

# PHENOMENOLOGICAL WAY OF THINKING IN THE SCHOOL

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**Abstract:** Education should take into account the phenomenological investigation of individuals in order to encourage students to create and construct their own knowledge. It is known that current educational system mainly approves of objective knowledge and phenomenological ways of thinking of individuals cannot be approved. Thus, individuals leave their own naturalistic ways of thinking and learning that it creates serious problems in current educational system related to students' learning in school. This study aims at reflecting the subjective knowledge, that is perceptions of students concerning "desire of learning" and also analyzing what those students felt and experienced in reflecting their subjective knowledge related to the given concept. The data were collected from the twelve master students studying at Institute of Educational Sciences between 2006 and 2010. It can be said that the students reach their own meaning related to the concept of "desire of learning". The phenomenological way of thinking and reflecting should be covered in school study in order to create and construct the authentic knowledge of self.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, desire of learning, reflection, creation, construction, knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

Students catch personal meanings while they are following the same instruction and they interpret the same event in different ways. Thus, the interpretation of experience differs from student to student in the learning-teaching process. Differentiation of meaning of the phenomenon in the learning-teaching process may be interpreted as the evidence of phenomenological way of thinking based on individual differences. Akio (2004, 103) stated that "people give personal meaning to each situational experience and people interpret the same event in different ways." However, education does not pay attention to students' phenomenological thinking and reflecting while they are studying in the school. It means that phenomenological learning occurs

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incidentally and naturally in education. The individuals follow their own ways of thinking which are naturalistic features of individuals while experiencing about the phenomenon.

Phenomenology always asks the question of “What is the nature or meaning of phenomenon based on perceptions of an individual?” An individual focuses on the unique meaning of phenomenon for phenomenological reflection. Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. According to Spinelli (2006, 2) “phenomenology as a method of enquiry into all aspect of lived experience and mental activity. The task of phenomenological investigation became that of illuminating and disclosing the meaning structures of lived experiences.” Lived experiences of individuals are main sources of the individualistic inquiry, creation and construction of their own meaning. The inquire focuses on the meaning of experiences continually gain new meaning in the individualistic perception of life.

Phenomenological inquiry begins by sensing, imagining, feeling and thinking of the students. Louchakova, (2005, 88) stated that phenomenological inquiry “works off the descriptions of ordinary, everyday reality, variously referred to as the ordinary language, the everyday life, the main reality, the natural attitudes, a common sense, and the everyday world”. These are based on individualistic perception and they are related to perceptions of individuals’ lives. According to Cozma (2007), individuals continuously within creativity act as construction-reconstruction, creation-recreation and interpretation-reinterpretation of phenomenon in creating their own meaning. This is creative act is a phenomenological investigation and search for meaning for them as participant in the construction and revealing reality, the world. Individuals become self-creator and meaning-maker during phenomenological investigation of the meaning. Education should take into account the phenomenological investigation of the learning experience about ordinary and everyday reality of learners in order to encourage students as learners initially to join learning experiences in any learning activities. Vandenberg stated that “education is ... the discovery of one’s own possibilities of being ... it is the enabling of unalienated (that is, authentic) existence.” (Cited in Rau, 2008). And also Tymieniecka (2008) stated that education can be defined as an attempt of fostering the creative planning of human existence. If education is defined as creative planning of individuals’ development and existence, learning activities must be designed

according to reflections of individuals' meaning of the phenomenon by means of self-directed learning for self-actualization of the individuals.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Phenomenological ways of thinking of individuals cannot be approved in educational system because individualistic way of thinking includes subjectivity of them. However, the current educational system approves of only gaining and reflecting of objective knowledge but not the subjectivity of individuals. It means that individuals as a whole are beings split into two parts as a subjective and objective being in educational system. According to Tjellander (2000, 139) if the self is divided into two worlds, individuals cannot be healthy and happy beings. Thus, individuals leave their own naturalistic ways and subjectivity. Then they prefer desirable ways of thinking and objectivity in educational system. This creates serious problems in current educational system related to students' learning and development in school. Students lose their naturalistic and phenomenological way of thinking, creating and reflecting their own meaning after the long time studies in educational system.

### PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study aimed at determining the master level students' difficulties of the application of phenomenological way of thinking, creating and reflecting their own meaning. The aims of this paper are to reveal the students' authentic meaning of the concept of the "desire of learning" based on students' own experiences and students' difficulties of the application of phenomenological way of thinking, creating and reflecting their own meaning by means of the phenomenological writing. The research focused on students' experiences within two activities through two research questions as follows.

- The first question was "What is the meaning of 'desire of learning' for you? Please write your own meaning related to the concept of "desire of learning." (Activity 1)
- The second question was "What did you feel during your own phenomenological writing about the meaning of desire of learning? Please write your own experiences related to the first activity." (Activity 2)

The purpose of the first activity was to reveal the students' own concept of "desire of learning" related to their learning situations based on their own experiences.

Following the first activity, they did the second activity concerning the description of their own problems related to their phenomenological writing. The second question and the second activity were related to the first activity. The first question and activity were related to the personal meaning of “desire of learning” and the second question and activity aimed at clarifying the students’ experiences regarding their obstacles or happiness while writing their own meaning of the desire of learning. The second question aimed at revealing individuals’ problems of phenomenological thinking and reflecting their everyday reality related to life-world.

## METHOD

### RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, the phenomenological research method was applied during the data collection and analysis of the results. “Phenomenological research is needed in the study of education to ground education in the being of children and youth by describing the essential characteristics of educational phenomena” (Vandenberg, 2002, 589). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological studies focus on a specific topic posing a question or problem to guide the study. Phenomenological research deals with phenomenological description that an individual gives to a situation. Thus, phenomenological research was used to reveal students’ reflections about the research questions. Two main stages were applied to determine the students’ difficulties during the application of phenomenological inquiry in their studies. While studying with the students, the two main stages were followed in this study:

- The concept of phenomenology, phenomenological approach and phenomenological way of thinking in education discussed with the students.
- Aim and process of research explained for the students. Then the students did the first and second activities.

At the beginning of the course, the students had no idea of phenomenological way of thinking and reflecting. For this reason, the first stage was related to sharing some information about phenomenology with the students. It included the concept of phenomenology, knowledge and explanation of phenomenological approach, phenomenological research and some examples of phenomenological studies related to phenomenological reflections of individuals. The second stage included applications of

phenomenological research method with two different activities which were related to two research questions.

#### PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected from the twelve master students studying at the Institute of Educational Sciences in Turkey between 2006-2010 in order to understand master students' meaning of the concept of "desire of learning" and experiences of students regarding phenomenological writing. It is known that writing is an important technique for reflecting the individual perception, feeling, thought and meaning. "Writing first and foremost is a dialectic process of self-interpretation: of confronting oneself in self-reflective activity with the phenomenon of focus" (Saevi & Eilifsen, 2008, 3).

The research was carried out within the first five weeks of the semester. In the third week of the semester, the students and researcher got closer to each other and got acquainted. The first stage was done in the first four weeks and the second stage was done in the fifth week. During the first four weeks, the researcher and students discussed the phenomenology and also in the fourth week, the researcher described the research process and its aim. After the explanation of the research process, the researcher gave the consent form to the students specifying the acceptance to participate in the research which was designed to express their own experiences regarding the research questions. In the fifth week, the researcher explained the first activity and then the students began to write their own meaning about the desire of learning. As soon as they had finished the first activity immediately, the researcher explained and gave the second activity to the students and after this explanation, they did the second activity without leaving the first activity session. Before the beginning of the activities, the researcher did not give any information to the students about the second activity. It means that during the first activity, the students did not know the second activity and they only focused on the first activity while writing their own meaning of the desire of learning. This was very important to reflect about their immediate experiences. The students did not write their names or student numbers on their writing papers in order to feel free and reflect their own authentic meanings and experiences.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative research method and content analysis were applied in the research. The data analysis was carried out to identify themes, categories and patterns from the two activities of participants. All of the writing of the students were read, coded and compared by the researcher and two experts in order to clarify the thematic framework. For reliability, the transcripts were also coded by two experts, the comparisons between the researcher's and experts' coding was done and agreements and disagreements were assessed. The reliability of the study was found as %90. Sample quotes from the participants' phenomenological reflection are presented within the text in order to provide supporting evidence to the reader.

## FINDING AND RESULTS

The data were collected through two main steps based on the first and second activity. The first part of the phenomenological writing refers to the present-day experiences of the students. The second part of the phenomenological writing refers to either positive or negative perceptions about the first part of the phenomenological writing by inner and unique experiences of the students. After having read and analyzed all of the students' reflections, two tables and themes were prepared depending on the research questions and students' activities. Table 1 shows the abstract meaning and central themes of the "desire of learning" and Table 2 is related to the experiences of phenomenological writing of Step 1. In order to present some student reflections from their writing, just one or two sentences were quoted as sample.

### Activity 1

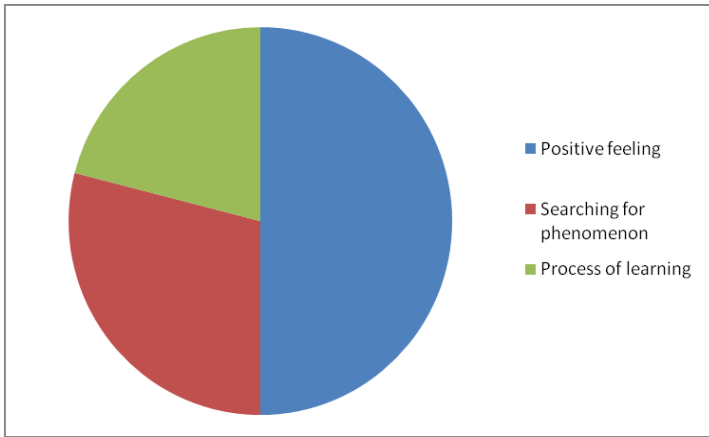
The first activity in which the students explained their own meaning of the concept of "desire of learning" was related to the students' writing about the first research question. During the first activity, the researcher asked a question "What is meaning of the desire of learning for you?" The purpose of the first activity was to reveal the students' own concepts of the "desire of learning" related to their learning situations based on their own experiences.

Table 1. Students' Phenomenological reflections of the meaning of the concept of "desire of learning"

Themes and sub-themes	N
<b><i>Positive feeling</i></b>	<b>14</b>
Happiness	6
Pleasure	4
Enjoyment	3
Love	1
<b><i>Searching for phenomenon</i></b>	<b>8</b>
Curiosity	4
Eagerness	2
Intensity	1
Intuition	1
<b><i>Process of learning</i></b>	<b>6</b>
Endless process	2
Motivation	1
Long journey	1
Forever wishes	1
Ceaseless	1

As it is seen in Table 1, the students' writings reflect their meaning about the desire of learning based on their own perceptions of the concept. Three main themes that emerged based on students' reflections about the meaning of "desire of learning" as "*positive feeling, searching for phenomenon and process of learning*" are related to students' favorable meanings. Each of the themes has some sub-themes as seen in Table 1. For example, the first theme is related to the students' positive feelings including sub-themes such as "*happiness, pleasure, enjoyment and love.*" The students' feelings carry positive meanings which are essential for a learning situation. Eight of the students' reflections focus on searching process for the phenomenon while searching the meaning of their own desire of learning such as "*curiosity, eagerness, intensity and intuition.*" Six of the students' reflections focus on the process of learning while explaining their own desire of learning such as "*endless process, motivation, long journey, forever wishes and ceaseless.*" Figure 1 shows the overall reflections of the students. The number of the total reflections related to the first question is 28. If we analyze all of the

reflections of the students, it can be seen that Figure 1 shows the percentages of central themes.



*Figure 1. Reflection of the students' perceptions related to the meaning of the concept of "desire of learning"*

Phenomenological reflections of the students include three main perspectives. The first one is related to the students' positive feelings in the learning process and half of the students' reflections (50%) included positive feelings of the students. The second one is related to the students' reflection (29%) including search for the phenomenon regarding learning, and the third one is related to the students' reflections (21%) including the definition about the process of learning the concepts of the desire of learning. It can be said that the students' own meaning of the concept of the desire of learning they reach, which is an abstract reflection about their experience, is real. In sum all of the students it means twelve students describe their desire of learning in connection with positive and favorable feeling. This result is very interesting and it can be interpreted that all of the master degree students have favorable feelings about their learning, and their program is based on their needs, aims and desire of learning. Some quotations from the students' reflections can be seen below.

*"The desire of learning and the learner start to give a form to each other just like lovers do. ...It is a long journey which has no end...."*  
 (Student 1)



“... *Desire of learning is a ceaseless wish, when we connect the subject with learning....Desire of learning promoted my curiosity about learning topics. ...*” (Student 3)

“*In general, I can say that I had a desire of learning about what I was curious ... I try to learn more about the subject. ... Desire of learning seems like a motivation tool ... Desire of learning may turn into the ambition of learning. ...*” (Student 7)

## Activity 2

The second activity was related to the description of students' experiences such as happiness, problems or obstacles related to their phenomenological writing while they were doing the first activity. The researcher asked a question “What did you feel during your own phenomenological writing about the meaning of the desire of learning? Please write your own experiences related to the first activity. The second activity included the reflections of the students' experiences about the phenomenological writing related to the first activity and they can be seen in Table 2. They experienced some obstacles that caused some problems while reflecting their own understanding of the desire of learning. The emerged themes concerning the students' reflections can be categorized into four groups; “*difficulties, positive feelings, new and different experiences, and confusion.*”

Table 2. Students' experiences about phenomenological writing while doing the first activity

<b>Themes and sub-themes</b>	<b>N</b>
<b><i>Difficulties</i></b>	<b>19</b>
Writing without thinking	4
Reflecting their own ideas	3
Bringing their own thoughts together	3
Insufficient expression of their own thoughts	3
Being afraid of writing freely	3
Writing more	2
Building up their own ideas	1
<b><i>Positive feelings</i></b>	<b>9</b>
Happiness	4
Writing freely	2
Feeling great	2
Relaxation	1

<b><i>New and different experiences</i></b>	
A new way of reflection	3
New experience	2
Different experience	2
Interesting experience	1
<b><i>Confusion</i></b>	
Getting disturbed by somebody else's comment	2
Hesitation in reflecting their own perception	2
Misunderstanding the activities	2

When Table 2 is analyzed, it is seen that the total four main themes emerge related to the students' reflections. Almost half of the students' reflections (45 %) show that the students had difficulties or problems such as "*writing without thinking, reflecting their own ideas, bringing their own thoughts together, insufficient expression of their own ideas, being afraid of writing freely, writing more and building up their own ideas*" while doing the first activity. These difficulties must have created obstacles for the students while reflecting their perceptions about the first activity. Also, these difficulties might have been barriers to the students' free reflection of their own bases. The second theme on students' reflections (21%) is related to the positive feelings about their phenomenological writing such as "*happiness of the reflection, writing freely, feeling great, and relaxations*" and they must have supported the students' free reflections of their own bases.

The third theme about the students' reflections (19 %) of their own experience is related to the phenomenological writing and phenomenological way of thinking such as "*A new way of thinking, new experience, different experience and interesting experience.*" As it is seen in the third theme, the students had new experiences during the research on phenomenological way of thinking, and reflecting this way of thinking was new and different for the students. The fourth theme is related to the confusion about doing the first activity such as "*getting disturbed by somebody else's comments, hesitation in reflecting their own perceptions, and misunderstanding the activities.*" The fourth theme shows that some of the students (15 %) had confusion about what the researcher explained and discussed on phenomenology, phenomenological reflection and phenomenological way of thinking in the first four weeks of this research. It is strange why the students hesitated to reflect their own perceptions since they did not write their

names on the paper while doing the first and second activity aiming at supporting free reflection of their own perceptions.

Figure 2 shows the overall reflections of the students. The number of the total reflections related to the first question is 42. When all of the reflections of the students are analyzed, it can be seen that Figure 2 shows the percentages of central themes.

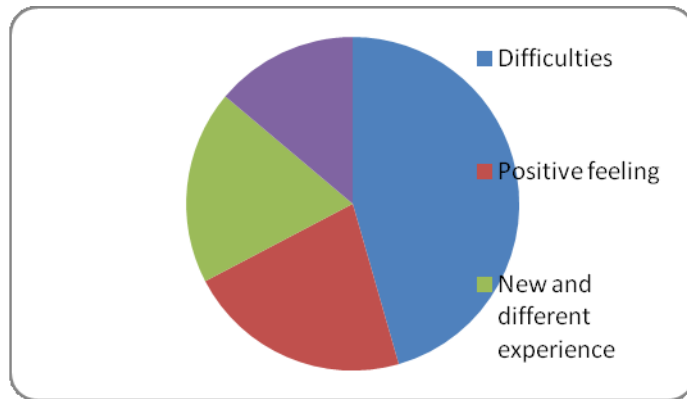


Figure 2. Reflections of the students' experiences related to phenomenological writing regarding the first activity.

Phenomenological reflections of the students' include four main perspectives related to the second activity. The first (45%) and fourth (15%) themes include negative perceptions about phenomenological reflection. In this context totally 60 % of the students' reflections are about the obstacles and problems of students' phenomenological writing. Figure 2 shows that in the third theme, 19 %, which equals to one fourth of the students, did not have any previous experience and knowledge about the phenomenological writing. That students have had such a previous experience will also hinder their phenomenological thinking and reflecting. In this case, 79 % of the students face problems and obstacles in phenomenological thinking and reflecting. The second theme includes positive perceptions about students' phenomenological writing. Only 21 % of students' perceptions about their phenomenological writing include positive feelings. Some quotations of the students' reflections can be seen below.

*“... As I wrote without thinking (too much) doing the things that I have never discovered before. Indeed, I was a little afraid of it. ...”* (Student 4)

*“I tried not to limit myself. I tried to write whatever I thought freely. But not to limit myself, I had to force myself again. I do not know what happened to me, but I had a problem related to writing the desire of learning. ...”* (Student 8)

*“I was not sure that I was able to write what I really wanted to express as I couldn't consider all the directions. I had problems in reflecting my feelings about the first activity because this reflection was very new for me. ...”* (Student 9)

## DISCUSSION

As a result, students reflected their own positive feelings, searching for the process of phenomenon, process of learning and intuition for the question “what is the meaning of the desire of learning for you?” The results indicated that all of the students reflected positive feelings regarding the meaning of the desire of learning such as *“happiness, pleasure, enjoyment and love.”* It is clear that master degree students have positive feelings about their own desire of learning. The master students have positive feelings because they must join the master programs depending on their positive feelings and their motivations of learning. It is concluded that this result reflects students' own learning reality. This result is very important for the master students' learning. While describing their own meaning of the concept, the students also described their own desire of learning as a scientific research process since they mentioned *“curiosity, eagerness, intensity and intuition”* in their reflections. “Phenomenology is an inspiration of self-searching, self-experiences and new learning. It also requires an inquiry of knowledge with endless motivation and a desire of learning like a scientist who is willing to know about self and others” (Selvi, 2008a, 39). Five of the students' reflections related to the concept of the “desire of learning” were about the process of learning such as *“endless process, motivation, long journey, forever wishes and ceaseless”*.

When all of the students' reflections concerning the concept of the “desire of learning” are analyzed, it can clearly be seen that the master students give the concept of the desire of learning a new meaning. This result suggests that phenomenological inquiry is a new knowledge created and constructed by the master students. This

definition is not totally different from the current definitions of the literature of the education, but the students' own meaning of the desire of learning indicated three different extents related to the desire of learning. The desire of learning can include positive feelings, process of searching for the phenomenon and process of learning.

All of these reflections related to the desire of learning such as "positive feelings, searching for the phenomenon and process of learning" may remind the motivation, especially the intrinsic motivation of an individual. According to Thorkildsen et al (2002), motivation can stimulate a person to think and act in a certain way that can be promoted by learning. The students' reflections can be discussed based on intrinsic motivation. Since intrinsic motivation includes having positive feelings, searching for the phenomenon and process of learning, it can create positive attitudes towards lifelong learning for the individual. "The desire of learning is an innate tendency, but the learner needs motivation and positive learning experiences" (Selvi, 2006, 489). Thus, the tendency of an individual and personal meaning of the master students' reflections about the desire of learning can refer to the innate tendency of students.

The second activity showed that there were a number of limitations for the students to express their own thoughts, perceptions and feelings by using phenomenological writing in the first activity. The students experienced phenomenological writing in the same situations, but they had different problems during the first activity while reflecting their own personal experiences.

In the second activity, the students reflected many problems regarding the phenomenological reflections related to the first activity while reflecting their own meaning. In the first theme in the second activity, students reflected some difficulties while doing the first activity such as "*writing without thinking, reflecting their own ideas, bringing their own thoughts together, insufficient expression, being afraid of writing freely, writing more and building their ideas.*" All of these reflections include difficulties that can create obstacles while students are writing and reflecting their own meaning. These reflections pointed out that the students had many difficulties in reflecting their own ideas and understanding. This result is very important for the phenomenological studies. If individuals have some problems while reflecting their own perceptions, the study may lose its phenomenological basis. It is needed to develop a phenomenological way of thinking and reflection for catching the individual meaning of

the phenomenon. Otherwise, he/she always repeats the ready-made knowledge and common understanding that hinder the development of human life and scientific study.

The reflections under the theme of *new and different experience* regarding the second activity such as “*a new way of reflection, new experience, different experience and interesting experience*” indicate that phenomenological writing was a new and different experience for the students. These reflections show that the students did not have any previous experience regarding phenomenological way of thinking and writing. This result is again very important for the learning-teaching process of the Turkish educational system. It is interesting that master degree students hadn't had this kind of experience even though they have been studying in the school for at least twelve or thirteen years at different school levels. It is also interesting that the students did not have any chance in reflecting their own perceptions and authentic meaning of the phenomenon such as ideas, thoughts, understanding, feelings and so on. The themes in the fourth category regarding the second activity; “*getting disturbed by somebody else's comments, hesitation in reflecting their own perceptions, and misunderstanding the activities*” are related to the confusion the students had in phenomenological writing. These four sub-themes correspond to the sub-themes under the first and third categories concerning the second activity that the students had many difficulties and also they had a new type of experience. These difficulties and new experiences must create confusion about phenomenological way of thinking and phenomenological writing process.

The themes regarding the second activity reflect students' positive feelings related to their own phenomenological writing such as “*happiness, writing freely, feeling great and relaxation.*” The students mentioned that the phenomenological writing gave them happiness. It is interesting that some students experienced difficulties in writing freely in the first activity and some students experienced positive feelings while writing freely in the second activity. It means that while some of the students did not like free writing, others liked it. Some of the students felt great during their own phenomenological writing. It means that some of them manage creation, construction and reflection of their own knowledge but some of them can not manage it based on their experiences. The construction of meaning from experiences is

based on individuals' own histories and they place their own constructions on what occurs (Wright (2001).

When the students' reflections regarding the first and second activity are compared, it is seen that the number of the students' reflections in the second activity is almost 35 % more than the number of reflections written by the students in the first activity. The reason for this might be that the first activity was based on longitudinal experiences; on the other hand, the second activity was conducted on the basis of immediate experiences. The results on students' immediate experiences show that most of the students (79 %) had some obstacles, problems and gaps while writing the first activity. This result summarizes the main characteristics of educational system that students may not have experiences in free thinking and reflecting. It is concluded that educational system cannot promote "freedom of the human mind" (Paul & Hogan, 2005) for individualistic' perceptions of phenomena, creating and reflecting their own knowledge. McGuire (2006, 3) stated that "formal education seems to teach us that what we utter is not our creation, nor an expression of our thought, but is instead impose on us by larger forces." Educator must deeply use phenomenological pedagogy in order for the freedom of mind of students. Teachers need to apply phenomenological approach in education by means of learning-teaching methods and techniques. It is clear that phenomenological approach should be applied in education as a learning-teaching method to develop learning motivation. Educators should create new learning-teaching methods based on phenomenological approach to improve students' motivation and reflection regarding their own meaning, perception and authentic experiences. Therefore, the new teaching-learning method called PhenoMethod has been tried to develop (Selvi, 2008a; Selvi, 2008b), but it needs to be improved and designed by means of implementations in the learning-teaching process.

Consequently, descriptions of experiences can be a useful way to understand students' perceptions, understanding, problems, ways of thinking and learning. We learned that students had some problems in reflecting their ideas, thoughts, feelings and experiences freely. Reflections of individualistic experiences must be based on freedom of human mind (Smeyers and Hogan, 2005). They perceived some barriers to reflect their own pure experiences and thoughts and this suggests that they cannot feel free while meaning making and reflecting. Feeling this kind of barrier while studying in the school can

decrease students' creativity and self-actualization. Thus, students need freer learning-teaching environments to reflect their bases as a whole being while studying in the school. Learning-teaching process supports individuals to share their own unique and authentic experiences with others.

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