


## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The Educational Environment from the Perspective of Schoolchildren and their Experiences of School Stress

El ambiente educativo desde la perspectiva de los escolares y sus experiencias de estrés escolar

O ambiente educacional na perspectiva de escolares e suas vivências de estresse escolar.

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to understand the feelings of stress and the events that produce them in fourth grade children in four public educational institutions in Comuna 11 of Medellín, Colombia. The approach used was qualitative, with a collective case study methodology. It was carried out with 83 students and two teachers in charge of the fourth grade. The experiences that generate tension, fear or sadness in students, related to school activities, should be heard from their own voice and brought to the attention of parents and teachers, in order to advance actions that allow children to develop socioemotional skills, which make it possible to visualize fewer situations as stressful, so that their journey through school is full of enriching experiences for their subjectivity and that of the members of the educational community in general.

### RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es comprender los sentimientos de estrés y los eventos que los producen en los niños y niñas de cuarto grado en cuatro instituciones educativas públicas de la Comuna 11 de Medellín, Colombia. El enfoque utilizado fue el cualitativo, con una metodología de estudio de caso colectivo. Se realizó con 83 estudiantes y dos docentes que tenían a su cargo el cuarto grado. Las vivencias que generan tensión, miedo o tristeza en los estudiantes, relacionadas con las actividades escolares, deben ser escuchadas de su propia voz y puestas en conocimiento de padres de familia y docentes, con el fin de adelantar acciones que les permitan a los niños y niñas desarrollar habilidades socioemocionales, que posibiliten visualizar menos situaciones como estresantes, de tal forma que su transitar por la escuela esté lleno de experiencias enriquecedoras para su subjetividad y la de los miembros de la comunidad educativa en general.

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Conflict of interest:

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## RESUMO

O objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender os sentimentos de estresse e os eventos que os produzem em meninos e meninas da quarta série em quatro instituições educacionais públicas da Comuna 11 de Medellín, Colômbia. A abordagem utilizada foi qualitativa, com metodologia de estudo de caso coletivo. Foi realizado com 83 alunos e duas professoras responsáveis pela quarta série. As experiências que geram tensão, medo ou tristeza nos alunos, relacionadas às atividades escolares, devem ser ouvidas em sua própria voz e levadas ao conhecimento de pais e professores, a fim de avançar em ações que permitam que crianças e meninas desenvolvam habilidades socioemocionais, que tornam possível visualizar situações menos estressantes, de forma que seu trânsito pela escola seja repleto de experiências enriquecedoras para sua subjetividade e dos membros da comunidade educativa em geral.

## Introduction

According to Román and Hernández (2011), one of the demands of the 21st century is the ability to perform activities under pressure that, in some cases, can produce stress in people. These circumstances are experienced by adults, young people, boys and girls in each of the environments in which they interact. According to Trianes (2003), students of all ages are immersed in a world that, at certain times, asks them to develop skills, especially academic skills that are not yet within their reach, a situation that causes them a feeling of inefficiency, fear or sadness in both the family and school environments. These feelings can become a risk factor for the permanence of students in the educational institution, as they make it difficult for them to adapt to an educational context in which they must learn to interact.

Furthermore, according to Trianes (2003), the different experiences lived in the educational environment, such as, for example, evaluative events (written or oral tests), expositions in front of teachers and classmates, forgetting to do homework, being ridiculed in class, changing classrooms or schools, arriving late to school, relationships with teachers and classmates, among other experiences in the educational environment, can cause school stress in students.

That is, beyond the training and socialization of students, the educational institution generates a myriad of relationships and situations that can benefit or harm child development in the school stage, in this sense it is necessary to understand whether the educational spaces generate feelings of stress in their students, the situations that produce it specifically in four public educational institutions of the Comuna 11 Laureles-State of Medellín.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the dynamism, harmony and affectivity with which the bonds between teachers and students are strengthened are highly influenced by the pedagogical practices in the classroom. Hence, it is the teacher, based on his or her educational work, who manages to open the paths of communication with students or, on the contrary, closes them and only becomes an entity of authoritarian supervision for children who, sooner or later, perceive him or her as a source of stress in the school environment. Similarly, on many occasions these educational practices are unconscious and remain hidden, even for the teacher himself, who, in many cases, fails to reflect on the consequences of his actions on the students.

However, this study is relevant because it allowed visualizing a problem in relation to the needs of children in the educational environment, in addition to sensitizing the participating schools about the experiences lived by their students, as a first line intervention against the object of study. This intervention benefited the

children by providing the teachers with tools to provide spaces in which there is a cordial, fluid and trusting interaction between students and between students and teachers, where both feel listened to, free to express their emotions, thoughts and concerns, actions that will enable the children to be an active part of their training process, in addition to opening the way for the students to develop in an integral manner and acquire the necessary skills to successfully integrate into the academic context.

It is evident that the main characteristics of school stress are related to school-related activities that produce tension, anguish or worry in students and are related to behavioral changes, symptomatology and the way of relating to others and their environment. This may be accompanied by a negative variation in the student's academic performance.

### Methodology

This research is qualitative because of its subjective nature, focused on the meaning and experience of the participants. The methodology used is the case study, which according to Simons' (2011) postulates enables "the analysis and interpretation of how people think, feel and act" (p.21). Likewise, it is very useful in the educational field because it provides tools that can be used to make the required adjustments in the teaching process. Specifically, we resorted to the collective case study which, according to Stake (1999), allows us to take into account the perspective in different contexts, particularly for this research were students from different schools that made it possible to understand in depth the topic of interest from the perspective of the participants.

As data collection techniques, 83 semi-structured questionnaires filled out by the students were used to collect information "quickly and simply" (Martínez, 2004, p. 250), in order to have an initial approach to their thoughts about school and their own relationships in it. Likewise, four story-drawing workshops were carried out, each one consisted of reading a story to the students in which the experiences lived by them at school that they made known in the initial questionnaire were presented, then they were asked about the situations with which they identified themselves and thus allow the participants to evoke their experiences, these were applied to groups of approximately 20 boys and girls, carried out by three researchers in order to subdivide the groups of 6 to 8 students. The coding used for the analysis of the instruments is shown in the following table:

	<b>Data Collection Techniques Codes</b>
<b>T.I.E. 1</b>	Story drawing workshop with students Educational Institution 1
<b>C.I.E. 1</b>	Questionnaire students Educational Institution 1
<b>T.I.E. 2</b>	Story drawing workshop with students Educational Institution 2
<b>C.I.E. 2</b>	Questionnaire students Educational Institution 2
<b>T.I.E. 3</b>	Story drawing workshop with students Educational Institution 3
<b>C.I.E. 3</b>	Questionnaire students Educational Institution 3
<b>T.I.E. 4</b>	Story drawing workshop with students Educational Institution 4
<b>C.I.E. 4</b>	Questionnaire students Educational Institution 4
<b>E.D.I.E. 2</b>	Teacher interview Educational Institution 2

The educational institutions provided three different physical spaces, one for each researcher and two hours of class time for the workshop. This allowed a personal approach to the experiences of the students in their school. Finally, a semi-structured interview was used with the teachers, which consisted of a set of closed and open questions about the categories of the research, these allowed to know and deepen the teachers' point of view about the experiences considered by the students as stressful and their perceptions about the educational environment because, according to Alvarez (2003), it is through an intersubjective dialogue that situations and emotions experienced by the participants of a research, in this study in particular the experiences of the children in their educational environment, are understood.

The population considered for this study were four public educational institutions of the five that belong to the comuna 11 of Medellín (Colombia), which in total have 321 students in the fourth grade. The sample was a group of boys and girls per educational institution with an average of 36 students per group. The selection criteria used were: to be fourth grade students, to be between 7 and 9 years old, to belong to one of the educational institutions in the sample and that their parents allowed their participation in the study by means of informed consent. A total of 147 consents were sent after the children showed interest in participating, of which 85 were received.

At the time of the workshop, some did not attend class; therefore, the final sample with which the study was conducted was 83 students. Teachers in charge of fourth grade were also part of the population. The initial intention was to send the questionnaire by e-mail to all teachers in the Comuna under study, but this was not possible due to their multiple obligations. It was then decided to invite the teachers of each of the groups that were part of the sample to participate, of which 2 agreed to be part of this research.

For the analysis of the information, a categorical matrix was made for each educational institution in which the story workshops, the semi-structured questionnaire and the semi-structured interview with teachers were transcribed. The children's experiences and teachers' perspectives were collected. Codes were established for each of the hermeneutic units that responded to the object of study in order to find the thematic axes. The first analysis of the hermeneutic unit consisted in evidencing the similarities and differences in the narratives, followed by a second analysis that allowed finding the individual aspects of each one of them, to finally unite them in the general categories and, thus, understand the essential in depth, in order to answer the research question.

In the ethical considerations, it was essential that the parents signed the informed consent given by the researcher so that their children could participate in the research. Additionally, at the time of the workshop with the students, they were asked if they wished to participate in the activity and it was only carried out with the children who accepted.

## Results

According to the information collected in the application of the instruments and their subsequent triangulation, the analysis was divided into four moments: 1) The school from the voices of the children, 2) school stress according to the perspective of students and teachers, 3) what causes us school stress and 4) when we feel listened to, an unexplored dimension, the latter had not been considered at the beginning, but emerges as significant in the experiences of the students in their school environment. The students' interventions were identified with codes to differentiate one participant from another.

### School from the Children's Voices

The school is a privileged environment in which children live significant experiences, from the different areas of knowledge and dimensions of human development. Together with teachers and peers, they build their identity, develop and identify skills that will be used for their own benefit and that of society.

For the participants, school is an environment that facilitates their cognitive development and learning that lasts over time, as they state in their stories that it is "where you learn more for life" (C.I.E.1); it is a place "to learn important things" (C.I.E.2); where "... they teach me new things..." (C.I.E.3); "for me school is a place where one learns, prepares for university..." (C.I.E.3). However, expressions such as "...without it I could not learn anything..." (C.I.E.3); "it is a magical place... and they fill you with a lot of learning in different ways" (C.I.E.1),



denote a learning process, with an active teacher in the construction of knowledge and a student as a passive agent, who does not visualize the possibility of being a participant in his or her formation. This is due to the implicit or explicit role of transmitter of knowledge, attributed to teachers by the students.

The school is still considered by some of the students as the repository of undisputed knowledge. In contrast to these testimonies, one student conceives school as "a labyrinth because it has many things to learn and to discover" (C.I.E.1), that is, although it is a complex scenario for him, he is willing to put all his effort to unveil what is immersed there and to appropriate the school environment.

Regarding the relationship with their peers, they think that living common situations in the school environment allows them to make friends because it is "a place where you go to share" (C.I.E.1) "where...you make friends and we have fun with them" (C.I.E.1); "it is where I see new people and share" (C.I.E.2). It is confirmed that the school for the population under study is a space that enables the construction of learning through socialization, because it is in the interaction with classmates and teachers that they acquire not only academic knowledge, but also knowledge related to solidarity, empathy, respect, in short, the ways of behaving in society.

Students also mention that "schoolmates are sociable" (C.I.E.4); that school is "joy, friendship, love, fun, it makes me very happy to be with my classmates and teachers" (C.I.E.4). Hence, school is also a space for playfulness, recreation and, in the words of the students, a "wonderful place... that entertains a lot" (T.I.E.3); "...I find it fun" (T.I.E.4) was the expression of several children when referring to their school environment. However, this should be the perception of most students, since, when pleasant emotions are generated in educational contexts, learning is consolidated in a meaningful way by relating cognition and emotion, necessary characteristics for students to be able to use what they have learned throughout their lives.

With respect to the interaction of students with their teachers, it is essential that children feel listened to in their school context. Students agree with these premises when they express: "I think it is good that the teacher listens to everything the children say" (T.I.E.2); "teachers should always... pay attention to us" (T.I.E.1); "...all the teachers are very affectionate and kind" (T.I.E.1). It is observed that children are eager to express themselves, to be taken into account in the decisions that involve them, to establish a bidirectional dialogue with their teachers not only from the cognitive aspect but also from the emotions that emerge in the educational context. These characteristics contribute to an environment in which students feel calm and confident to solve those concerns that arise in their learning process and the need to adapt to school life. This is what a teacher participant affirms when she says: "this generation works to the extent that we give them the floor...we let them express their feelings no matter how they express them because that is what we are here for, to 'mold'..." (E.D.I.E.2).

However, this desire to express feelings or concerns is sometimes repressed by students who said: "I'm not going to ask the teacher because suddenly... she answers me ugly or tells me: no, read it and see how you understand it..." (T.I.E.1); "there are times when the teacher, if you ask a lot of questions, gets angry and starts to scold harder and to explain to you angrily... she treats you shouting when you do not understand something" (T.I.E.1); "Yes! there are very scolding teachers: like one who yelled at us, hit us with a ruler and pulled our hair" (T.I.E.3).

Not providing spaces for dialogue, debate, questioning, is going against the educational environment to which "...all children have the right, I say duty because school is for studying" (C.I.E.4). This participant recognizes that the school is an environment conducive to exercising his right to be educated, established in art. 67 of the Political Constitution of Colombia (1991) and, at the same time, a duty to himself, his educational process and the parents or guardians, who make multiple efforts for him to be educated. Therefore, the teaching process must be carried out in spaces that recognize the diversity of students and enable their participation, with the objective of making them active citizens capable of exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the following participant, the school environment is a "place where they do a lot of tests" (C.I.E.1). For him, school as a place for fun, socialization or meaningful experiences, takes a back seat. What is relevant for this student are the written evaluations necessary to verify the appropriation of a subject. However, it should be kept in mind that this instrument was applied in November, a time when the children were closing their school year, and some were in the process of recovery in order to be promoted to the following year. In this sense, it is understandable that their main concern was to pass the evaluations established by the teachers and thus be able to successfully complete the school year.

However, it cannot be ignored that in educational institutions it is common to use exams as a means of evaluation to identify the learning of students, hence it is pertinent to ask whether this is adequate to establish what has been learned. Thus, what the teacher should seek is that the student learns in a contextualized way and knows what to do with the acquired knowledge.

For other students, school is "something very precious to study and learn" (C.I.E.4), an expression that shows enriched teaching and learning processes for students that allow them to feel valued and value their school environment as fundamental to "...share, and be someone" (C.I.E.1); "...a big space where there are people and many people who...help our brain to learn new things, we can be someone in life and develop ourselves" (C.I.E.4). These last two expressions are striking, referring to school as a necessary place to "be somebody," heard from their parents or teachers, who are aware of the importance of education.

The expression "going to school to be someone in life" by students is supported by Neut, et. al. (2019) and D'Aloisio (2015) who in their research concluded that for students, finishing their school years will allow them to integrate into working life and thus be an active part of the society to which they belong. However, it should be clarified that the studies were conducted with a high school population, a situation that shows that this conception is cemented from the early years, ignoring that, from birth, the human being is a sentient being and in active development with the environment that surrounds him/her. Consequently, one is already someone in relation to another.

Likewise, the school environment is a "place where there are bad and good things" (C.I.E.1), a phrase that concludes this section and makes us think that the school environment is a place of contradictions. In other words, the school is a living social system in which subjectivity is constructed in the midst of intersubjectivity.

Hence, students perceive some school experiences as unpleasant (referred to as bad by students), such as physical and psychological violence among classmates, indifferent treatment by teachers or punishment by parents for not achieving academic objectives; and other pleasant experiences (referred to as good by students), such as: having friends to play with and carry out class activities, feeling listened to by teachers and being an active part of the learning process.

#### **School Stress in the Perspective of Students and Teachers: A Hidden Companion of Children.**

The children expressed that school stress "is when, for example, one is thinking about many things and these things do not let you flow and you feel angry and, at the same time, you feel like you cannot do anything and nothing productive comes to your mind and sadness because you do not know what to do and that is why you may be leaving many things behind and you are very tangled" (T.I.E.1); "When you do not know what to do, whether to count or not to count" (T.I.E.1); "For me, stress is when, for example, you do not know where to start, it makes you angry because suddenly things do not work out or, for example, your mother sends you to do one thing, you are doing it and she sends you another and another, and many things pile up and you do not have time to do things" (T.I.E.1).

These testimonies show that children consider school stress as the inability to respond to the demands of their context due to the demands it presents, which coincides with the definition established by Trianes (2003) who refers to school stress as the educational demands that exceed the students' capacities. For this reason, it is important that teachers dose the level of difficulty presented to students in teaching activities in order not to cause stress in the educational environment that discourages students' learning.

Likewise, school stress is related to the emotional changes that children have in their school environment. From their experiences, students state that: "to be stressed is to be sad" (T.I.E.3); "stress is when... one does not know whether to laugh, cry, or get angry" (T.I.E.1). "Stress is also when you have a lot of accumulated anger, for example, when you are doing something and they send you to do something else and something else, and something else, and something else, you feel angry, and you start answering ugly" (T.I.E.2). "It is like feeling depressed, wanting to run, to do something like talk to someone to de-stress" (T.I.E.3).

The participants state that when they feel stress for school reasons "I feel like a fingernail" (T.I.E.3); "I start to tremble" (T.I.E.3); "...my back hurts" (T.I.E.3); "...when I am in an exam and I don't know what to answer, my head hurts" (T.I.E.2); "I used to say that my belly hurt...my throat, as an excuse not to go to school because the teacher scolded me" (T.I.E.2). Sometimes these changes can be confused with the changes that occur in pre-adolescence (the age range of the population under study) because at this stage they begin to wonder about aspects such as

decision-making and the activities they would like to do in their free time, situations that generate stress for them. Therefore, parents and teachers should get to know the students and be observers of their problems in daily school life; in this regard, one of the teachers participating in this study said:

I have even seen many children talking to themselves, and I go up to them and say: "what are you talking about", they answer "no nothing teach", "But I saw you talking to yourself, come and talk to me". Yes, I have seen and it has happened to me several times. (D.I.E.2)

The teacher shows that she knows her students and recognizes, through intentional observation during breaks, emotional changes in her children, but she does not stop at just identifying them; she goes beyond that by taking an interest in her students' experiences in the school context.

However, there must be a commitment on the part of the entire educational community with the integral formation of the students, that is to say, from the cognitive and emotional aspects. In this sense, it is necessary to establish cross-cutting curricula, in which both areas are important, otherwise the right to education would be violated, where the most important thing should be to take into account the needs of the students.

### What Causes School Stress?

Initially, a semi-structured questionnaire was carried out in which the children expressed the situations that cause them tension at school, which are shown in the following summary table:

Situations that cause stress (SCE)	Type of stressor
Bad grades, not knowing or not understanding a subject, lots of homework, exams. When there is nothing to do because it is not an interesting subject to teach.	Studying a stressful task.
Feeling lonely or bored, when classmates judge with words or looks, changing schools, when they do not listen or pay attention to us, not expressing my feelings, fights or mistreatment. Teachers who do not help to solve an argument with classmates.	My relationship with others, the children's perspective.

It is evident that the situations causing school stress in children are varied and depend on how they perceive their educational context. These situations cause a feeling of displeasure and discomfort in people regardless of their age. Children expressed feeling annoyed, frustrated or distressed by aspects related to their school environment such as academics, interaction with students and teachers, and structural aspects of their school. The following is a narrative of the participants' experiences, classified into two subcategories: studying a stressful task and my relationship with others: the children's perspective.

### Studying: A Stressful Task

School activities, specifically written evaluative tests and homework sent home, are one of the situations that cause the most stress in children, with this postulate the participants in this study agree when they state that they feel school stress:

When, for example, one day you get homework in all your notebooks and you didn't remember that you had homework in other notebooks, then you do the homework of those days and you go through your notebooks and see that you have more homework, you put it there... Then you don't notice that you have exams and things accumulate "mmm" and it's more difficult for you to do them. (T.I.E.1)

Like this participant, other children agreed in expressing that: "at my other school they gave me a lot of homework, they exploited me too much, things didn't even make sense anymore" (T.I.E.2); "a lot of homework at school because you also want to go play, have lunch, spend time with people, play soccer, be at a family reunion, but you have to do that homework until late" (T.I.E.3); "because sometimes when I don't do my homework I get stressed and when I think they are going to ask me to do it I feel very bad" (T.I.E.3); "because sometimes when I don't do my homework I get stressed and when I think they are going to ask me to do it I feel very bad" (T.I.E.3)." (T.I.E.4).

It can be seen in these narratives that the number of homework assignments sent home sometimes does not allow students to dedicate time to other activities considered fundamental, specifically sharing with family and friends. In relation to this, one teacher expressed that:

...In the first few days, we teachers are not really aware of the importance of dosing homework, so I give the children a science assignment, but it so happens that the social studies teacher gave them another one and the technology teacher gave them another one, so weeks went by with a pile of homework. I saw that this was also generating stress in the children. Then I tried to put only the tasks when I saw that the time for X or Y reason: meetings, stoppages or whatever, could not cover a subject, so I tried to consult them to be able to socialize and move forward a little... (D.I.E.2)

The teacher's interest in her students' concerns regarding the number of homework assignments helps students to remain motivated over time in their learning processes and contributes to their adaptation to their school environment. Therefore, teachers should be aware that it is not the amount of homework that determines student learning, but rather how meaningful, motivating and contextualized it is for their students.

Additionally, the children stated that: "I also feel very stressed because I got a bad grade and I think: Oh no! they are going to scold me at home" (T.I.E.1); when earning "...a bad grade I get stressed, I get tense, I worry" (C.I.E.1). Another participant commented that:

...I didn't want to go to school because I hadn't done my homework... My mom said to me: why don't you want to go if you play with your friends very well and you are happy every day? I told her that I hadn't done my homework... I felt sad because I knew I was going to get a 1 and I also felt worried because my mom was going to scold me. (T.I.E.2)

It is evident that, for the children, not doing their homework well generates concern because of the scolding they receive from their parents. Similarly, other participants expressed: "when they give me a homework assignment and I do it, I get scared because I don't know if I will get it right" (T.I.E.3); "I feel very anxious and nervous about what the teacher is going to say, about the grade, although she is very kind" (T.I.E.3).

It is found that there are different causes for feeling stressed by this situation, the first, for not knowing how the parents will react to the results obtained in it, the second, the self-demand of the students in their learning processes and, the third, for not knowing the teacher's expectations; one or the other will depend on the relationship that the students have with their parents, educators and their perception of effectiveness in the academic activities. Therefore, it is necessary to dose the students' academic responsibilities and establish a bidirectional communication between teachers-students and student-student, because it will allow children to integrate into the educational system by feeling capable of facing the challenges that school brings.

In relation to the written evaluations, the children expressed feeling stress: "when they take an exam it is like the tension that one has... especially the moment before while they are handing it out because it is as if it is going to come, what am I going to put?" (T.I.E. 1). In a similar experience, it was stated that: "I had not studied for the exam, and I was very afraid of losing it, so I told my mother that I did not want to go to school and I went to school and I got a 3.

Likewise, other participants expressed that: "last year I felt stressed by some tasks or exams we were given" (T.I.E.3); "because I did not know the answers to the exam, I feel anxious for not getting a good grade" (T.I.E.4). Here the evaluation appears as a source of school stress for the children, specifically the written one, since it demands a process of memorization of more data; however, successfully passing this type of evaluation, as already mentioned, is not a guarantee of significant learning for the students:

...My way of evaluating is different, I do not evaluate the children in writing... for me, I try to get them to participate and do activities so that I can realize that they do know, by going out to the board, round table, dialogues, because I know the stress that a sheet of paper and a piece of paper generates. My evaluations are more for them to tell me what they feel, if something happens in the environment, as if they have an opinion, and to give an account of that, not theoretical things. (D.I.E.2)

It is observed that the teacher uses different strategies to verify what her students have learned, actions that make her classroom a space of trust and support, in which the students have the possibility of recognizing which type of evaluation adjusts to their learning style, according to their cognitive, emotional, and conceptual skills developed so far. These dynamics allow them to be less tense in front of the evaluation processes. In contrast to this response, the teacher (D.I.E.4) did not report exams as a source of school stress.



Another aspect that stresses children about academics is the thought of getting a bad grade or receiving a bad grade; in this sense, they said they feel stress "when, for example, you think you are losing something, a subject or a homework... you worry because you feel you are going to repeat the year or lose the evaluation" (T.I.E.1); "I have felt sad when I do not do my homework or work and they give me a bad grade..." (T.I.E.1). Likewise, one of the participants commented that:

...when I don't practice at night because I have to go to bed early, I tell my mom that I don't want to go because I get too scared. My mom tells me to go to school, that I will do well, to practice there; but there are times when I get a 1.3 because I don't practice at night and I don't get to school early. I feel stressed, sad, bored because I get scared, because my mom scolds me and I get beaten a lot with a cow pat. (T.I.E.2)

These narratives show one of the academic situations that cause the greatest concern among students. However, the lack of time to finish an assignment, the feeling of insecurity as to whether a job was well or poorly done, and the subjects perceived as uninteresting by the students, cannot be left aside as experiences at school that generate stress. It can be seen here that the sources of stress related to academic matters are varied, as well as their causes, among which are: the perception of inefficiency in responding to school commitments, or the fear of the consequences they may receive at home, often translated into physical or verbal punishment.

### **My Relationship with Others: A Child's Perspective**

One of the challenges that the educational environment poses for students in middle school is maintaining good relationships with their peers. These are aspects that can cause stress in students. In relation to these situations, the participating children expressed that: "I felt kind of sad in a school activity because we were making a circle in the activity and a girl left me out of the circle" (T.I.E.4).

Similarly, the students stated that: "when I was little I would go to play with my classmates and they would leave and I would cry, I felt very lonely, but then I found a friend who studied at this school and I came here" (T.I.E.2); "I felt lonely because I had no friends" (T.I.E.2). Likewise, one student mentioned feeling "bored because when he came to school this year he had no friends" (T.I.E.3). It can be inferred from these narratives that for the children, feeling that they are rejected by their peers makes them think that they do not belong there and experience discomfort in their school environment.

Along the same lines, but in relation to the conflicts and mocking situations experienced in their educational environment, one of the students said she felt stress: "when they made me frizzy and here at school they looked at me as if I were a witch and I had to wash them" (T.I.E.1). Referring to this same situation, other participants expressed that: "many times I have felt sad because they bother me, they call me fat, ugly, dumb, idiot, imbecile and push me. When they say that to me I feel angry and at the same time bored" (T.I.E.4); "in another school where I studied, it was terrible, because there everyone fights, they didn't leave me alone, they took my things, they stole them. So I had to put up with it, it was a little difficult, but they put me here and here I am happy" (T.I.E.2); - "That they bully you" -Researcher: What is that? - That they make fun of you, that they hit you, that they take away your breakfast" (T.I.E.2); - "That they make fun of you, that they hit you, that they take away your breakfast" (T.I.E.3).

In the experience lived by the children, it is observed that conflictive relationships with schoolmates are concerns that students have in their daily school life. The teachers who accompany their training processes are not indifferent to these problems, when they say:

As far as I know, the greatest unhappiness is that of some children who are bullied, that for me is the saddest thing, although I can attest that it is not always due to bullying episodes, but I also realize that children have very low self-esteem and it is a concept that is reinforced a lot at home: "is that they are bullying him" because they told him that those glasses he has are very ugly, for example; that is, these are things that children have to have self-esteem, self-esteem to know if I have my ugly glasses what does it matter, I need them to see. (D.I.E.2)

The teacher at I.E.4 agrees that one of the problems faced by her students is that "they call them names and hit each other". This problem causes school stress and teachers must be attentive to it, as well as to the relationships they establish with the children. So that they do not become another source of tension in the school context.

The stress-generating spaces are those where students feel worried about having "a scolding teacher because one does not know what to say and is afraid of being scolded by the teacher" (T.I.E.2), and where

teachers and students are treated with nicknames, as expressed by the following participant: "the teacher... told us that she had a zoo, that we were: I was a chicken, he was a lion..." (T.I.E.2). In addition to school environments in which students are exposed to the criticism of their peers, as in the experience of one of the students when the teacher asked "the children to raise their hands for those who had lost the exam and I raised my hand, there were about 4 children and one feels bad, sad because the other children look at him badly" (T.I.E.1) or "because sometimes it is very hard to study and we do not understand almost..." (C.I.E.3).

According to the perception of the participants, school stress occurs because, in some cases, teachers use teaching strategies without stopping to analyze whether they allow the understanding of the subject by the students, their relevance in terms of the topic to be addressed and the characteristics of the students themselves. These educational spaces discourage children's participation in their educational process and, over time, can lead to students dropping out of school because they do not feel welcome in the school.

In contrast to these experiences, the testimony of one of the participants emerges: "one day I did not understand a subject and I did not want to ask the teacher because I was very sad and sad and I cheered up, I asked the teacher and I understood" (T.I.E.1). According to the type of relationship established between students and teachers, these experiences will be considered by them as a source of school stress or, on the contrary, as a support to overcome a circumstance that generates it. That is to say, the teacher's empathy or not for his/her students, referring to academic difficulties and their relationships with peers and teachers, is considered fundamental for the schoolchildren who participated in this study. In this sense, the teacher is an essential part in the mediation of conflicts in the educational environment, in order to contribute to generate harmonious spaces that favor the integral development of the students.

Finally, in this subcategory, other aspects that are considered by students as a source of school stress and that are part of this classification are: damaging something at school or a classmate, getting up late and not arriving on time to school, comments and possible fights between parents as a result of school responsibilities not successfully overcome. These situations should be of interest to guardians, teachers and directors, with the aim of accompanying children in reducing these experiences in the educational environment and thus enable students to develop all their skills.

#### **When we Feel Listened to: An Unexplored Dimension**

This category arises from the expressions of the students who participated in this study. Human beings are people with reason and emotion, aspects that cannot be separated when generating spaces for learning. Hence, it is suggested to carry out activities that achieve significant cognitive development and feelings of well-being (joy, love, hope, amazement, fun) in the students.

An example of these is the interactive technique of the drawn story used in the framework of this research, in which the children expressed feeling good "because the story talks about a boy who liked to sing and play" (T.I.E.4); "...we listened to a story that helps us to do mental exercise of the brain" (T.I.E.2); "I felt good because I learned new things" (T.I.E.3) "...it helps us to develop our writing skills" (T.I.E.2); "good, because we draw" (T.I.E.2); "...because we share our experiences at school with our friends, we do other activities" (T.I.E.3), the activity allowed students to foster creativity, strengthen reading and writing processes, and acquire knowledge they did not have.

They also mentioned feeling "happy because the story was very good and I like to be told stories, in relation to expressing what I feel, I have no words" (T.I.E.4). This expression shows that emotions, especially pleasant ones, transversalize and guide meaningful learning, as there is a greater commitment and involvement in the training process, derived from the feeling of well-being that it produces in the students and the bond of trust between teacher-student.

One way to do this is to listen to the students' experience with the activities carried out in the classroom. This aspect is valued by the children and their teachers, when they state that they felt good in the activity "...because they listened to us and we could express our feelings and get our sorrows out" (T.I.E.2); "good, because we felt free to express our feelings" (T.I.E.2); "...relaxed" (T.I.E.3); "let off steam" (T.I.E.3); "...because we express ourselves and as children we need help to be able to express our feelings and emotions well" (T.I.E.4), "...the activity helped us to express our feelings and to have the courage to say things that we did or that have been done to us" (T.I.E.4); "...very funny the activity because one can feel stressed, angry, grumpy anyway... We have to tell someone to express ourselves" (T.I.E.4); "...the activity helped us to express our feelings and to have the courage to say things that we did or that have been done to us" (T.I.E.4).

Providing spaces for students to express their feelings in the classroom generates an environment of cohesion and trust, conducive to meaningful learning that will be used in the different contexts in which students interact. These feel the need to express the sadness generated by events in the school environment, evidence of this are the stories of the participants in which they mention:

"I felt so happy that I still have a little memory that happened: that they were beating me 'calvazos', now I have nothing to talk about sadness, I am fine" (T.I.E.4); "very happy, I was able to vent too many things, now I have very, but very few things to vent; I felt very happy that people listened to me" (T.I.E.4); "I was happy because I was able to get out the things I had stored up" (T.I.E.4); "good, because I was able to tell about a problem that happened to me with joy, at the end a little sadness, remembering what happened to me, it made me sad because I remembered the moment..." (T.I.E.4); "well, because with the activity I was able to express what I had inside... I would not have said it in front of a teacher if he did not ask us or if we were not doing this activity because it makes you sad and you do not want to express things like that because it makes you angry, you start to cry" (T.I.E.4); "...I really liked the activity because you taught us many things that I am going to leave in my head so that I can keep them in my head and keep them in mind so that we can calm down when we are crying, when we are sad or when we are tense with anger" (T.I.E.4).

In short, the children consider that the activity significantly enriched their school experience by providing them with a space in which to express their feelings about the academic activities and relationships that are woven in the school environment. It also allowed them to become aware that "...we no longer have to keep quiet with that feeling and we could not move forward because of the things we have in mind...we have to let it out and tell a responsible adult" (T.I.E.4); "...this activity... teaches the children to say things and not to keep quiet, they should seek help" (T.I.E.4), so much so that one of the participating girls dared to comment that she suffered sexual abuse in her family context and made it possible to activate the comprehensive care route to protect her.

If students can trust the adults who accompany their education process, to discuss their concerns about the tasks of their school environment and the relationships with their peers, they will be less vulnerable to situations of bullying or stress at school, as well as to experiences of mistreatment that go against their fundamental rights in any of the environments they inhabit. For this reason, it is imperative to build spaces in the school, where children can express themselves with confidence without neglecting respect for others, to work for educational communities that listen to the voices of schoolchildren and give them the leading role they demand in society.

### **Discussion**

For students, school is a place provided with knowledge that is attended to acquire learning that cannot be accessed in other spaces. This statement coincides with

...particular forms of relationship of children and young people, ways of interaction that are conditioned by the idea of a teacher possessing knowledge and students who need to learn through the teaching of a series of contents specific to the areas. (Becerra, et al., 2016, p. 30)

The above is a sign that the concept of school as the owner of irrefutable knowledge that provides training spaces where students are passive subjects waiting to acquire the knowledge expected by teachers, parents or guardians is still in force.

Likewise, for students, school is a place of encounters that provides spaces to relate with teachers and classmates. These relationships make it easier for students to access learning that is not explicit in the curriculum, framed, as expressed by the participants, in play and games, that is, they are experiences that on most occasions generate feelings of well-being and happiness in the children. A similar result was evidenced in the study conducted by De Pauw, et al. (2018), when observing that the educational institution allows students to share with the other (teacher or student), establish relationships and build meaningful learning specific to each experience, which acquire a special connotation when they generate joy. Accordingly, learning environments that generate feelings of joy and enjoyment in students make possible the appropriation of implicit and explicit knowledge in each pedagogical intervention.

However, the school is a place that demands from each of the subjects that interact there (directors, teachers and students), the ability to adapt to relate to others and adjust to the learning rhythms proposed by the teacher.

Hence, the teacher, being the leader of the interactions that take place in the school environment, is the one who sets the example in dealing with students and becomes a role model for children when relating with classmates. This aspect coincides with the research conducted by Bustamante and Urrea (2015) when they state that:

...the teacher's job is... to generate friendly and trusting environments, where the necessary and fundamental competencies can be deployed in order to assume life and society from a coherent and dignified human condition. It is not only a commitment to learning, it is above all a commitment to mankind. (p. 225)

In this sense, the school fosters learning beyond the contents of each of the subjects, all transversalized by the cognitive, corporal, ethical, aesthetic, communicative, socio-affective and spiritual dimensions that are part of every human being.

In contrast to the above, a school environment in which students do not feel free to talk openly with their teachers for fear of being scolded or ridiculed in front of their classmates, generates in them feelings of worry, anguish and a lower capacity to regulate their emotions. In agreement with the above premise are Ahnert, et al., (2012) in demonstrating in their study "how critical students' relationships with their teachers can be with respect to their stress management" (p.261). If these are authoritarian in style, children perceive a greater number of events as stressful in the classroom and focus their energy on establishing better interactions with their teachers. This generates a decrease in their effort towards learning processes by affecting their ability to concentrate.

With respect to stress, there is evidence that it is a construct, in most cases, object of analysis in adulthood, it is stated that making reference to it since childhood or in the school environment is just a fashion. However, when children are asked about the meaning of the word stress, they clearly define it as the set of conflicting emotions and not knowing what to do in each situation. They also relate it to symptomatology such as: headache, backache or stomachache in worrying situations.

These aspects coincide with the manifestations of stress established in the research conducted by Martínez (2014), who assures that in childhood it is possible to experience stressful situations in the family, school, and social environments, and if they prevail over time, they affect the integral development of schoolchildren. Regarding school stress, children relate it to the activities of their academic work, for example, the high volume of homework, not having good relationships with classmates and teachers, among other aspects. With this definition they agree, Aguila, et al. (2015), when concluding in their study that school stress is described as the experiences lived in the educational environment that cause discomfort, concern, or fear to students.

Regarding the situations that generate concern and school stress, the participants of this research stated that conflictive relationships with classmates and teachers, the scolding received from their parents for failing evaluative events at school or from their teachers inside the classroom and the number of tasks that exceed their capacity, are events that frequently generate discomfort in the daily school life in accordance with the stage of development in which the students find themselves.

In agreement with the above, we find research by Rey, et al. (2017); Gutiérrez and Lemos (2016); Encina and Ávila (2015); Maturana and Vargas (2014) and Trianes, et al. (2014); stating that the school environment demands from learners skills to adapt and relate and not having the necessary resources to establish harmonious relationships and overcome academic challenges in each of the grades, results in feelings of school stress in children. In this same line, Wang and Fletcher (2017), concluded that it is necessary to train teachers in skills to establish emotional connections with their students that allow children to visualize them as support in their training process.

Therefore, setting aside spaces during class days for students to develop their socioemotional skills will allow children to integrate into their educational environment. In this sense, one of the strategies that can be developed is to have a moment at the beginning of the class for students to express how they feel and the reason for that feeling. This activity will allow them to recognize themselves and others, in addition to contributing to learning, since the school will be a space in which students are an active part in the construction of knowledge.

Another school event that generates tension in the school for the participants is the written evaluation. Here it is worth asking whether the evaluation is an exercise of power by the teacher perceived by the students as an act of punishment? Because the ways of assessing children's knowledge, especially written tests in



some contexts, are focused on the efficient result of the teaching and learning processes without regard to what the student learns or the diversity that exists in the classroom.

In agreement with this statement, Maturana and Vargas (2014) and Trianes (2003) found that evaluative processes are one of the experiences considered stressful by schoolchildren after relating the low grades obtained with scolding and punishment in their family environment and with criticism or rejection by their classmates.

In addition, it was observed that in the face of experiences that produce emotional imbalances in children in the school environment, students make a cognitive evaluation and change their behavior in order to regain calm in moments of concern generated by the multiple responsibilities that arise from their role as students.

### **Conclusions**

The educational community in general must assume the challenge of changing the paradigm that limits the students' actions to passive subjects waiting for the transmission of knowledge and the indications of their teachers, a condition that makes students not very autonomous in their training processes, towards a conception of a school in which teachers and students perceive themselves as active participants in the construction of multidisciplinary knowledge.

To achieve this end, it is not advisable to fragment the teaching and learning processes; it is recommended to have a holistic vision of them and make use of those experiences that are outside the curriculum to enrich and strengthen the links between teachers-students and student-student, This will benefit a learning environment in which the tension experienced by the students is low and, therefore, the children will see the school as a favorable space to develop their skills to the maximum and participate in their training process.

Similarly, teachers are required to provide spaces where children feel welcomed, listened to and valued, actions that will result in harmonious educational environments, with fewer conflictive situations between teachers and students, and students among themselves. This situation allows them to feel welcomed in their school environment and to go through school with experiences of well-being.

On the other hand, it is concluded that the school environment does generate stress in the children who were part of this research; therefore, parents and teachers, being the guardians of the children's training processes, should pay attention to its manifestations in the educational environment and the changes in the students' moods, their physical ailments and concerns in the daily school life, in order to help them identify situations that cause them school stress as well as the necessary skills to cope with it. Actions that ensure better educational environments for the deployment of all the capabilities of students.

In turn, the experiences that generate tension, fear or sadness in students related to school activities should be made known to parents and teachers, in order to take actions that allow children to develop socioemotional skills, and thus visualize fewer situations as stressful, so that their journey through school is full of experiences of well-being, which enrich their subjectivity and that of the members of the educational community in general.

Thus, this study provides a broad perspective of the meaning of school for students and valuable information for teachers that will allow them to make the school environment a protective and facilitating environment for the acquisition of the skills required by children to integrate into society as the ultimate goal of the educational process.

In addition, a change is required in the way of thinking and carrying out the evaluation, since it is one of the situations that generates the most school stress and transcends its punitive nature to a formative evaluation that allows students to take charge of their learning process, by recognizing the aspects in which they should improve and the actions they can take to, beyond passing the courses, acquire knowledge that will be useful in their daily lives, regardless of the context in which they find themselves.

The call is not only for teachers as leaders of the teaching and learning processes, but also for state entities, who should evaluate the possibility of reducing the number of students per classroom with the aim of reducing the number of students.

The call is not only for teachers as leaders of the teaching and learning processes, but also for state entities, who should evaluate the possibility of reducing the number of students per classroom so that teachers can provide personalized attention to students and thus facilitate the maximum development of their capabilities. Similarly, the state should improve the infrastructure in terms of lighting, ventilation and have

enough green areas for children to access these in the middle of the school day, since exposing students to natural environments after experiencing stress due to school responsibilities, allows them to restore their emotional balance. Likewise, it is recommended to establish as mandatory within the curriculum and transversal to the contents of each of the areas of knowledge, activities that promote the development of socioemotional skills, essential in all contexts where students live.

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