

Enhanced student joy in learning environment; understanding and influencing the process

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Abstract

In education, there is a risk that joy in learning is counteracted by allowing a performance culture to dominate. Research shows that emotions are of great importance for results, motivation and well-being. This study aims to add knowledge about the essential meanings of joy in learning based on students' lived experiences and thereby implications for the learning environment. The essence of the phenomenon of joy in learning has been formulated through descriptive phenomenological analysis. Qualitative data consists of 25 narratives from students engaged in voluntary forms of education. The study shows that joy in learning emerges throughout the learning process, when students discover that they gain knowledge, understand and can control their learning process and achieve something with their knowledge. The implications for teaching involve awareness of the learning process providing a balance between structure, support, challenge and personal choice which was valued along with relationships that contribute to autonomy.

KEYWORDS

higher education teaching, joy, lived experience, phenomenology, self-determination

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Higher education can be viewed in a tension, but hopefully not contradiction, between performance demands (such as examination grades) and personal development (Messenger, 2015; Rosengren, 2009; Røset et al., 2023). In a way, this is obvious. Students need to both pass exams to be able to progress with their studies and qualify and develop personally and produce an overall positive view of learning and desire to continue learning after their education. The role of emotional experiences like joy, boredom and anxiety is a significant aspect of learning environments that is often underestimated (Tvedt et al., 2021). Dias and Sá (2014) studied students' emotions at the transition to higher education and found that their first days were characterized by negative emotions while positive emotions emerged later. Positive emotions affect students' engagement, which in turn provides a positive cycle for both motivation and results (Asikainen et al., 2018; Kahu et al., 2015; Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2013) as well as students' emotional well-being (Hagenauer et al., 2018; White & Ingram, 2023). Therefore, positive emotions are important in learning environments, sometimes in a tension between a performance culture and personal satisfaction (Humberstone et al., 2013; Røset et al., 2023).

The concept 'academic emotions' (Pekrun et al., 2002) is frequently used about emotions experienced in learning in relation to, for example a learning content or working methods and might have implications for future learning in the long run (Asikainen et al., 2018; Ben-Eliyahu, 2019). In a study by Núñez-Peña et al. (2013), the result showed that negative feelings and poor self-confidence in relation to mathematics influenced the students' performance, which makes visible the significance of the teachers' attention to the design of the emotional learning environment. Emotions are individual and contextual, meaning that factors like personal interests and personality, learning environment and teaching methods in different situations matter (Asikainen et al., 2018). Within the research, it is clearly stated that positive emotions are wanted to motivate and affect results as well as emotional well-being. What we need increased knowledge about are the situations in which students experience positive emotions and their individual lived experiences in these contexts. Phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for studying students' lived experiences of positive emotions in various situations. In addition to knowledge through descriptions of individual and contextual experiences, essential meanings can be searched for, to provide knowledge about what is required for a joyful learning environment regardless of different contexts and personalities. The movement between the whole and the different parts characterizes the phenomenology and defines an abstract understanding in relation to concrete examples. The positive academic emotion joy was chosen because it is one of the most salient (Pekrun et al., 2002) and was retained from a previous study with participants from compulsory education (Cronqvist, 2021) to enable comparisons in future studies.

In Sweden, the education is voluntary from about 16 years of age when students can choose programs in upper secondary school and then go on to university studies. In regulations for voluntary forms of education, aspects such as a positive view of learning are expressed with varying clarity. In curriculum for upper secondary school (Skolverket, 2011), emotions are not mentioned in the introductory general part but the importance of a positive attitude to learning and the lifelong perspective is clear:

Students must become aware that new knowledge and insights are prerequisites for personal development. This should aim to establish a positive attitude towards learning and to recreate such an attitude among students with negative school experiences. The school must strengthen the students' belief in themselves and in the future. (Skolverket, 2011, p. 5)

Regarding higher education, regulated by the Higher Education Act (SFS, 1992:1434), clarifications about a positive attitude to continued learning is missing. Therefore, Higher Education Act (SFS, 1992:1434) is now amended with the aim to promote academic freedom and lifelong learning. This is an attempt to clarify the responsibility of higher education. This change together with the clarity in the curricula for upper secondary school motivates the current study about students' lived experiences of joy in learning.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Guay et al., 2008) is used in the discussion to understand what implications the results from the descriptive analysis of the students' lived experiences have for teaching in higher education to promote joy in learning environments. The theory adds understanding of the tension between academic performance (grades, examinations) and personal development as well as autonomous and controlled motivation. To be self-determined involves having control, being responsible and self-motivated as well as determine actions based on internal value goals. Reinforcing positive emotions for learning in general is not a task for the students themselves but the teachers must provide support to develop towards an autonomous regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and students' lived experiences about joy in learning environments can facilitate the understanding of this development.

2 | PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Research shows that positive emotions influence students' motivation for their studies, their performance and general well-being (Asikainen et al., 2018; Hagenauer et al., 2018). Academic emotions, positive or negative, arise in activities related to learning and studying and are distinguished from emotions connected to achievement activities and outcomes (Asikainen et al., 2018; Ben-Eliyahu, 2019). To stimulate positive emotions and thereby improve students' performance, students need to develop self-regulation and responsibility for their achievement (Asikainen et al., 2018). Self-regulation is a concept that can involve a variety of strategies and behaviours such as the ability to set goals and manage time. Through these results, we understand that positive emotions are stimulated in students when they develop a kind of autonomy by being self-regulating in different ways. At the same time, positive feelings also benefit from a kind of dependence on other people by building relationships with teachers and fellow students. The results are somewhat contradictory as to whether relationships with peers (Hagenauer et al., 2018) or with teachers (Leenknecht et al., 2020) are most prominent in eliciting positive emotions. Leenknecht et al. (2020) state that teachers' emotional involvement and avoidance of conflict in relationships with students in higher education as well as at younger ages promotes motivation. They emphasize that the commitment from teaching teams has a greater impact than from individual teachers and that the emotional involvement must not contribute to the student's autonomy suffering. Here, a balancing act is expressed that can be problematic in teaching.

Hagenauer et al. (2018) studied how satisfaction of basic psychological needs, including autonomy, competence and relationships, stimulate positive emotions and motivation. Within these three basic needs, the results showed that the relevance of the knowledge content, for example in future professional practice, transparency in terms of assessments and achievement demands and friendship between students were factors that stimulated positive emotions. Positive emotions can also arise when students consider the studied content relevant to their own life experiences (Kahu et al., 2015).

Through analysis of a self-report survey with college students (Sakiz, 2012), a significant positive relation between instructor affective support and academic joy appeared. In addition to joy, the result indicates that affectively supportive learning environments promoted academic help seeking and engagement (motivation). Similar results, about motivation and enjoyment enhanced by teaching, emerged in a quantitative study on learning environment factors at a faculty of art in Slovenia (Radovan & Makovec, 2015). In addition to support from the teacher and usefulness of the studied content, opportunities for autonomy turn out to have an impact on joyful learning. Quite different results from focus group interviews with students in another study indicate strong individual performance cultures (Humberstone et al., 2013) and it is unclear how such cultures and students' autonomy relate to teacher support as well as relationships.

However, positive emotions are important to motivation and are promoted through learning environment enabling support, relevant knowledge content and in accordance with most studies, relationships (Asikainen et al., 2018; Hagenauer et al., 2018; Leenknecht et al., 2020; Messinger, 2015). In one of the studies in the

area (Loon & Bell, 2018), a simulating computer game is used which gives the students the opportunity to use knowledge that they previously acquired in a traditional way via lectures and seminars. In the game, the students are assigned roles and interact with each other, which overall evokes positive emotions that stimulate learning. Teachers' positive attitude to teaching in higher education is relevant to students' experiences of joy in learning (Miočić et al., 2020) as well as teachers' engagement or enthusiasm (Keller et al., 2018). How engagement is related to joy has been studied in the interrelation between students' experienced enthusiasm and teachers' enthusiastic teaching at lessons in upper secondary school. Data consists of quantitatively analysed diary questionnaires from both students and teachers. The result shows that when both students and teachers experience an enthusiasm in teaching, joy arises. Interestingly, students' and teachers' experiences did not always coincide.

3 | AIM

Previous research clearly states that learning environments that are characterized by joy give students motivation and commitment to continue learning, which promotes both performance and personal development. However, learning environments that provide joy seem to be designed in a variety of ways based on individual studies, but at the same time certain factors are recurring. The recurring factors justify a study that can provide more knowledge about the essential meanings that characterize the joy of learning despite different contextual variations. Based on students' lived experiences, the current study aims to gain knowledge about what joy in learning means and how it is effectively promoted in education. The research question is:

What does joy in learning mean for students in voluntary education?

4 | METHODOLOGY

Through students' lived experiences in voluntary forms of education of the phenomenon joy in learning, the essential meanings are searched for, which leads to a phenomenological methodology, inspired by the approach of Reflective Lifeworld Research (RLR) (Dahlberg et al., 2008). In phenomenology, the essential meanings can be made visible through the participants' lived experiences of how the phenomenon presents itself to them (Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2009). The phenomenon presents itself in different ways depending on the context (Van Manen, 2016) and individual differences. Therefore, variation of contexts is searched for in data. From all variations, the meanings that are relatively stable constitute the essence (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The essential meanings are contextual as they are related to the study's design (Giorgi, 1997). The results of the analysis are described at both the essential abstract level, as a new whole, which indicates the structure of the phenomenon and a concrete level through the constituents based on supplementary specific examples from the variations in the data. From both descriptions of the meanings, an understanding is obtained of characteristic features that all must be present for the studied phenomenon joy in learning to appear (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

4.1 | Participants

Participants are 14 students (8 males and 6 females) from upper secondary school and 11 students (3 males and 8 females) from college/university in Sweden. In the findings section, participants are called S1-14 (upper secondary school) and U1-11 (college/university). In upper secondary school, participants are from one class, studying a demanding college preparatory program with teaching in English. They are in the final phase of education and applying for higher education. Participants from college/university are studying programs in many different areas such as healthcare (2), police (4), textile (1), communication (3) and IT (1). Some of them have recently started (5) while

others have studied several semesters (6). Various voluntary forms of education, gender, ages and programs have been sought to bring about variation in contexts. In upper secondary school, a former colleague helped me to get in contact with a class that during a lesson was informed about the study's ethical guidelines, read and signed the consent form if they wanted to participate and, in that case, wrote down their experiences. At college/university, students who were on campus for self-study were informed about the study, asked for participation and if they approved, they signed the consent form, and wrote down their experiences. I went around different corridors to get participants from as many courses as possible.

4.2 | Data collection

In the study, students' written experiences are used as a data collection method, which provides the opportunity to take part in the experiences of more participants compared to interviews, which are more time-consuming. The writing can help the participants to explicitly express their experiences without the researcher influencing through various questions (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Giorgi, 1997). The disadvantage is that the researcher does not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, ask for clarifications or examples, but is limited to what is written down. The data collection was initiated with an open question to students, asking them to write down their experiences of joy in learning in current or past education. Participants, who had not experienced much joy, could describe situations with opposite feelings (anger, frustration, sadness). The situations described could be ordinary everyday events and the concept of joy is defined by how the participants understand and experience it. No common definition of the concept was given to the participants because they would start from their own experience of joy. The sampling process was based on purpose (Khan, 2014) and convenience but at college/university it also had a random element as to who was on campus at the time. All participants wrote down their experiences directly on the spot or sent them shortly after we met. They were about 1–2 pages, handwritten or computer typed.

4.3 | Analysis

The descriptive analysis started with many and thorough readings of the material to gain a good knowledge of both parts and the whole. After readings, in the first step of the analysis process, words and sentences that said something about the phenomenon, called meaning units (Dahlberg et al., 2008), were underlined. Students mentioned for example that good grades gave them joy or explained how joy emerged when an interest had inspired them to work hard. Then, in the second step, the meaning units were collected to find patterns, called clusters. It is a time-consuming phase to find clusters since many different patterns are possible. An inspiring interest might fit into a cluster about an enthusiastic teacher but also in a cluster about control and choices in learning. Meaning units and clusters were parts of the material that in the ongoing process, the third step, would form a new whole, the essence. In the meeting between researcher and the phenomenon, the phenomenon's way of being, the essence, is revealed. In this process, the researcher must be open, reflective and bridge preunderstandings (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Gadamer, 1989), so that the description of the essential meanings is slowly emerging. The final formulation of the essence must be true to data, use language different from the everyday language of the participants and capture the nuances (Giorgi, 1997). Another difficulty is translations, but they were done at the final stage and have not affected the analysis.

The presentation of the findings starts with the abstract essence of the phenomenon joy in learning, followed by concrete examples from the participants' lived experiences. In RLR, an openness to the phenomenon is sought and thus theories are primarily used to better understand the data (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Therefore, the self-determination theory has been added as part of the discussion.

5 | FINDINGS

Initially, the essence of the phenomenon of joy in learning is described. The essence is a new whole, that based on the data analysis describes what characterizes the phenomenon of joy in learning on an abstract level:

Joy in learning means to gain and discover new knowledge about something that is interesting, and to satisfy one's curiosity. Joy emerges when students understand something new about themselves, other people, about life in general or when they discover patterns. By gaining knowledge, understanding the learning process, and achieving something with the knowledge, joy arises. The joy that arises in learning can give a desire to learn even more, but also the struggle, difficulties and adversities in learning can create a driving force to learn more to feel joy and pride in one's achievement. Students feel that they have achieved something when learning becomes visible, when they can use their knowledge, practically or theoretically, by passing it on to others, or through some kind of recognition.

In the learning process, joy in learning arises when students can influence and make choices in their learning. Opportunities to discuss and argue with others as well as to question what is being learned are valuable. Joy can be stimulated by taking part in teaching, but both possibilities for self-study and ability to teach others can also give joy in learning. Own interests and what you like should be allowed to control learning but sometimes, new interests emerge during learning. What was boring or difficult at first can be joyful later. Therefore, joy in learning means moving between having influence over one's learning and being open to what is new. Since people learn in different ways, there must be space for the individual needs in learning. Different kinds of freedom in learning create joy and help students feel comfortable in their learning.

Well-being generally is part of the joy in learning. Having a community, building relationships, and finding common interests make it possible to work together, struggle together and create cohesion. Perceiving the learning environment as pleasant in general adds joy and conditions such as length of lessons, time of day and similar are influencing. Furthermore, aspects such as sleep, food and life in general outside the school, affect the joy in learning.

The teacher has a significant role for joy in learning, both as a person and as an organizer of the teaching. A general engagement for the students' development is indicated when the teacher invests time and energy and obviously likes to teach. Being knowledgeable, explaining in a pedagogically and committed way, creating curiosity and in some way expressing expectations and confidence in the ability of the students, are signs of engagement. In addition, the joy lies in the fact that the teacher makes the students feel included, noticed and confirmed for the work that is being done. Trust and good relationships characterize the joyful environment in the teaching. The work must be organized by the teacher so that it is varied, enables collaboration and discussions, is pedagogically (clear and structured) and includes constructive response.

The essential meanings are constituted by the following meaning elements:

- Joy in learning means gaining knowledge, sometimes through difficulties, understanding the learning process and achieving something with the knowledge.
- Joy in learning means to both influence your own learning and to be influenced.
- Joy in learning means to be part of a community and feel good in general.
- Joy in learning means that the teacher is engaged, supportive and organizes the work so that learning is promoted.

5.1 | Gain knowledge, understand the learning process and achieve something

The learning itself gives joy. To be interested in something, wanting to know more about it, makes students forget about time and space. S2 experienced that 'the more I read and learned about the subject, the more I wanted to do. It was like living in a bubble.' Besides joy in learning itself, the joy arises when the students know why they are

learning and can achieve something. U11 writes: 'To find joy in learning, there is either a reason or purpose for learning or a genuine interest.' The idea that achievement is about high grades is nearby, and grades are indeed important. A low grade is experienced as 'totally feeling worthless' (S11) and the joy is depending on 'how much I can learn and at the same time how much I can show on the exam.' (S11) However, in addition to grades, the participants mention many kinds of achievements. The most basic achievement is the discovery of having learned; 'I feel joy when I get to discover new things, seeing something I didn't see before, noticing new patterns in reality.' (S6) Another achievement mentioned by students is the ability to use the knowledge. U5 expresses that the most fun is to 'apply the theoretical knowledge in practice.' To use the knowledge in practice, perhaps helping other people, students with a clear connection to a profession highlight especially. The knowledge can also be used theoretically, as a support to understand more: 'I think that is something which makes subjects such as math liked to such a great extent by those who enjoy it, as it requires the use of previous knowledge to solve the problem in front of you.' (S3) The feeling of having achieved something that comes from recognition usually arises through grades, but also examples such as scholarships or just encouragement for hard work are mentioned.

Even if learning itself can be experienced as joyful, the learning process is often related to stress, struggle and other negative feelings. However, different adversities can be motivating: 'When I get a bad result, it can contribute to some frustration, but it affects me in that I want to work even harder and learn more and in a better way.' (S14) The hard work can be motivated by a quest to develop and achieve something, which brings joy. 'We have high demands on us with various tests and exams that we will undergo but the development that we will go through I look forward to, where we will grow as persons and in the professional role.' (U1) In addition to possibilities to use the knowledge already mentioned, joy also emerges from opportunities to teach the knowledge to others: 'I feel joy when I understand the lessons and can teach others because then it feels like I have something to teach or give out.' (S5) The quotes express that the students' lived experiences of achievements include many more meanings than succeeding with submissions and examinations.

5.2 | Influence your own learning and be influenced

The joy in learning is stimulated both when learning takes place through one's own efforts and when knowledge is taught by someone. S3 writes:

A lot of learning also happens in school of course, but here it is told to you directly, robbing you of the satisfaction from properly learning it yourself. I do still think that there is a combination of the two that is needed, i.e. learning at home and learning in school.

Consideration of individual ways of learning affects the joy and the students need to question and think critical about what they are being told: 'I feel frustrated and unhappy when I am told to just quietly accept what I am learning.' (S6) In this quote, a sense of autonomy emerges that is not just about responding to the content but also having the opportunity to make own decisions in learning: 'It is impossible for me to learn something if I am encountered by rules and strict guidelines that will make me out of my comfort zone.' (S4) The students must be allowed to learn in a way that suit them individually and not limited by various restrictions.

Interests that the students already have are guiding them and motivating them in their work and decisions. One of the students at upper secondary school speculates about the future: 'At the university, I will be able to decide for myself what I want to study and then I will probably get back the joy in learning I once had.' (S1). Deciding can mean a possibility to choose subjects and courses or learning for a profession, but also choices within courses are important. Sometimes, an interest is growing during the learning process: 'I think when it went from a must to something I liked to do, that's when the pleasure and joy came in.' (S2) This quote shows the difficulty to balance between challenging students and letting them choose something of interest to them.

5.3 | Be part of a community and feel good in general

From students' experiences, it is obvious that feeling good, both in studies and in private, is crucial to joy in learning. A student at university refers to earlier experiences: 'In high school, things got better when you met people who were more like yourself with common interests. This led to several positive situations when one felt belonging.' (U3) The feeling of belonging can arise from having the same interests, but it can also be based on working and struggling together. 'I have felt joy when a group of friends gathered to study together to get through the exam studies (which is often associated with many other emotions such as anxiety, frustration and performance requirements).' (U8) Possibilities to discuss and argue with others is joyful: 'We have been three in each group which has been a very good number of people. It does not get messy but at the same time you get very different ideas and thoughts, to discuss with each other.' (U10) The social context in learning is encouraging, U11 writes, 'partly because you see that you are part of something bigger, but also to compare yourself with others, help one another exchange thoughts and ideas about what you learned and simply have a forum for the knowledge that one acquires.' Good relationships between students are fundamental to joy in learning.

In addition to relationships, external circumstances surrounding the education are also important to joy in learning. 'I feel joy when the lesson/school starts late because I hate (the student's own mark) waking up early.' (S5) The students also tell about how joy in learning is affected by conditions not connected to education. 'Of course, there are also other aspects or factors that affect how happy I am in my learning as sleep (usually too little) or other things that go on in my life outside of school (e.g. friends or family problems).' (S9) This experience shows that well-being, important for joy in learning, is not always governed by the education.

Overall, the teacher is experienced as very important to joy in learning. The participants are describing how the teacher as a person can be inspiring and supportive but also the teachers' abilities to organize the work influence the joy in learning.

5.4 | The teacher is engaged, supportive and organizes a stimulating learning environment

The students have experienced that the teachers' attitude can affect their joy in learning: 'His lessons and lectures make it fun. A feeling that the teacher actually wants you to succeed.' (U7) The attitude is experienced as an engagement for teaching in general and especially for the individual student. S8 writes: 'When teachers would genuinely have high expectations and help and praise for the hard work and believe in me as a student.' It is not obvious what the teacher does, but positive feelings arise. 'Lectures where we are included provide better motivation and a feeling that we are able.' (U7) An interesting experience is that a teacher's low self-esteem 'which pervades the whole lecture' (U6), can take away the joy. The teacher's ability to give response is affecting the joy in several ways. The students often mention that they want to have good grades and be successful but even when they are not, they can still feel joy in learning. 'Not only when I have good results but also when somebody notice how tired I actually am and says something positive about that.' (S7) Response can mean being noticed and confirmed, not only praised for good results. Inclusion and a good relationship to the teacher are part of experiences from joy in learning: 'Usually, when I like my teacher very much, I automatically like the topic.' (S12) What makes the student like the teacher is not obvious, and it could be related to the teacher's personality.

The students have experienced that the teachers' ways to organize the work influence joy in learning. U4 writes that 'variation in the education is something that I really appreciate.' Different elements in teaching make the work joyful and interesting. Besides this varied arrangement, teaching must be clear and structured. A student (U7) writes that 'his lectures make us understand' and when the student understands, inclusion and joy is experienced. The teacher also needs to be open to collaboration and discussions among students. U6 shared bad experiences and states: 'It would have been better with occasions where the teacher divides us into smaller groups

where we can discuss and work together.' Relationships with the teacher and between students stimulate the joy in learning. Stimulation can also mean scoring and clarifying levels. U11 writes: 'You feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in this, yes, I passed the grammar test at the most difficult level.' Another element of the teaching that the teacher must organize is response. The most obvious response is when the students get their results or grades and constructive feedback, but response is also the kind of support already mentioned, being noticed and confirmed. One example of response in daily work is experienced by S5: 'I get happy or feel joy when I notice that I have learned from the lesson, and I usually notice when the teacher asks some questions at the end of the lesson.' The students' experiences show that response can be given in many ways and is crucial to joy in learning.

6 | DISCUSSION

The phenomenological descriptive analysis (Dahlberg et al., 2008) of the students' lived experiences of joy in learning provides both an overall, abstract understanding of how the different meanings of the phenomenon relate to each other through the formulated essence and an in-depth, concrete understanding of the different nuances of the phenomenon through the examples. The study thus contributes to the field with a structure of the phenomenon by showing how all four elements of meaning must characterize the learning environment and interact to induce joy.

Based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Guay et al. (2008) point to the problem that education creates learning environments with a focus on control and competition. Cultures of performance might take precedence (Humberstone et al., 2013) over the view that knowledge itself is valuable or entails general life-satisfaction (Hagenauer et al., 2018; White & Ingram, 2023). Getting good grades is important to academic joy and perhaps the most common external goal to motivate students (Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2013). This means that success breeds success and students that are failing at exams might lose joy. The view of education as something you must succeed at, otherwise it is not for you, is devastating in democratic societies as they are based on people being informed about their rights and obligations and being able to make decisions and express themselves based on their knowledge. To encourage lifelong learning, students need to experience joy and develop towards autonomy and self-motivation.

The results in this study confirm previous results about joy as required both for academic performance and personal satisfaction (Asikainen et al., 2018; Hagenauer et al., 2018) and additionally shows impact in the other direction, that living conditions in private life affect the emotions in learning environments. A further confirmation of previous research is that joy is induced through the usefulness of the knowledge (Hagenauer et al., 2018; Kahu et al., 2015) and this study reveals how the entire learning process, discovering one's knowledge, understanding how the knowledge was acquired and how it can be used all together stimulates joy. When participants describe the knowledge they discover, they include aspects such as understanding themselves and others. Achievements are described, for example, as opportunities to pass on knowledge.

In voluntary forms of education, autonomous motivation could be expected but findings indicate that a discussion about the development of self-determination is highly relevant and needed. Students' interest in subjects that they study varies even in educations leading to the dream profession and data shows that parts of the education can be experienced as boring and difficult. When this happens, students need to be persistent, get the work done and unless they enjoy the struggle itself, wait for future joy. Earlier research indicates that self-regulation and autonomy are crucial to positive emotions and there are a lot of different examples to clarify what the concepts include (Asikainen et al., 2018; Hagenauer et al., 2018; Radovan & Makovec, 2015). However, it is also obvious that students need support to develop their autonomy and self-regulation, but it is unclear how to design it to avoid dependency and control (Leenknecht et al., 2020). The essential meanings of joy in this study indicate that autonomy and self-regulation is a matter of both having influence and being influenced. Students must be given space in relation to their individual needs, for example to question, to choose and to organize their work. This

space, usually provided by the teacher, is problematized as the students might discover new areas of interests and new ways of working, which requires a combination of own choices and challenges as well as support to leave the comfort zone. In the essential meaning, the teacher support, reveals a complexity and a balancing act between support and challenge in relation to individual needs. In this way, the teacher enables to strengthening the student's autonomy and thereby induce joy.

The interaction with other students and teachers is related to joyful learning but in previous research, a somewhat ambiguous picture is given regarding relationships to peers (Hagenauer et al., 2018), to teachers and teaching teams (Leenknecht et al., 2020). Despite minor differences between different studies, there is nevertheless a consensus between previous research and this study that relationships are important in several different ways for the joy in learning. The essential meaning shows that the relationships are important in themselves to exist in a community but also based on the possibility of being able to, for example, cooperate, express opinions and try out different ideas. The relationship with teachers is fundamental for the students to feel that the teachers are committed to them and confirm them, both summatively from their results or formatively from the point of view of strengthening the learning process. The teachers' balance between supporting and challenging individually leads to the relationships being the basis for understanding the students' needs. Relationships with both peers and teachers are problematized through SDT and the concept introjection, related to controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Guay et al., 2008). The concept means incorporation of admired people's ways of being and reacting without really accepting it as your own. The essential meanings reveal a need for support both from the teacher and between students, but the individual must balance the influence of others against the development of their own autonomy.

The current results confirm previous research, that the teacher is expected to be genuinely engaged with the students, support them (Sakiz, 2012; Tvedt et al., 2021) and teach enthusiastically (Keller et al., 2018). Both teachers' personality and ability to structure the learning environment are essential for the joy in learning. However, to be involved with students in higher education is problematic for several reasons. One problem is that teaching often is organized as lectures with many participants. The ability to notice and confirm each student for the work that is being done becomes a matter of time and reasonable demands on teachers. Another problem is the balancing act already mentioned between support and challenge. In this study, students' lived experiences express different needs for support and these differences need to be weighed against what is reasonable. In addition to student differences, it is crucial whether the emotional learning environment is controlling or autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Guay et al. (2008) advocate a structure with consistent and predictable teaching which is somewhat different from the essential meaning of how the teacher structures the teaching based on clarity but also with varying elements.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present study was to gain knowledge about what joy in learning means and thereby enable a learning environment that stimulates joy. The essential meanings broaden understanding and provide an overall structure that shows how all four meanings should characterize the learning environment and interact: Students gain knowledge, sometimes through difficulties, understand their learning process and achieve something with their knowledge. Students need to influence and control their own learning but also be influenced. Students must be part of a community and feel good in general, both in education and in private. The teacher's role to stimulate joy in learning is to be both inspiring and supportive and to structure the work so that learning is promoted.

This study has contributed with confirmation of results from previous studies that were recurring in several of them. The overall structure through the essence and the nuances through the concrete examples help us understand how the conditions for joy, the importance of seeing, understanding and using learning, autonomy in relation to support, relationships with fellow students and teachers in relation to individual freedom, involves tensions and complex contexts. The essential meanings reveal implications for the design of a learning environment where teachers must balance between inspiring, challenging, supporting, structuring and giving space for students' individuality,

opportunities to act autonomously, understand their learning process and influence it. Relationships with other students and teachers are fundamental for the joy in learning but must contribute to autonomy and not dependence. On the one hand, the essence clearly expresses that all four constituents of the phenomenon are in demand to achieve a joyful learning environment. On the other hand, it is obvious that different essential meanings must be balanced in a way that needs to be decided in relation to the students as individuals and as participants in a learning community. The concrete examples can be helpful for this balancing act, but ongoing collegial discussions and further research are needed. The students' living conditions in private life affect the emotions in learning, which can be valuable to recognize even if teachers are unable to change the situation. A supportive learning environment must be developed based on the needs of individual students and in relation to what are reasonable demands on teachers.

The limitation of this study is that the number of participants is quite low, which partly contributes to fewer variations of contexts. Studies with more variations may contribute to find out if the essential meanings are reliable. Few studies in the area are qualitative and thus desirable. The tendency to focus on achievement as grades and examinations in research requires studies about achievements as personal development and a positive view of learning.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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