# Between the Actual and the Desirable
## A Methodology for the Examination of Students' Lifeworld as It Relates to Their School Environment

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## Introduction

In this article we describe and demonstrate a phenomenological method for researching students' school experiences. Within this method, students are asked to imagine and design an ideal school and to illustrate it both visually and verbally. Their proposals are examined in relation to their current actual school context regarding the characteristics of the physical environment and educational vision. The method is applicable for the use of high school students. It offers them an opportunity to express their feelings and wishes in this regard. Through the designs of their ideal school we receive a subjective portrayal of the way they conceptualize "school."

Projects in which students are asked to design a school are mentioned in the literature in the context of accomplishing two main goals: First, to produce an architectural design of the environment tailored to the students' needs; second, to offer a challenging task that ignites the students' creative imaginations and increases their involvement in school life (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003; Burke, 2007; Flutter, 2006; Koralek & Mitchell, 2005; Sorrell & Sorrell, 2005). Our method proposed in this article serves to accomplish both these goals. Its uniqueness is expressed in two aspects: First, it is based on a solid rationale that is grounded in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty; second, it outlines a process of analysis that enables a comparison between the students' school experiences, which leads to general insights into the nature of learning environments.

To illustrate our method, we will demonstrate an analysis of the *ideal school* proposed by two Israeli students: Eli, 17 years old, who attended a democratic school, and Tom, 18, who attended a regular public school. Eli and Tom prepared their proposals as part of a comprehensive study that took place in Israel in 2008 (Zur, 2008). Twenty high school students—ten from a democratic and ten from a public high school—participated in it. Since we cannot present here the entire corpus of our findings, we decided to focus on two proposals based on the fact that these two students expressed a common idea—to design a school for the arts. Paradoxically, their common purpose served as grounds for exploring the difference in their school experience and its linkage to their respective educational environments.

The article has three main aims:

1. To present the method that we have developed and the rationale on which it is based.

2. To characterize basic components of students' school experience.

3. To present ways in which students' school experience is interwoven with the characteristics of their school environment, and discuss implications for school choice.

The article is composed of five sections: In the first section, we present the philosophical infrastructure of our research method; in the second, we describe the tools and processes on which the method is based; in the third section, we illustrate the democratic and public school contexts; in the fourth, we present an analysis of two students' proposals for an *ideal school*—one from a democratic school and one from a regular public school. In the last section, we discuss the results and the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

## The Philosophical Underpinnings of the Research

This study is anchored in the phenomenological paradigm which incorporates the description, analysis, and interpretation of the structure of consciousness as it is experienced from a first-person perspective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). A key concept in phenomenology is the *lifeworld*, which is considered as the fundamental layer of consciousness—the everyday, covert, primordial, self-evident, and pre-reflective stratum, from which people's overt and explicit thinking originates (Husserl, 1970).

The lifeworld expresses the idea that people are immersed in the world. Applying *natural attitude*, they don't tend to reflect on their life's

experiences—to examine why they occurred, what would have happened if they had not occurred, and whether they could have happened differently. The aim of the phenomenological inquiry is to enhance the researcher's access to participants' lifeworlds; to describe things and events from their point of view and explore the meanings that they ascribe to them (Seamon, 2013; Van Manen, 2007).

Our method is based on assumptions drawn from the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1962). According to this philosopher, perception is made possible due to the body. The body belongs simultaneously to the subject and to objects in the world. It belongs to the subject as a constant, whole presence which senses the world. It also belongs to objects, because, similar to them, it has a form, size and the ability to expand. Space acquires meaning in accordance with the manner in which the body moves and operates within it. The body's form, size, and directions in space constitute the primary axis for measuring and understanding the world. This analysis, therefore, explains how the body-space interrelationship becomes the source of of meaning-making processes (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Place, phenomenologically speaking, is not synonymous with location or space as an objective and abstract entity. It is rather ecology created by the interrelationship between body and human space, consciousness and activity (Gruenewald, 2003; Seamon & Sowers, 2008). The relationship between people and places is bi-directional. On the one hand, people create and change places through meaning-making. On the other hand, places affect people, shape their identity and define the conditions that formulate their attitudes to themselves, to others, and to the world (Casey, 1993, 1997; Taylor, 2009; Eisikovits & Borman, 2005).

Casey (1993, 1997) calls our attention to the paradox that although places play a role in every experience, people do not give them conscious attention. Places are taken for granted as static backdrops in the routine of life, and their attributed cultural meanings remain ignored, buried in the depths of the lifeworld. Hence a contradiction arises between the importance of "places" in the lifeworld and their marginal position in conscious discourse. This contradiction entails the promise that the study of people's linkage to places will illuminate their lifeworld.

As mentioned above, this article presents a method that we developed to explore students' school experiences. The method implements a process that is outlined in the Location Task (Peled, 1976; 1990; Peled & Schwartz, 1999), which was developed on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological principles. During the process, students are asked to create an ideal school as a place, when the body is invited to participate in a prereflective dialogue with the product being formed. In the next section,

we elaborate on the method, its link to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and its modes of implementation.

## Methodology

To prepare the *ideal school*, we propose the use of the Location Task—a process developed by Peled (1990, 1976) to serve architects in their work with clients. We adapted the task for researching the school experience in two ways: first, by adjusting Peled's tool for architectural design to a tool suitable for educational research; second, by examining the *ideal school* in the context of the participants' real-life schools (Zur & Eisikovits, 2011).

The Location Task includes a task sheet (see Figure 1) and a task notebook. The task sheet is for creating a visual scheme and the notebook is for writing a description of the proposal. The size of the task sheet is 24 inches x 24 inches and the spatial dimensions for the design are 19 inches x 19 inches. On the paper, we find a thick, oval frame that marks the boundaries of the place. The broader circle surrounding it delineates

**Figure 1**
***The Location Task Sketch***
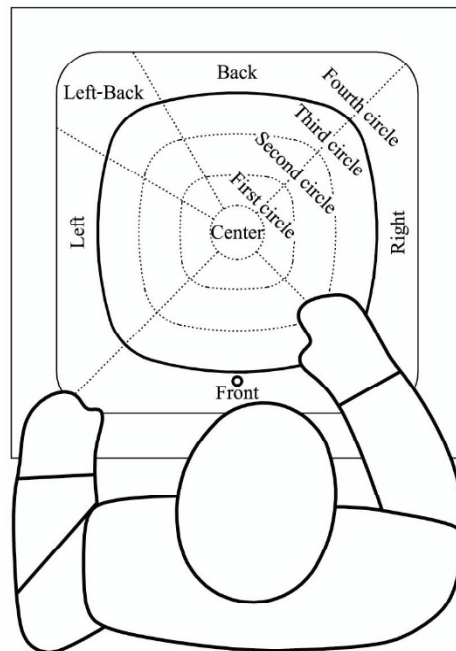
the outer area. The size of the task sheet was determined by the average width of a human body based on the assumption that these dimensions would encourage the participants to enter into a discourse with the place at the level of the lifeworld—a naïve, pre-reflective discourse, in which they personify the place, attributing to it meanings taken from the spatial relationships experienced in their bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Peled, 1990).

The Location Task guides participants to decide which specific places they wish to include in the location and its outer area, and then to locate them in relation to each other and in relation to the place as a whole. The task is open-ended and participants are asked to express their wishes giving their imagination free rein. The visual medium is most suitable for highlighting the particular and the unique (Banks, 2007). Furthermore, it facilitates the exploration of young people's meaning making, as visual images are a central component of their culture. Hence they are a convenient and empowering mode for expressing themselves (Prosser & Burk, 2011).

The notebook includes questions on background information, as well as several broad open questions. The open questions invite participants to describe the school they have designed; its outer area and specific places within it that are of particular importance. The questions guide them to describe the physical space, the activities and atmosphere, the times at which each place will be active, and the type of interpersonal interaction to take place therein. They are asked also to relate to the subjects to be learned and the desired style of learning. The task sheet and the accompanying notebook are to be completed privately.

Upon completion of the task, participants undergo an in-depth interview. The interview guide includes two types of questions: fixed questions and specific questions that arose after perusing the task sheet and task notebook. The fixed questions are mainly descriptive. For example: "Describe your task preparation process," "Take me on a tour of your school; what can I see from the entrance?," "What do the school's boundaries look like?," "What does the X place look like and what do you do there?"

Data processing draws on the phenomenological approach, which guides the researcher to be attentive and empathic, to suspend his or her own judgment, and to adopt an open, reflective attitude that strives, as far as possible, to go beyond the "natural attitude" of taken-for-granted understanding (Finlay, 2008; Wertz, 2005; Van Manen, 2007).

Analysis of a participant's proposal progresses via the following stages:

A. Scanning the entire text of the participant's proposal: the task sheet, the notebook, and the interview transcript.

B. Analyzing the visual scheme produced on the task sheet and generating a configurative interpretation whose aim is to highlight a central idea emergent from the variety of texts. A contextualized examination of the proposal in view of the participant's actual school plan, spatial environment, and educational vision.

C. Creating insiders' perspective categories (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990) that cover the proposal's main themes. From our cumulative experience (Zur, 2008; Zur & Eisikovits, 2011), we have learned that special attention should be paid to the task configuration, the number of places on the task sheet and their recurrence, the type of places, their location, movement system, school boundary and external environment, center of the task sheet, participant description of the task preparation process, the opening sentence in the notebook, words used frequently and expressions that indicate ideas that are perceived as self-evident.

D. Validating the categories by triangulation (Flick, 2008) between the visual scheme of the school and the verbal description.

E. Validating the analysis by presenting it to the participant and inviting him to comment. The proposals may be analyzed comparatively as well as individually using ethic categories (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990). The definition of comparative themes is based on two principles: first, that they include most of the data contained in the proposals, and second, that they help sharpen the similarities and differences between the proposals (Zur & Eisikovits, 2011).

In the next sections of the article, we will present a comparison between two students' proposals of an *ideal school*: the proposal by Eli, who attends a democratic school, and the proposal by Tom, who attends a public school. Before presenting the findings, we will briefly describe the two schools.

## The School Contexts

### *Democratic School*

The *democratic school* was established in 1987 by a group of parents and educators. It is owned by the local authority and the school's non-profit association and is defined as "specialized" and "recognized

but unofficial." This school belongs to a group of twenty five democratic schools that operate in Israel. Only part of them is recognized by the Ministry of Education. Recognized but unofficial schools constitute approximately one percent of the overall number of schools in the country. These institutions are not state owned but are financed at the level of 60% to 75% of the expenditure on official schools. Like private schools in other Western countries, these schools are not limited to intra-district registration. They enjoy higher degrees of autonomy in student acceptance, teacher hiring conditions, and curricular decision making. In addition to this type of schools there is a variety of other specialized educational settings that will not be detailed in this article due to space limitations (Wininger, 2014; Wiseblay, 2013). In congruence with the overall tendency in the West from the nineties on there is a rising pressure towards decentralization in the educational system and the expansion of specialized schools (Bunar, 2008; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Thomson, 2010; Wininger, 2014). In recent years educational policy allows for increase in school autonomy in parallel for higher demand for accountability regarding student achievement. There is a trend toward gradual inclusion of specialized schools which makes for greater variety in the educational landscape (Wininger, 2014).

The democratic school is attended by approximately 350 students aged 4 to 19. It serves students who reside at a distance of an hour and a half's traveling time each way. The students are divided into three age groups. The young division is for ages 4 to 8, the elementary division for ages 8 to 12 and the high-school division for ages 12 and above. A regular time schedule is offered, but classroom participation is optional. Learning activities are not age-limited. There are no grades and examinations; however, the school assists students who choose to take external matriculation exams.

The school is directed toward developing a democratic way of life. It includes three decision-making authorities: a school Parliament that meets once a week, a judicial committee that deals with conflicts within the school community, and an executive forum, composed of permanent and ad-hoc committees. Students, teachers, and parents of all ages are entitled to membership in any of these authorities.

The school (see Figure 2) is located in the heart of a eucalyptus grove, sprawling over 2.84 acres, on the outskirts of a city in central Israel. Its northern and western sides border on a residential neighborhood, and its southern and eastern sides on fields and orchards. The buildings are scattered around in a random configuration due to the position of the woodland trees that were there before the school was built. They are poorly constructed and decorated with lively murals and mismatched

furniture, carpets, and curtains, some of which appear to be second-hand from private homes.

The grounds are directly accessible from the buildings, and are, comparatively, very large. Movement is by means of a footpath circulating the soccer field in the center as well as unmarked paths through the woodland. Gardening is kept to a minimum, preserving the natural inclines of the landscape. Sculptures and junk can be found between the trees, which, themselves, are used for different purposes: decoration, shade, climbing, and playing equipment.

The school's educational vision, as presented on its website[1] at the time of the study, was as follows:

The democratic school is a community of free individuals. They exercise

**Figure 2**
*Layout of the Democratic School*
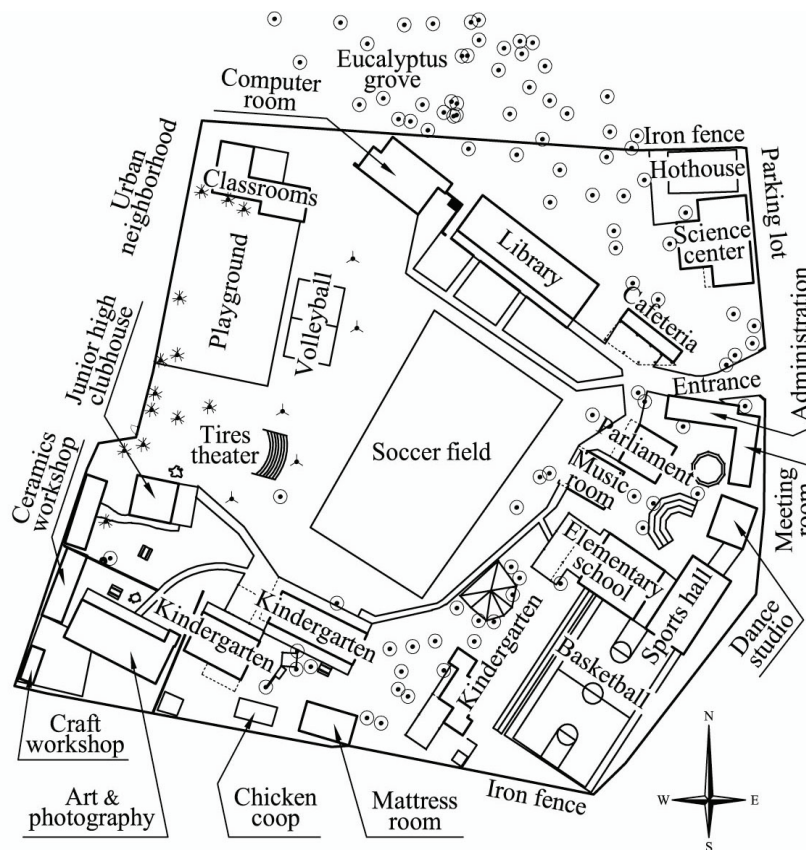
their freedom in their decision to study, respecting each other's rights, thereby enabling each other's liberty; a community in which actual living constitutes learning. The school believes that individuals (young or old) are aware of their own developmental needs better than anyone else, and know how to orient themselves toward their fulfillment. We believe that there is no single, uniform set of actions that can meet the needs of each person, and that all reciprocal actions in this world, without exception, serve people's developmental needs and are instruments of learning, based on full respect for the student as a complete individual. While in school, the students are completely at liberty to plan their own time.

The democratic school's declared vision, as presented above, is based on a classic, humanistic educational ideology. It emphasizes individual rights, freedom of choice, internal motivation, and a broad definition of "learning" that places students at the center of the educational process (Dewey, 2012/1916; Herriman, 1995; Rogers, 1969; Hope, 2012).

### *Public School*

The *public school* belongs to the educational mainstream in Israel, and is defined by the Ministry of Education as "recognized and official." Like all public schools, it receives most of its budget from the Ministry of Education, which prescribes its curriculum. The curriculum is divided into 45-minute classes, where attendance is compulsory. The public school serves approximately 1200 students. It is divided into two main age divisions: junior-high (grades 7 to 9) and high-school (grades 10 to 12).

The school (see Figure 3) is situated on the outskirts of an old established village in the north of Israel, sprawling over approximately 14.8 acres divided into five areas: a two-story main building designated for offices and various learning functions; a year-group complex, including six identical pairs of buildings standing opposite each other, according to year group; an amphitheater with a large, grassy area and performance stage; a sports complex; and an access road to the school, with a large parking lot for private vehicles and buses. Two footpaths pass between the school buildings: the internal path encircles the main building and the external path encircles the school complex. These footpaths are interconnected by six radial footpaths, and smaller footpaths connect the year-group buildings. The central area is dominant—large, accessible and visible from all parts of the school. The further away one moves from the center, the more physical, free, and private are the activities. The public school was designed by a professional architect, who imposed a limited number of design rules on the space and created a unified homogeneous appearance.

**Figure 3**
*Layout of the Public School*
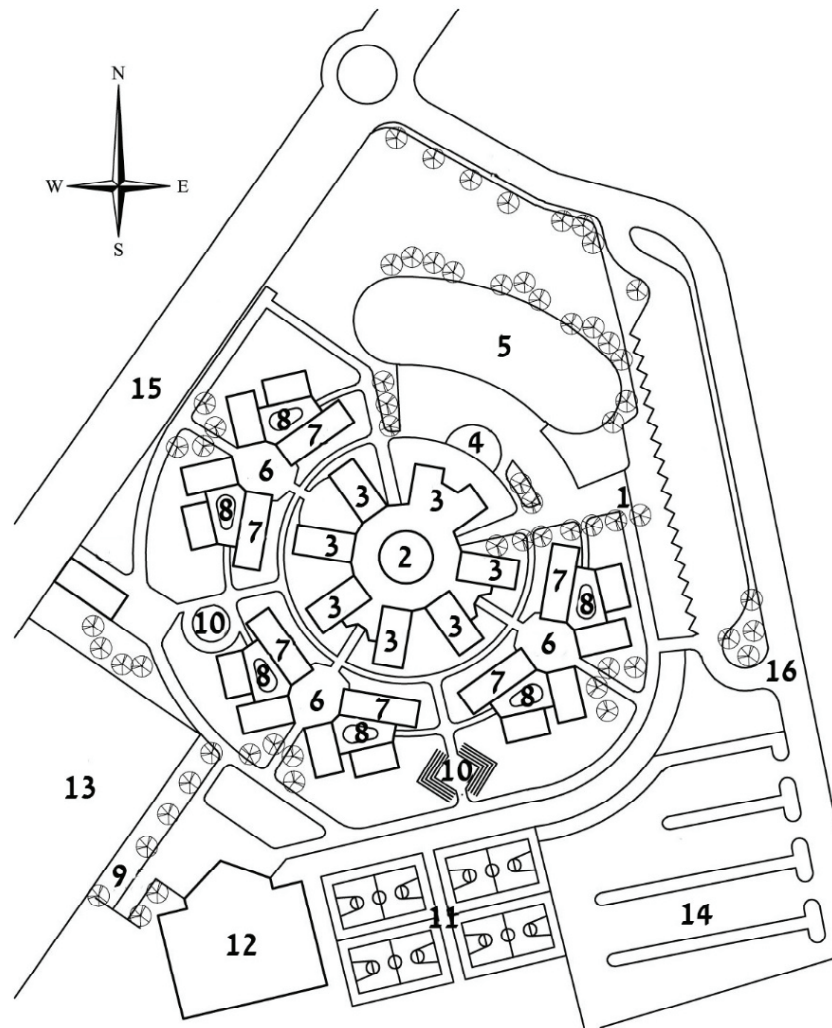


1. Gate and entrance path; 2. Patio to main building; 3. Designated space in main building for: library, auditorium, administrative offices, staff room, laboratories, classrooms for elective main subjects; 4. Stage; 5. Amphitheater; 6. Plaza between two year-group buildings; 7. Year-group buildings; 8. Central patio for year-group buildings; 9. Back gate; 10. Sitting areas; 11. Basketball courts; 12. Sports hall; 13. Soccer pitch; 14. Parking lot; 15. Road to village; 16. Access road to school.

The school's educational vision, as presented on its website at the time of the study, was as follows:

> The school stands for the values of Zionism, tolerance, and faith in the individual. We believe that all students are entitled to decent opportunities for acquiring education and achieving success, both in school and in life. We are committed to creating suitable conditions for the entire school community's development. The school strives to impart challenging, innovative learning to the highest level, which fits the varied needs of the population. We believe that the school and the community will create a nurturing environment conducive to students' personal and social growth, educating toward responsibility, social obligation, leadership and a sense of belonging to the school and the community.

The public school's vision emphasizes two elements: the first relates to social-collectivistic messages and is conveyed through words and expressions such as "values," "Zionism," "the entire school community," "social obligation," and "sense of belonging." The second relates to ambitiousness and is expressed through words such as "education," "challenge," "success," and "high level."

In this article, we analyze proposals of two male students: Eli, from the democratic school and Tom, from the public school (names have been changed). We chose these specific proposals, as both these students designed a school for the arts, and their common intent highlighted the disparity between their tasks.

## Interpretation and Comparison of Eli's and Tom's Proposals
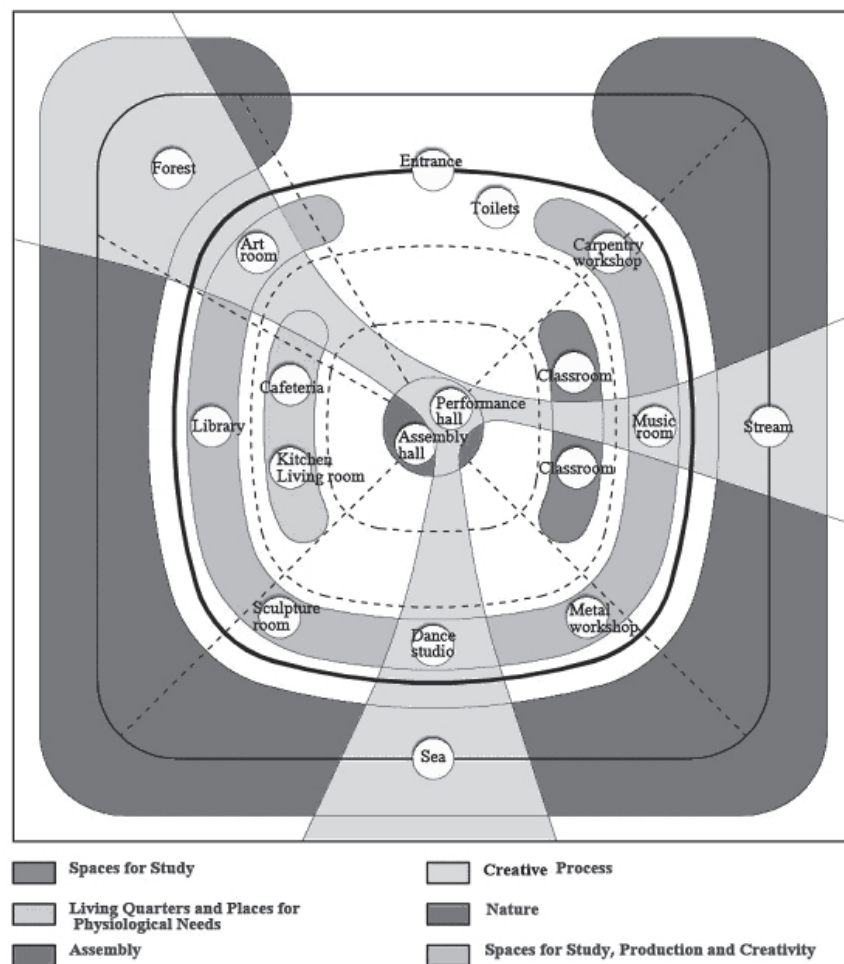
### *General Description of the Location Tasks*

Eli is 17 and has attended the democratic school since the age of 12, after six years in a public elementary school. Transition to this school was his own decision, against his parents' wishes. Eli concedes that he is often absent from school and usually late when he does attend. His great love is playing the saxophone, in which he invests much of his time and energy.

The task sheet (Figure 4) includes 18 places, most (44%) located within the third circle. The places are spread more or less evenly over the sheet. All places except *classrooms* appear only once. Analysis of the spatial configuration reveals a combination of a circular and a radial formation, exposing Eli's disposition to organization of space around symmetrical axes. The radial structure expresses students' involvement in creative processes. It includes places representing *nature*, *studios*, and a *performance hall*. We named Eli's task "the creative process."

The spatial configuration analysis highlights the locations belonging to creative activity as figure-ground relations, to emphasize the importance that Eli ascribes to creative, as opposed to other types of activity. Evidence of the importance of creativity appears in his proposal in different ways: when we asked him why people engage in creative activity, he responded in surprise to the question itself:

**Figure 4**
***Diagram of Eli's Location Task***
***and Graphic Analysis of the Spatial Configuration***



**Spaces for Study**

**Living Quarters and Places for Physiological Needs**

**Assembly**

**Creative Process**

**Nature**

**Spaces for Study, Production and Creativity**

> It seems to me, I don't want to say taken for granted, but it's natural for people to want to be creative. It's a fact. It's something that people do.

His opening sentence in the task notebook (quoted further on) dealt with the conditions that should be provided for the creative person. Finally, the word "creativity" appears 18 times in the text, in its different inflections.

Nature is a large, constant presence in the external environment:

> The school is not located in an urban environment. It is built from natural materials and blends into the scenery. The buildings face outward with large windows, to absorb as much of the view as possible.

One can learn about his conception of producing a work of art from the way he describes the task preparation process. The nature appears as a source of inspiration:

> First of all, I located the places outside school, because what is inside is determined by what is outside. Afterwards, I thought about what to place opposite what: meaning, that if the stream is here, then the music room should be opposite.

The artist generates his work in the *studio*, and when it is complete, displays it in the *performance hall*. Eli positioned the hall in the center of the task sheet as an expression of the importance of creativity among the entire range of school activities. Thus, the graphic scheme supplements the verbal description, giving meaning to Eli's perception of the creative process: The process begins at the periphery, through an undefined experience of seclusion and encounter with nature, and ends in the center, through receiving social attention in a structured situation. In a broader metaphorical sense, Eli's attitude toward nature implies his wish for all school processes to be based on his natural tendencies.

Tom is 18 and has attended the public school since graduating from elementary school at age 12, which is the natural progression of his peer group in his geographical area. As opposed to Eli, who took only some of the matriculation examinations, Tom chose a comprehensive program, which included in-depth studies in Theater, Cinema, Arabic, and Mathematics. Outside school, he is busy with a wide range of hobbies: he edits films, plays the guitar, and is member of a drama group. The task sheet includes 100 places (see Figure 5), most of which are *classrooms*. All straight lines in the illustration were drawn in pencil.

Tom's plan exceeded the task sheet boundaries. He explained this deviation in the following way:

> First of all, I did not evaluate the proportions correctly. It was also

important to me that everything should be *together*, and I wanted to include as many rooms and things as possible.

That being the case, Tom wished to create one rich, cohesive, complete whole, and expressed this through creating a crowded scheme, whose parts are interwoven and facing the center.

The expansive detail of the places and their interconnecting lines give the scheme the appearance of an architectural plan. This is evidence

**Figure 5**
*Diagram of Tom's Location Task*
*and Graphic Analysis of the Spatial Configuration*
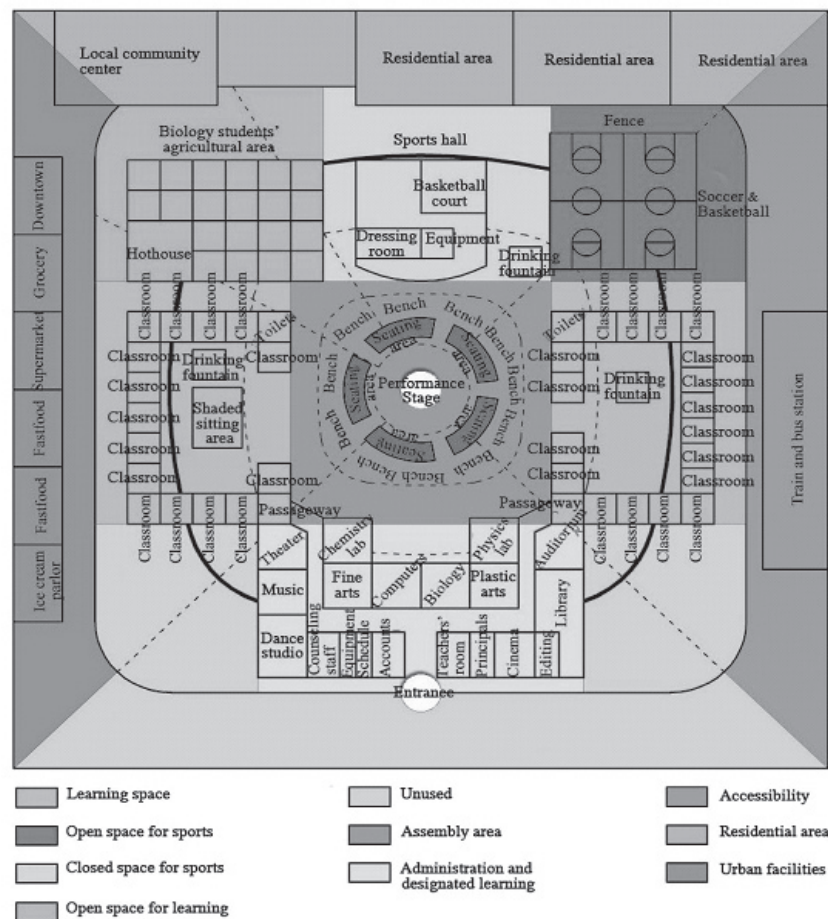
of his thoroughness and tendency to become engrossed in detail. The simple, orthogonal shapes that distinctly delineate the space allocated to each place; the nature of the relationships between them; the systematic, symmetrical organization of the space, as well as the clear division into subjects (see legend) all indicate his preference for a defined, orderly environment. When we brought these observations to his attention, his response was: "Once school is orderly, students are orderly, too." We named Tom's task "professionalization," due to his emphasis along the verbal text on high standards of performance.

## Thematic Comparison between the Tasks

We compared Eli and Tom's proposals through five categories. The comparative analysis is presented below:

### A. Boundaries and Authority

Both Eli and Tom addressed the need to set boundaries, but there were differences in the meaning they ascribed to the concept of boundary: For example, when asked whether their ideal school has a border, the responses diverged. For Eli, the function of the border was to distinguish school from its external environment:

> The school has natural surroundings, so it's clear where it starts—the buildings, the garden. There is also a signpost that carries an inscription.

Eli perceives the aim of the border as helping people to find their way around: "I wouldn't put up walls or fences, not to separate for separation's sake, but to define the area, so that when you're walking down a path, you get the feeling of moving from one place to another." Like Eli, Tom sees orientation as important, but prefers to build a fence to prevent students from leaving the facility:

> There's a fence just like in our school. A regular fence, so that students won't run away, and to show where school ends.

Eli prefers flexible and informal boundaries, determined through dialogue. His *ideal school* contains no offices, but has a *kitchen* and *living room*. Instead of a parliament, there is an *assembly hall*. The distinction between the parliament, which is a central institution in his current school, and the assembly hall, exposes Eli's discomfort regarding fixed procedures that impose limits on people's freedom. He criticizes the parliament as follows:

> If people learn to see differences in each other's opinions, it will be

easier to reach honest agreements, instead of just accepting majority decisions in the parliament.

In contrast to the parliament, the *assembly hall* is home to negotiations aiming for agreement. Its spatial characteristics indicate the nature of the activities held there:

> The *assembly hall* is designed for discussions, mainly about school issues. The circular seating arrangement shows that everyone is equal and can see each other.

As opposed to Eli, Tom believes in adherence to formal, hierarchical procedures in school. For example, this is how he describes the *stage*:

> It stands in the center of the school, where most of the ceremonies take place. On Fridays, there will be an organized assembly, for singing the National Anthem and going over all the announcements—like saying 'good morning' to the whole school.

When we asked him whether students could influence what is presented on the stage, he replied:

> I understand that students may initiate projects, but they should do this via the teachers and the school administration. They need the administration's approval. It's not a democratic school.

Comparing the ways in which Eli and Tom imagined the *ideal classroom* illustrates the above dissimilarities. Eli's classroom is a flexible environment that responds to people's needs:

> I wasn't thinking of chairs and tables like there are here (in his current school). It is better to use mattresses and cushions. Comfort is important. With all the chairs we have in school here, it's terrible.

Tom, on the other hand, reacted in surprise to the question itself:

> What do you mean? It (the class) should be normal. Regular classes, with a teacher and students sitting in rows, in pairs, a blackboard, classroom cabinet, map of Israel.

### B. Boundaries and Respect

The importance that Eli and Tom ascribe to boundaries surfaces in the discomfort they expressed when faced with situations of boundary breach. Eli stressed the preservation of personal space: "School should be built in a way that respects people's space." As a musician, he relates to this subject mainly in the context of playing music: "I feel that to perform a piece of music, one should be able to cut oneself off from the reality of other people, from what is going on around." He uses the Location Task to "correct" what he perceives to be a central problem in his own school—the

lack of proper conditions for playing privately in the music room. His criticism includes four elements, all space-related: movement system, the place's changing function, supervision of entrances, and exposure:

> If you have a music room in the middle of the school, on the path, and everyone who passes by opens the door, it's a big problem . . . the music room is sometimes used for school gatherings and sometimes just for music . . . when you're in the music room, you feel as though you're right in the middle of the school.

Eli makes the connection between the spatial and the social environment in his school, concluding his criticism with a general statement about respect:

> The whole issue of mutual respect, respecting everyone's space and everyone's opinion . . . Because of the way it's built, our school makes people behave disrespectfully to each other.

It should be noted that the term "respect" appears in the democratic school's vision statement only with the individual as its object. The echo of this value reverberates in Eli's above quote.

Like Eli, Tom is troubled by the lack of respect for creative activity. He criticizes students in his school:

> Last year, there was a performance, and I was shocked. Some students behaved terribly. I want respect for art and for those who create it.

Tom's criticism of the students extends to their disrespect for teachers. To preserve respect for the latter, he limits students' accessibility to the staff domain in his plan:

> The *teachers' room* belongs to the teachers, and students shouldn't be allowed in there without permission. The principal has her own private room. I think that staff and students should be separate. They are older and deserve respect.

### C. School and the External Environment.

Eli and Tom proposed different types of relationships between school and its surroundings. Eli's *ideal school* is strongly influenced by the outside:

> School events happen anyways, even when you're not aware of them. It's much more interesting to look outwards.

He encircled his *ideal school* with a wild, natural environment, and positioned it on a hill top. The differences in height between the school and its surroundings, the large openings in the rooms and the lack of a fence, ensure the constant presence of outside nature inside school.

The interaction between school and the external environment in Tom's proposal is more restricted. A look at his task sheet indicates that his focus is directed inward rather than outward: Most places are facing the center, the three inner circles are overcrowded and the school area exceeds its designated limits. Tom encircled his *ideal school* with an urban environment, separated by a fence. The interaction between the two is functional and confined to the provision of services.

### D. Individualism and Collectivism

The task sheets bear testimony to the intensity of social belonging that Eli and Tom wish to experience in school. In Eli's proposal, school emerges as a permissive, loose entity. The arrangement of places is flexible, and each place has its own space. Eli explained:

> It's crucial that places should be separated. That's why I scattered them, so that each could have its own territory.

Eli's attitude toward the places emphasizes their uniqueness. Every place, except for the classroom, appears on the task sheet only once, and the school conveys respect for heterogeneity. "There should be different kinds of places for people to go to, so the school won't look like a collection of buildings that are just the same." It can be construed that Eli metaphorically projects upon place the need to safeguard his individuality.

In Tom's proposal, however, school appears as a cohesive entity. The arrangement of places is inflexible, with each allocated to a small, limited square. The places are interconnected, forming a repetitive configuration. The center is emphasized by an amphitheater-shaped structure with a stage at its lowest point. As described by Tom, the school has a homogeneous appearance:

> The buildings are built in the same style. It's important because it's an official establishment, and because of something even more necessary—order.

Tom projected onto place his need to experience school as a well-organized and consolidated social entity.

Eli's opening statement in the notebook brings out his yearning for an environment devoid of rules and expectations:

> People in school are free to go wherever and whenever they want. Most activities are creative, but not in a conventional sense. That is to say, people can create in whichever field they choose, without the need to meet specific achievements.

When we asked him where he would spend most of his time in the ideal school, he chose the secluded music room in its peripheral location.

His individualism is absolute, to the point that he interpreted the task primarily as designing an *ideal school* for himself, disregarding the needs of others. Hence, his proposal contains many places for the creative arts, but excludes those that might be important for others, such as areas for sports, science, or younger children. The expressions used repeatedly by Eli: "it is important to me" (which appeared 36 times in the text) and "it seems to me" (appeared 26 times), imply his self-absorption.

Contrary to Eli, Tom planned his school, first and foremost, as a public system. The way in which he described the task preparation process shows that he gave priority to the interests of the school community as a whole, over his individual inclination as a student interested in art:

> I put three age groups into *one* building. I wanted everything to be *together*. It was only at the end that I realized it would become a school for the arts. At that point, I elaborated the façade.

However, he found it worth mentioning that it would not be at the expense of the other subjects: "Of course, I haven't short-changed physics, chemistry and biology, but the greatest investment would be in the arts." Tom wishes to experience a sense of belonging in school. When we asked him why he put a *stage* in the center of the task sheet, he described the good feelings this evokes in his current school: "When all of us encircle the stage, there is a strong sense of *togetherness*, which I like about school." The need to belong to school is apparent in Tom's proposal in additional ways: in his *ideal school*, photographs of the school's graduates adorn the walls and works of art by students are scattered all over the school space.

### E. Learning and Creativity

Eli's and Tom's attitudes toward artistic activity in school are similar in many ways. Both stress the importance of creativity, provide detailed descriptions of equipment necessary for art, and wish that school would allow students to display their work before large audiences. Nevertheless, Eli and Tom have different approaches to learning.

Eli perceives art as more significant than theoretical learning. This is apparent in the way he relates to accessibility when describing the *studio* and the *library*. He positioned the *studios* in a remote, concealed area, "so that if people go there, it is because they specifically choose to do so." He regarded the *library*, however, as an unattractive place, which should therefore be positioned to entice people to enter: "It's not a place that people go to with a clear purpose, and should therefore be inviting to people, with openings in all directions." The library is "central" just in terms of accessibility:

> The *library* is central to a certain type of learning, but it is not the focus of the school. Books are not the most important thing in school.

Contrary to this, in Tom's proposal, the formal-theoretical learning is the self-evident purpose of school. The 32 *classrooms* that Tom scattered around both sides of the task sheet fill the initial areas that he developed. He positioned the art rooms only at later stages of the process.

Eli emphasized self-expression for youth and minimized the educational role of adults. Whereas Eli's *ideal school* is populated by "people" (mentioned 69 times in his text), in Tom's *ideal school*, there are "students" (mentioned 52 times in his text) and "teachers" (mentioned 37 times).'People' in Eli's proposal are used synonymously with 'audience.' In the *performance hall*, he believes that: "It is important that people accept works of art, and express only their feelings about them." He wishes to eliminate judgmental statements:

> I don't want things to be constantly assessed, comments that this person draws better than the other . . . If kids want to improve their works, it should be for themselves.

In line with the emphasis placed in the public school's mission statement on achievement and quality of education, Tom also highlights students' self-expression, but his view takes for granted the use of external standards. The opening sentence in his task notebook, which integrates the words "professionalism" and "expression," testifies to this: "I think that my [ideal] school is good because it professionalizes in the arts, and allows as many students as possible to express their thoughts and feelings through art." Tom uses variations of the word "professionalism" 14 times throughout the text, thereby voicing his perception on the status of teachers and students in the learning process:

> I think that teachers represent education. Once students accept their authority, they will succeed in their matriculation exams. It sounds as if I am discounting the students, but after all, school is run by teachers.

## Discussion

In this article, we described a method for exploring students' school experience, based on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962). Demonstrating the method through Eli's and Tom's proposals illustrated its latent potential. An abundance of data can be gleaned through implementation of the method: the focus on the body and space and on the relationship between the educational, social, and physical aspects of school; the creation of a school as a public institution that can contain the self and the other; examination of the texts in the context of the

student's actual school; and the simultaneous expression of all of these through the visual and verbal channels. All these data together create a whole that enables a clear, sharp, well-founded, and reasoned encounter with the complexity of the study participant's world. The researcher is exposed to the participant's overt and covert layers of consciousness, as well as to the self-evident and formative aspects, whose source is in his or her life world.

Eli's proposal reflects the experience of a student, who attends a unique school in an intimate community, which, at least on the declarative level, promotes dialogue and freedom of choice. The design on his task sheet, which presents a large, open external space that contains a small number of unique places, is similar in essential components to the physical environment of the school that he attends. It conveys the impression that his *ideal school* is a product of his school experience, in which he internalized the message that school is a place that offers, or is supposed to offer, individual fulfillment. This message is reflected in Eli's imagination of the *ideal school* as a place from which he expects support for his aspiration to play and perform music. This is in contrast to his perception of his actual school, which appears as a place that has been drained of its resources, a place that has nothing more to offer.

Tom's proposal expresses the experience of a student who attends a large school that belongs to the mainstream Israeli education system. The orientation toward achievement and social involvement that is emphasized in the school vision is expressed also in his ideal school. The visual schema on the task sheet is characterized by an orderly, hierarchical, and repetitive arrangement of squares, which divide the space into small units, resembling the physical environment of the actual school that he attends. Like in the verbal texts, principally expressed in this arrangement is the yearning for the sense of belonging to the place.

Tom's description of the task sheet preparation process shows that his thinking was focused mainly on preserving what exists in his actual school. The manner of description conveys the impression that, as a result of his school experience, his thinking horizons regarding school are narrow. Within these horizons, he experiences himself as a part among the parts; as an entity without a status or the ability to bring about change.

The Location Task offers the study participants the opportunity to design a school under conditions that leave possibilities open. One conspicuous phenomenon, which Tom's task illustrates very well, is the stock of limitations that participants impose upon themselves and hence do not explore the latent possibilities in the freedom that they have been offered. Eli, however, saw the Location Task as a platform for critical thinking about school, and for designing a place tailored to

his own needs. We interpreted Tom's task as his initial and surprising encounter with thick layers of *of-course assumptions* (Schutz, 1971a), which are an integral part of his lifeworld. From an analysis of his task, we conclude that his school probably does not offer him a variety of broad, high quality experiences that will nurture his ability for introspection and for grappling with questions about his identity and goals.

If this is the case, then Eli's and Tom's proposals provide a glimpse into their worlds and to consider the following questions: Do they experience themselves as being at the metaphorical center or at the periphery of the school? What is relevant to them and with what are they familiar? What motivates them to action? What do they perceive as under their control? In which contexts do they experience themselves as a separate entity and as part of the community? What are their preferences on the axes between the heterogeneous versus the homogeneous environment, between richly stimulating environments and environments lacking in stimulation, between integral versus divided environments, between dialogical versus hierarchical environments, between locally-driven environments versus universal and formal environments?

From our meeting with Eli and Tom, as well as with other students who participated in our study (Zur, 2008; Zur & Eisikovits, 2011), we learned that one can relate to the task from two interesting standpoints: from the students' insiders' perspective and from the researchers' outsider perspective. The first provides the opportunity for creative expression of preferences, thoughts, emotions, and wishes, and holds the potential for personal empowerment; the second paradoxically reveals the boundaries that delineate the relative natural worldview of the group to which they belong (Schutz, 1970, 1971b).

What can we learn about school choice from this study? The question has political, economic, social and pedagogical angles (Bunar, 2008; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012). From all the above the conclusions of our study address the pedagogical angle. The findings of our research (Zur, 2008), parts of which are presented in the article, illustrate that the choice between two learning environments—that of the regular and that of the democratic school—is a choice between two pedagogical alternatives. Students in the regular school internalized the value of investment in measurable achievements and learning, generally speaking. In their tasks and interviews they stress subjects, tests and express an attitude that "learning is work"; also that they have to respond to school demands, even if this means suppressing their personal interests and drives. Compared to students in the regular school, those in the democratic school demonstrated dynamic, open, and flexible thinking. They exhibited reflective skills and a width of

critical abilities. Metaphorically speaking, the democratic vein flew in their blood stream.

The findings of our study support the approach that underscores the benefits of decentralization and heterogeneity within educational systems (Berkman, 2010). The two school environments are mirror images of each other. The advantages of the one reflect the disadvantages of the other. Provided that a mutual discourse between the two is in place, the tension created by these differences encourages development and improvement. In the rapid speed of change characteristic of the twenty first century, which confronts schools with ever growing challenges, such a dynamic is vital for both societies and individuals within them.

## Note

[1] Details of the two schools' websites are not provided here. This omission is made in order to safeguard the schools' anonymity.

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