UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LIVED SPACE IN SCHOOLS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Educational institutions provide a variety of space to their students, where they perform their learning activities throughout the day and experience the space while living through it. Most of the studies have focused on infrastructure, physical facilities and resources available in school. The present study aims to gain a description of students' lived experience of school spaces such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories, playgrounds, examination room and cafeteria. The main question was how it is like for them to live through these spaces and what they reflected on their spatial experiences. A phenomenological approach was employed to understand the essence of participants' experiences of lived space within the school premises. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected eleven student participants of 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades studying in public secondary and higher secondary schools of rural and urban areas in a district of the province of Punjab, Pakistan. As a result of interview analysis, the researchers identified five themes namely, compromising the space, intense reactions, boredom and irritation, hurting self-respect and being satisfied. The study has implications in phenomenological perspective in understanding the nature of experiences of living through various school spaces. It also suggests how school administration can respond to students' varying experiences of spatiality in schools.

1. Introduction

Lived space is not an object or thing having the dimensions of height, length and depth. It can be viewed as the place or world in which people live, move freely, interact with the environment and feel comfort or discomfort in a particular situation as their home, workplace, school or any other place (Van Manen, 1990, 2014). Historically, the place is linked with the past world and space is related to present and future situations (Agnew, 2002, 2005). Our lives are directed towards and complete with the place even when we cannot think of what it would be like to live without a place. We live through a pace, have a chrematistic experience within the place and cannot get out of it in which we find ourselves (Casey, 2009). Seamon (2008) argued that we can learn from that space and can determine how and in what way we commit and pose ourselves to live through that space. Whereas place or locale can be conceptualized as the "focus of meanings or intention, either culturally or individually defined" (Relph, 1976, p. 55). Godkin (2015) understands place as "a discrete, temporally and perceptually bounded unit of psychologically meaningful material space" (p. 73). The meaning of a place as a lived space is not permanent and constant in its experiential nature, but it can be affected by the environment, experiences, working situation, nature of work or job, behaviour and dealing of a person with the society (Bollnow, 2011). For example, a room may be bright and lively for someone but, the same room can be confused, disoriented and an unhappy place for another one. One place can be lively one day but the same place may be dark and restricted the very next day. Our sense of lived space is little or much influenced by other people in our surroundings. A place has great importance and considered a basic need of human beings to dwell and move forward. All human being needs a safe, friendly and positive place where they live existentially and experience the environment in one way or the other. We need such a place where we can live with ourselves and where we can feel like our home. In Heidegger's (2001) perspective, the relationship of a man with space is not more than to live in it, strictly thought and spoken. According to Bollnow (2011), "Every change 'in' the human being entails a change to his lived space" (p. 21). He added that our home is a friendly and secure space that "educates our heart and mind". We direct ourselves to live within this place and this relationship of ourselves with this place provides security that we need. The students are influenced by school structure, design, culture and space where they live and experience what happens on the premises. This space affects classroom activities and students' understanding of the school environment. It determines and directs the teaching-learning process and examine how do students live through and deal with the space within school building and how does this shape the nature of relationship of students with their student fellows, teachers and school culture. This shows the nature of connection of students with school space. The importance of school space had been ignored for many years (Martin, 2002). Mostly, teachers do not think about different school spaces that can build a positive, productive and healthy environment for teaching and learning. Many of

them merely focus on the restriction of school space (Walden, 2009; Weinstein, 2007; Weinstein, Romano, & Mignano, 2011). Students also suffer from adverse conditions of the school building and certain places like classrooms, libraries, computer laboratory, toilets, washrooms, playgrounds, hall, canteen and other such places. For example, in the studies by Woolner, Clark, Laing, Tiplady and Thomas (2012, 2013), the students think that the better condition of school spaces can provide a better environment for learning. The work of Steele (1973) discussed the various aspects of the setting of school spaces. He states that the physical environment can affect the behavior, feelings and thinking of the student. Following this statement, Weinstein (2007) argued the five aspects of school spaces, i.e., safety and protection, assistance in a task, symbolic documentation of a student, interaction among students and pleasurable experiences of students within school spaces are significant for student's better learning in school. It was noticed that many of such studies focused on the physical facilities and infrastructure and how they influence student's learning, achievement and co-curricular activities (Steele, 1973; Woolner, Hall, Wall, & Dennison, 2007; Woolner, McCarter, Wall, & Higgins, 2011; Woolner *et al*., 2012, 2013).However, there is no research found that can explain how do secondary and higher secondary students experience the lived space in an educational setting particularly in the context of developing countries like Pakistan where the physical infrastructure and conditions do matter in understanding and experiencing the space lived through by the students, teachers and other workers of the school administration. The researchers in the present study had attempted to examine student's experience of living through space within an educational institution and how do they give meaning to this space while reflecting on their experiences. This phenomenological study delves into the lived space experience while studying in the classroom, playing in the ground, reading in the library, experimenting in the laboratories and using other such spaces within schools and higher secondary schools of a district in Pakistan.

2. Purpose of The Study

The present research is on exploring the 'felt space' and lived experiences of students about specific places in secondary and higher secondary schools. Their experiences provided a different view of school space and setting in contrast to the results of most of the studies focusing on the physical facilities and infrastructure of educational institutions and their effects on students' achievement, learning and behavior (Walden, 2009; Weinstein, 2007, Weinstein, Romano, & Mignano, 2011; Woolner *et al*. 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013). The present study emphasized that what meanings students assign to school space while living, studying, playing, interacting, reading, and passing leisure time during their stay in school hours. The study aimed to provide a detailed and rich description from the perspectives and experiential lens of those students who had personally lived through the spatial engagements.

3. Research Questions

The participants of the study were approached to address the following research questions from a

phenomenological perspective.

1.   What is it like for students to live through the school space and how do they reflect on the specific situations?

2.   How do students' experience of lived space in school shape their reactions to the environment?

3.   What do students suggest for 'better' school space that can foster a positive learning and 'pleasant' experience?

4. Methodology

The phenomenological research method was used in this study. This method provides in-depth and rich data about the participants' experiences of lived space and the situation they are embedded in. It was considered as one of the most appropriate research methods to describe delving into lived space and interpreting the experiences participants had in the school context (Moustakas, 1994). This methodology helps to uncover the nature of the phenomenon through reflecting on experiences and feelings the individuals have that provides deep insight into the experiences (Zack, 2013). It offers an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and allows readers to form their own opinion about it. It emphasized on the specific experience of students and gave a clear perspective on their familiarities of the phenomenon (Glendinning, 2008). The sample of the study consisted of eleven students of secondary and higher secondary schools and they were selected purposively from 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades to allow diverse experiences and perspectives on lived space. All the participants were interviewed during their school hours at different spaces like the library, laboratory, playground and classroom etc. It was assumed that they could best reflect on these spaces while physically being there and experiencing them as 'lived and felt spaces'. The individual interviews were held in the form of open questions that permitted participants to be more flexible and elaborative in their responses (Creswell, 2007, 2013). According to Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom (2001), an interview may help participants to describe or reveal his/her situation. It is undertaken first, gathering of statements about experiences and, second, thinking on this material (Van Manen, 1990). The main interview question asked from the participants was: "How did you experience when you were at one of the school spaces like a library, classroom, playground or school laboratory". The other questions like, "how was it like for you to be in the playground after school hours" or "how do you feel while being in the library in the school hours". The probing questions were asked to clarify and understand the statements of the participants. Each interview was undertaken approximately for one hour and they were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

5.   Analysis of Interviews and Results

The phenomenological analysis provides realistic information that leads to a practical understanding of the phenomenon (Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000; Garner, 2016). The data gathered from interviews provided a wide variety of descriptions of experiences as Herndon and Bembenutty (2014) found that each individual interprets his experience in a different perspective and understanding.   By   examining   students' experiences about their school space, common

themes emerged and they elaborated that most of the participants experienced a state of 'unease' and confronted 'unpleasing situation'. The emergent themes include: compromising the space, intense reactions, boredom and irritation, hurting self-respect and being satisfied. The themes are described and elaborated phenomenologically through the lens of participants' descriptions supported by their typical quotes. As a result of the analysis of the interview data, the emergent themes are described in the following paragraphs.

6. Compromising the Space

The theme, compromising space, reflects the experiences of those participants who are "suffering from the un-pleasant environment" within their educational institutions. They had also shared that there is nothing in their hands to make that "uninteresting environment" an "interesting" space for them. So, they have to compromise and adjust with the existing situation. This situation makes them demotivated and frustrated but according to study participants, there is no other option for them. As with other school spaces, when it was asked to students about the experiences of their school library, they shared a lot of views which they had experienced there. A participant "K" who was 18 years old, studying in class 12th in a public school of an urban area, has shared his experience very offensively. He described that "I always dream of visiting my school library but whenever I asked my teacher to take us in the library, he always replied, "you are not that brilliant student who studies other books except the textbooks". Another student, "O" of class 10th described his irritation about his school

library that "Why our school does not sell these books to the old book house". On the other hand, few participants had no such issues. They described that they had adjusted themselves in all such situations provided by the school. They never get irritated or frustrated whenever they suffer in any problematic situation. They try themselves to minimize all the feelings that make them unhappy. For instance, a student "M" who was 17-year-old, studying in class 10 and belonged to an urban area, shared his experiences in these words: I have no problem with my classroom environment. Most of the schools have a similar type of room, so it does not matter that my class has no attraction for me or it has damaged furniture that caused me injured many times. I never feel irritated whenever I have to clean my classroom because I think, as I belong to a low-income family, so I deserve this school where I have to spend just six hours. The participants also shared their experiences of "being in the classroom". According to them there is issue of electricity in their schools. In summer students badly suffer due to heat and darkness of congested rooms. Students feel trouble during their class hours due to shortage and unavailability of light and proper ventilation. The rooms of their school are tiny and overcrowded with a large number of students. Due to all these problems, the students' concentration gets dispersed and students fail to focus in their study. Regarding the experiences of classroom condition, it was described by a student "D" studying in class eleven in a public school that: The teachers never allow us to go out of the classroom to take some breath in fresh air when light is not available. When the light goes, our

room becomes to look like a dark cell. The classroom is occupied with full of bad smell of sweating and it makes me nauseated in this lousy situation. I imagine that I should run away from school and never come back. Another exciting experience was shared by a student when he was asked that "have you ever used your school washroom," he replied: "Not at all…. I try my best not to go washroom because they are very smelly and dirty. I always wish that I should wait until I go back home". Thus, it seems that students' feel "being helpless". Because of being treated rudely, the students do not want to comment badly about the school spaces where they perform a lot of different activities the whole day.

7. Intense Reactions

This theme describes the extreme reactions of a few students who confronted with an unbearable situation. Nevertheless, it might be a good or bad act. From the participant's experiences, the intense reaction had described the feelings of aggressiveness or rudeness about certain spaces that they experienced within their educational institutes. It led to the maximum limit of a person's anger. It might be a specific feelings and emotions towards specific situation. It was noticed from the participants' experiences that the feeling of anger is a very common state of human beings. The participants described that this feeling disturbed one's self mentally and emotionally. The human mood varies from situation to situation. It depends upon the situation which is available for you or the environment in which you are experiencing a lot of things. If circumstances are not favorable and nothing happens according to your mood you get

angry. A student "W" who was 15-year-old, studying in class 9 in a public school of the rural area has shared her feelings of anger very intensively as: My dirty classroom always makes my day very bad. When in the morning, I come to school and enter in my class, the dusty floor and dirty environment of my classroom make me unhappy. At that moment I only think; I shall leave this school very soon and the studies too. Another student, "P" belonged to a rural area, studying in class 9, shared his experience about the school library. He remarked that "If we have no permission to visit the library, then all books should be torn and burned. I think my teachers are not confident enough to take us to the library because they do not know the student's interest". It seems that the school administration does not cooperate and facilitate the students. They all are responsible for this severe reaction of students towards specific spaces and situations. Another student "Q" of class 9 studying in a public school in a rural area shared his experience very aggressively advising the interviewer that "Don't ask about our school library. Most of the time I wished that the library should be closed forever if we are not allowed to use it". The computer laboratory is another place where students want to spend time but they are not allowed to visit this place due to specific reasons. Some participants shared their "bad" experience with their school computer laboratory. For example, a student "T", studying computer science in class 9 and belonged to a public school in an urban area reflected that "The computer laboratory means 'the silence box', where you can't speak and even to can't breathe".

Other than academic places, in schools and other educational institutions, the cafeteria plays an essential role in entertaining students. According to study participants, the presence of a cafeteria in an educational institute is a basic need of students that should be clean and hygienic. Participants argued that a school without canteen could not provide a healthy environment for living and learning of students. There are some participants who described their intense feelings in this regard. For instance, a participant "E" studying in class 12 in a public school of the rural area expressed his anger while experiencing the school canteen that "I have the horrible experience of my school canteen. If one wants to lose one's temperament, one should have a look at our school canteen". When being asked what you meant by" to lose temperament", he replied that "We can say that "the canteen time means a hard time in the school". Similarly, another student of the same school remarked that "What are you saying…our school and canteen?" He further added: "No canteen….no feelings". It means participants want to describe that they are frustrated and suffering from harmful foods and conditions. This can divert their attention from studies and, in this way, they fail to focus on their study work due to continuously fatigued study hours.

8. Boredom and Irritation

The participants described that the "boredom and irritation" is the feeling of being unsatisfied with an activity that is not interesting to them. Boredom may occur when you feel energetic but you are nowhere to direct your energy or you have difficulty in focusing on a task and feeling uncomfortable while dealing with your thoughts and actions. Most of the participants supported such arguments that they feel boredom while they are in their classroom. Their classrooms are not exciting and well-arranged and managed. Also, the teaching method of their teacher was not impressive, so they failed to attend that information given by the class teacher. It is essential to make their classroom and other spaces of school enjoyable so that they can have a better experience that could lead them towards a better learning experience as well. One of the participants, "A" described his feeling of boredom like this: My classroom is not a classroom; it looks like a 'prison'. If you get a chance to visit my classroom, you'll find a lot of boredom there. We have no opportunity and freedom to talk even not to whisper. My classroom has no 'attraction' for me and many times; it causes a headache. Another participant "C" from class 10, who was studying in an urban school, aggressively described her classroom environment that: In the morning, when I entered in my classroom, the ruining environment makes my day a dull and fatigued. The broken furniture looks like a museum and I prefer to sit on the floor instead of on a damaged chair because I never want to injure myself with that 'master piece'. The participants described that they felt this irritation and boredom while they visited the school's computer laboratory. They remarked that their computer laboratory was well furnished with the latest computer systems but these were only for the "amusement for the students and decoration piece" for the school. Students are not allowed to use these brand-new

computers and the subject of computer was taught orally and not practically. Most of the students realized that the teachers did not know how to operate these systems. This was very strange and awful situation experienced by the participants. Explaining a somewhat similar situation, another student "D" studying in class 10 in a public school of rural area added that "My computer period always makes me lazy and dull because whenever we get chance to visit computer lab, the 'sleeping' and dusty computers irritate me and I regret of choosing this subject". It seems that the school spaces develop a sense of what is right and what is wrong for students and what they should do.

9. Hurting Self-Respect

It was noticed from the participants' experiences that the student's self-respect was hurt by teachers in the school. Participants experienced that whenever they came to school and entered in their classrooms, they were informed by their teachers that they had to clean their classroom by themselves. To sweep or clean the classroom by students seemed a common practice in public schools. Students remarked that when they came to know that they had to clean their rooms by their own, they got frustrated. The participants informed that in spite of availability of sweepers in the school, the students had to clean their rooms. The school principal and teachers both did not bother that students never wanted to do this work. They got hurt and felt depressed by this experience. For instance, a 16-year-old student "N" who was in class 9 in a public school of urban area elaborated the feeling of hurting his self-respect while sweeping his classroom as: As I

belong to a labor class, that's why one day my teacher asked me to clean the whole classroom. When I refused, my teacher insulted me on my poor family background and he said you are not a landlord here, you are from a low-income family. So, you have to sweep too. Then I questioned myself, "don't the poor people have self- respect? Most of the participants reflected that they were not treated respectably. Mostly, they got hurt by the harsh words of their teachers. The school washroom as space was a common experience for most of the students. Most of them gave negative and aggressive remarks when they asked about their school's washroom condition. The school washroom was such a place that is a fundamental and necessary need for everyone. Most of the participants spoke that their school washrooms were in terrible condition and the school failed to provide the washroom in good condition. For example, a student "R" studying in class 10 in a public school of an urban area described his feelings of anger that "My school has filthy washroom even it makes me vomiting". Another student of the same school remarked on hurting her self-respect while complaining against the bad condition of her school washroom: Whenever we complain about dirty washrooms, teachers rebuke us and insult us. The teacher said that you do not have such a "clean" washroom at your home like these toilets. It hurts my self-respect very much, and I wish not to stay there even for a single moment." Similarly, another student expressed her feelings of depression, reflecting that "Once I have complained about the dirty toilets of my school and my class teacher treated me very rudely, then

I decided to go to a school where students are treated respectfully at least". Students also experienced hurting their self-esteem when they visited their school computer laboratory. One of the participant student "O" studying in class 9 in a public school of the urban area shared his bad experience of visiting the computer laboratory for the very first time. He described: Once I got the chance to visit my school computer lab for the very first time, I just asked my teacher to allow us to operate the computer, but my teacher scolded me and asked me that you should be thankful for this that you have got chance to visit the computer lab so, don't be over smart anymore. This theme reflects that the participants were afraid of their self-respect being hurt by the teachers in school. The harsh words and the aggressive behavior of their teachers affected students' self-image and self-esteem whenever they complained or talked about their un-pleasant experience in the school.

10. Being Satisfied

The theme "being satisfied" gives participants' experiences that make them happy and give them "a sort of assurance" for the fulfillment of their expectations. "Being satisfied" to them is having "good sense and feelings" of the space where they spent time during school. It is relevant to the actions or things which made them motivated and enthusiastic. The participants were of the view that the feeling of satisfaction is the stage when human needs are fulfilled through some available resources. It leads and motivates someone to achieve one's goals. The level of satisfaction decides how much someone is happy with the provided environment or situation. Nevertheless, very few students described that they felt relaxed in school hours and they did not want to leave school even after closing time. One of the students named "B" of class 12, who was studying in a rural school, described the feelings of satisfaction by commenting that "You can't imagine how much love I have for my school and classroom. I really feel relaxed as I enter to my classroom. There are many attractive things. It is a source of pleasure for me." Upon asking Which "many things" attract you in the class? She elaborated that the colorful paintings and charts make me free of fatigue. My classroom has such an environment that decreases the burden of my studies and makes me mentally relaxed. When I am home, I always wait for the next school day. Similarly, a student "S" studying in class 11 in a public school of the urban area shared her feelings when she entered into her school computer laboratory that; "I always wait for my computer subject. The pleasant environment refreshes me and makes me more active because I have many activities to do on the system there, such as drawings, paintings, making files and many other things". Some of the other participants loved to visit their school canteen. Participants expressed that the canteen times have great importance for them because, at this time, they can relax and enjoy gossiping with their friends freely. Another student, "R", 15-year-old and studying in class 9 in a public school of rural area, who had an enjoyable experience with his school canteen. He reflected his feelings saying that: "you can't imagine that how crazy I am for canteen hour…. the neat and clean environment with delicious food attracts me, in short, you can say, if I am here, the

credit goes to my school canteen…." In contrast to other themes, it seems from the participant's experience that they were enjoying their school routine and the schools were successful in providing a healthy environment for students where they can have 'better' experiences. They are satisfied with existing situations.

11. Conclusion

The researchers attempted to explore how secondary and higher secondary school students lived through various school spaces and how these spaces shaped their perspectives and experiences. Most of the participants experienced that they could not perform such activities in the school that make them happy or satisfied while being at various school places, 'unacceptable' to them. They described that they felt like being helpless when experienced the strict behavior of their teachers and they could do nothing to minimize the feelings of being insulted. They added that there was no other option except compromising such situations. Most of the students severely and some of them 'extremely' reacted to the school spaces where they undertook many activities in the whole day. Most of the time, they experienced the unpleasant environment of various school spaces such as computer laboratory, library, toilets, classrooms and canteen etc. They expressed the feelings of 'anger and anguish' because there was no place in the school that can make them relaxed, motivated and energetic. They were bored, irritated, frustrated and disappointed with the situation. They added that at least the classrooms should be such a place where they can concentrate on their learning activities. The school was not

'attractive' and there was nothing of interest for them where they could spend the leisure time. It failed to attract students in the class. Most of the students were treated rudely and harshly by the teachers and this attitude hurt their self-respect and lowered their self-esteem. The teachers asked them forcefully to sweep the classroom. They were harshly treated by their teachers whenever they asked to visit the computer laboratory, library or other such places. They insulted the students on complaining of dirty toilets, washrooms and classrooms. On the other hand, few participants expressed their feelings of satisfaction. They considered the school as their 'home' where they had the freedom to talk, share and to do many activities, which made them motivated to learn. They described that visiting the school library, computer laboratory or canteen etc. made them excited and happy. We can conclude that most of the participants were not comfortable at various school places. Most of the time, they had 'bad' experience of many spaces such as classrooms, canteen, playground, computer laboratory, library or toilets. A few of them never wanted to come to school and thought of going somewhere in another school. They neither enjoyed the school places nor they had any pleasant experience there. They were frustrated and disappointed. They could do nothing to minimize the troubles or change the available situation. On the contrary, a few participants felt relaxed and enjoyed the school place and they had been waiting for the next day to come to the school.

12. Implications

The emergent themes provided a fresh perspective

of students' experience about specific spaces that can be considered in future development and improvement of these places and school in general. This type of study has the potential to produce valuable information that can be used for improving the workplace of educational institutions, study conditions and provide insight into ways that may better serve the needs of students. A school space that is beneficial to students' learning, engage them in, and leads them to think critically through different processes is recommended. If we want to bring change in a real sense in educational institutions, the focus should be on changing school space more than changing the individual student (Caroleo, 2014). All institutes should try to make these spaces better as well as positive so that these can shape the students' behavior affectively and they would have positive experiences living through these paces.

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