learning environment was conceptualised as an attractive, supportive and strengthened learning environment (ASSLE), with characteristics that significantly contribute to children's welfare in the school setting and stimulate them to learn.

The ASSLE model was generated according to the Jordanian children's perspectives on an ideal school and learning environment. Thus, "attractive" requires an ideal learning environment to be physically stimulating. The ASSLE places great importance on providing school and classrooms with aesthetic features, attractive classroom equipment, amazing halls, harmonious classroom building, beautiful gardens, multiplicity of green spaces and sports fields and other physical elements that ensure children's physical welfare. According to Awartani et al. (2008), physical well-being refers to "feeling comfortable with one's body and physical ability and being in healthy physical state and a healthy physical environment" (p. 60). The interviewed children anticipated engaging in comfortable spaces and expressing themselves through several physical activities. Therefore, the ASSLE must supply a variety of athletic, playful and pleasing learning practices and support physical welfare and environmental comfort. Johnson et al. (2005) argued that many learning aims can only be achieved through outdoor play activities. The ASSLE offers purposeful indoor and outdoor spaces and places for physical activities and games.

For example, the idea "to learn math through computer games" implies the utilisation of classroom (indoor space) to enjoy learning, while the idea "to learn math by selling items in supermarket" implies the utilisation of (outdoor classroom space) to exercise physical activity to enjoy learning. This refers to achieving a combination of educational goals and enjoyment. Thus, the ASSLE model implies that a combination of learning and enjoyment can be achieved by the provision of both indoor and outdoor spaces and places.

"Supportive" refers to encouraging and enjoyable strategies for educational and cultural welfare. The ASSLE sponsors the inclusion of educational technology and creative, participative, explorative and playful tasks in the learning process as well as strategies for providing additional support to children with learning difficulties. Thus, the ASSLE promotes several ideas of informal learning. This supports Livingstone's (2006) definition of informal learning: "Any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill that occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria" (p. 206).

"Strengthened" reflects the importance of assuring conditions that promote positive and mutually respectful relationships among the school members. The ASSLE provides a friendly, collective and delightful learning environment. It ensures the promotion of a safe socio-emotional environment among peers, on the one hand, (i.e. group activities and cultural activities) and between the students and teachers (i.e. no violence), on the other. This, in turn, enhances children's socio-emotional welfare, enjoyment and school satisfaction. Our findings also support Akinola et al.'s (2014) argument that positive interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging significantly contribute to maintaining children's enjoyment in school.

Based on this study, an ideal school and learning environment would focus on the children's physical, educational and socio-emotional welfare. The joy of learning emerged as a key element in all these categories. This corresponds with Claxton's (2002) argument that children would enjoy learning if their needs are met. Therefore, the ASSLE supports a holistic view of the ideal learning environment (Awartani et al., 2008) which emphasises the importance of school children's developmental welfare from multi-dimensional aspects, thereby achieving the pedagogical aims of the learning process.

To conclude, this study provides valuable information that contributes to the discussions on improving the learning environments of Jordanian public schools in accordance with the

current criticisms about the quality of public education. This study recommends that the provision of a conducive learning environment would address the multiple interconnected holistic needs of the child. Thus, offering a holistic learning environment is necessary to aid in the children's holistic growth physically, socially, emotionally and academically. As indicated by Runco (2010), educational achievement is intertwined with the social, emotional and physical welfare of school children.

This study is not without its limitations. First, the aims and methodology focused on Jordanian school children's needs and suggestions. Thus, comparative studies would be valuable for examining the social similarities and differences in the children's view of an ideal school environment from diverse societies and cultures. Second, this study mainly considered the viewpoints of boys as the public schools in Jordan are not mixed-gender ones. This gap reinforces the need to conduct future research on girls' experiences. Third, this study explored the ideas of children aged 9–11. Therefore, conducting similar studies with other age groups would also be helpful.

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