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Secondary school students' experiences of presence in daily classroom practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study among 50 secondary school students from 10 schools in the Netherlands, aiming to understand how they experience 'presence' – being fully (with one's entire being) engaged in the here-and-now – in class. Although presence was a non-regular experience, students experienced it as personally relevant for a broadened worldview and becoming more confident and autonomous in their thinking and acting. Using a phenomenological approach, the authors found three general themes, as well as many variations and nuances within them, in students' experiences of presence, related to the subject matter, interaction and students' self. The similarities found in the situational contexts in which presence occurred – meaningfulness, student participation, responsivity and otherness – can inform teaching. Implications for teaching in order to realise such a situational context are discussed.

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Presence; secondary school students; teacher–students–subject matter interaction; personal development

Introduction

Presence refers to how people are engaged as *experiencing human beings* in the *here-and-now* (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1973). In the context of education, student presence has predominantly been studied by educational philosophers (e.g. Dewey, 1933; Noddings, 2013). They have argued that, when students are present, their energy and concern are directed towards the subject matter and the classroom conversation, and they perceive and act with their whole being and all their senses. In other words: students are not merely intellectually engaged, but also emotionally and physically engaged. For example, Noddings (2013) related this full engagement to students' grasping and valuing of the subject matter. More recently, researchers have argued that presence has an inclusive focus on broad educational aims: students' academic learning and personal development (Peschl, 2007; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). These scholars have emphasised the value of presence because they acknowledge students' activity as whole persons in knowledge construction, meaning making and classroom interaction.

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However, research has indicated that in actual educational practice, students' engagement decreases as their education progresses (Macklem, 2015). Students' loss of interest and high levels of class-related boredom are well-known concerns in secondary education (Tze, Daniels, & Klassen, 2016). Despite a wide range of research into psychologically oriented concepts such as 'student engagement' (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016) and 'flow' (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003), little has been achieved in classroom practice in this respect. Drawing on educational philosophy, presence may provide a new frame of reference, which may deepen our understanding of students' engagement in relation to the situational context of the classroom. Building on Rodgers and Raider-Roth's (2006) research into student presence seems relevant for three reasons. First, Rodgers and Raider-Roth's conceptualisation of presence is embedded in relationship. Citing Martin Buber, they pointed out that: 'Presentness [...] arises when the "*Thou* becomes present", when one comes to see the other and allows one's self to be seen' (2006, p. 284, italics in the original). This quote makes clear how the philosophically grounded notion of presence can be distinguished from the psychological notions of student engagement and flow: presence refers to an intersubjective experience. More specifically, presence is embedded in the interactions between students, teacher and subject matter. This further suggests that presence refers to a complex notion of what it means to teach and to learn (cf. Cochran-Smith, 2015; Loughran, 2013). Researching presence can contribute to our understanding of how various factors in the moment play a role in whether and how students experience engagement. Second, presence directs attention to individual and, thus, unique and different experiences of students' in-the-moment engagement with the subject matter, others and the world. Research can provide insight into the similarities, variations and nuances across students' experiences. Third, presence opens up an inclusive perspective on students' engagement in academic learning and personal development. Hitherto, research has predominantly related psychological notions of student engagement and flow to their academic learning (McMahon & Zyngier, 2009). In keeping with the European tradition of pedagogy in which students' growth, maturity and development are considered important aims of education (e.g. Ponte & Ax, 2009; Van Manen, 1991), we argue that students' engagement needs to be understood as an integral part of their personal development, as well as of their academic learning.

Because presence has mainly been studied philosophically and conceptually, we do not know how secondary school students encounter presence in everyday classroom practice. Our aim is to gain a deep understanding of whether and how secondary school students experience presence in daily classroom practice. How do they talk about presence, what concrete examples do they mention, and how do they experience presence? In what situations does presence occur, according to them? In that way, we may contribute to a conceptualisation of student presence that is grounded in empirical data.

This study was conducted in the Netherlands. Dutch education is of high quality and belongs in the top tier for performance among OECD countries (OECD, 2019). A key feature of the Dutch educational system is freedom of education, which refers to publicly funded choice and the right for schools to provide teaching based on religious, ideological or educational beliefs. As a result, public and private schools are equal by law and equally financed. However, this freedom is limited by the qualitative standards set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, which prescribe, for example, the subjects,

attainment targets, benchmarks for student achievement and the content of national examinations. As in many countries around the world, test-based accountability has spread in the Dutch education system, in an ‘age of school autonomy *with* accountability’; tests tend to focus on what has become internationally accepted (Browes & Altinyelken, 2019, p. 2, *italics in the original*). Our attempt to understand students’ experiences of presence may inform efforts to enhance students’ learning and personal development and set a new direction for educational systems that currently prioritise school performance metrics over ‘presence’, ‘engagement’ and ‘flow’.

Theoretical background

A few qualitative studies on presence are available (e.g. Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009; Solloway, 2000), all of which focused primarily on the teacher’s perspective on presence. These studies revealed that presence is expressed in teachers’ sensitivity and receptivity to students and classroom situations. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) made a significant contribution to the conceptualisation of presence in teaching. Although they did not define student presence explicitly, they took the student perspective into account in their conceptualisation of presence in teaching as a *quality of engagement*: ‘There is energy and curiosity [...] that keeps teachers alert and engaged with the learner and the learning [...] in the sphere of questions that matter, not just to us personally but in the world [...]’ (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 271). From the students’ point of view, the experience of presence (in teaching) is

one of recognition, of feeling seen and understood, not just emotionally but cognitively, physically and even spiritually. It is a feeling of being safe, where one is drawn to risk because of the discoveries it might reveal; it is the excitement of discovering one’s self in the context of the larger world, rather than the worry of losing one’s self, in the process. (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 267)

This description reflects not only many aspects of what presence in teaching means to students, but also what presence in learning means to students.

Characteristics of the experience of presence in class

As a starting point for investigating students’ experiences of presence, we use Rodgers and Raider-Roth’s (2006) definition of presence as a quality of engagement that is *subjective* and *relational*. Its subjective character indicates that the experience of presence is associated with a single and unique point of view. Consequently, gaining insight into how it is for students to be present requires an understanding of how they subjectively experience presence. The relational character of presence is embedded in the situated interactions between students, teacher and subject matter (Raider-Roth & Holzer, 2009). Presence thus manifests itself differently across situations and over time. Consequently, students’ experiences of presence can only be understood in relation to the various situated interactions they are engaged in.

In a theoretical approach to profound learning and change, Scharmer (2000) coined the term ‘presencing’, which combines ‘presence’ and ‘sensing’. This term emphasises the value of connecting to one’s feelings, will and purposes (cf. Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, &

Flowers, 2004). Drawing from educational philosophy and the notion of ‘presencing’, we suggest four characteristics in order to clearly demarcate what the experience of presence in class actually consists of and on the basis of which we could investigate students’ experiences.

The first characteristic of the experience of presence in class refers to a state of being completely immersed (Scharmer, 2007). In this state, students’ energy and concern are directed towards the subject matter, its context and the classroom conversation (Dewey, 1933). In her ‘ethics of care’, Noddings (2013) used the term ‘engrossment’ to describe this kind of immersion in order to highlight students’ intellectual caring for the subject matter under investigation. By engrossment, she meant ‘being seized’ (p. 190) by something, whereby one gives it all of one’s attention.

Second, the experience of presence points to being closely involved intellectually, affectively and physically (Noddings, 2013; Peschl, 2007). From Dewey’s (1934) conception of ‘integral experience’, we derive insights about how the intellectual, emotional, bodily and practical are united in the experience of presence. Within this experience, the mind is informed by students’ direct and sensory perception of the subject matter that is being intellectually as well as emotionally explored.

The third characteristic is active receptiveness, which indicates that when experiencing presence, students move beyond conditioned or controlled ways of thinking and doing by being open to new perceptions (Scharmer, 2007; Senge et al., 2004). This description resonates with Dewey’s (1933, p. 13) explication of reflective thought as being often experienced as ‘troublesome’ or ‘somewhat painful’, because it involves suspending one’s judgement and ‘willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance’. Noddings (2013) described receptiveness as follows (p. 185): ‘I’m watching, being guided, attentive as through listening [...] I let the object act upon me, seize me, direct my fleeting thoughts [...]’ Perception and response, doing and undergoing are intertwined within this active receptiveness (cf. Dewey, 1934).

The fourth characteristic is a connectedness to the self – including attitudes, values and habits – through which students relate to the world (cf. Peschl, 2007; Senge et al., 2004). Informed by Merleau Ponty’s concept of embodied consciousness, Greene (1973) highlighted the significance of students’ presence to themselves within her notion of wide-awakeness. The premise is that one’s original perceptual awareness continues to be the basis for all higher-level structures one develops later in life. Hence, wide-awakeness refers to an act of consciousness that is intentional, towards the world and conscious of something, while continually rediscovering one’s actual presence to oneself (see also Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006).

The significance of presence in students’ academic learning and personal development

As we argued earlier, when present, students are engaged with their entire being. Scholars have related this quality of full engagement to two educational domains. The first is the domain of students’ academic learning. Noddings (2013) considered the involvement of students’ subjective experience through their trying, feeling and being receptively attentive as crucial within an intuitive mode of working. By working analytically and intuitively in alternation, students may gain a fuller understanding, consisting of knowing and

also appreciating or valuing the subject matter. Dewey (1933) also related undergoing or experiencing the subject matter to the quality of students' reflective thinking and to the construction of new and vivid knowledge. Similarly, Scharmer (2007) related the quality of receptiveness and openness within the state of presencing to the (creative) development of new knowledge.

The second domain is students' personal development. Biesta (2005) put forward that 'coming into presence' offers students entry into learning about their own subjectivity. By means of their full engagement, students can have their own responses and give their own meaning to the subject matter and to the situations in which they take part. Their responses and meanings can reflect their specific personal values, opinions, interests and goals (cf. Peschl, 2007). Thus, being present can be both 'reflexive and reflective; that is, instead of receiving the world or the other, I may receive myself' (Noddings, 2013, p. 59). What is more, presence has been conceived of as a value that must be nurtured within education, allowing students to become engaged with and attentive to the world (cf. Dewey, 1933; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). For example, citing Kierkegaard, Greene (1977) discussed the meaning of 'awakening' students so as to enable them to pay full attention to life and to 'become aware of their "personal mode of existence", their responsibility as individuals in a changing and problematic world' (p. 120). In this sense, presence has an existential meaning – for who the students are and become as unique persons (cf. Biesta, 2014; Peschl, 2007) – and is grounded in a moral imperative 'that can root the world of teaching and learning in its essential purpose, the creation of a just and democratic society' (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 284).

Drawing from these philosophical and theoretical insights, we argue that presence as a quality of engagement relates to students' whole development: to their academic learning and personal development, including their responsible engagement with the world. Yet, the question is whether students actually experience presence while they are in class and what this looks like. Our research questions are therefore:

- (1) How do secondary school students talk about presence?
- (2) How can students' experiences of presence in daily classroom practice be characterised and what are the variations and nuances within their experiences?
- (3) What typifies situations in which students experience presence?

Methodology

In line with our aim to gain a deep understanding of students' experiences of presence, we adopted a phenomenological approach. In order to achieve our research aim, we needed to stay as close as possible to students' descriptions of their experiences of presence, rather than explaining them. Van Manen's (2014) hermeneutic phenomenology offered a point of departure for data collection and analyses of students' 'lived through' experiences. The hermeneutic approach refers to a methodology aimed at interpreting and unveiling the phenomenon as experienced by the participants through their stories of their 'lived through' experiences. We further assumed that presence could be part of students' experiences as situated in everyday classroom practice. Because of its emphasis on the lifeworld as a dynamic and meaningful background of experiences, we used the reflective lifeworld research approach (K. Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström,

2008). In addition, informed by this approach, we adopted a ‘bridled’ – open and critically reflective – attitude towards students’ experiences of presence and during the process of understanding their experiences.

We used focus groups, which are informal group discussions among a small number of people (Wilkinson, 2004), to create a safe and trusted peer group environment in which the peer interactions might encourage students to become aware of and reflect on the various aspects of their experiences (Freeman & Mathison, 2008).

Participants

This study investigated the perspectives of 50 secondary school students, who participated in 12 focus groups (see Table 1 for an overview of the participating groups).

Participants were selected in collaboration with 12 teachers from our network, from 10 different schools in a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To vary the context, the selected schools had either a traditional or an alternative educational programme. Among the latter were a Waldorf school and two schools with a new alternative educational programme, generally focusing on autonomous student work and broad development of students. Students should: 1) Be from the same group; 2) Have the capacity to reflect on their experiences; and 3) Be diverse across gender, motivation and learning achievement. Informed consent was obtained from the students and their parents.

Data collection

Two rounds of 12 focus groups were conducted at the schools between February and June 2018, with the first author as ‘moderator’. In the first round, the research topic was introduced to students,¹ and they were asked to discuss their experiences. These exploratory focus groups lasted 30–45 minutes each. On the same day, the first author attended classes with the students, in order to get better acquainted with them and their educational context.

Subsequently, in order to enable students to describe their experiences of presence as ‘lived through’ (K. Dahlberg et al., 2008; Van Manen, 2014, p. 354), we incorporated a preparation period for the second round of focus groups. Over 10 school days, the

Table 1. Overview of the participating groups of students.

School	Type of educational programme	Group	Number of students	Gender distribution	Grade	Age in years
1	Traditional	A	5	3m/2f	7	12–13
2	Traditional	B	5	5f	12	17–18
3	Traditional	C	4	2m/2f	10	15–16
4	Traditional	D	4	2m/2f	10	15–16
5	Traditional	E	4	2m/2f	11	16–17
6	Alternative	F	4	1m/3f	7	12–13
7	Traditional	G	4	2m/2f	10	15–16
7	Traditional	H	4	2m/2f	9	14–15
8	Traditional	I	4	2m/2f	10	15–16
9	New alternative	J	4	2m/2f	8	13–14
9	New alternative	K	4	2m/2f	11	16–17
10	New alternative	L	4	2m/2f	8	13–14

students collected their experiences of presence in *subject-matter-oriented* classes, as these are often associated with lower levels of student engagement than, for example, drama or sports classes (Tze et al., 2016). Their experiences were registered each day, using a questionnaire, and used as input for the second round of focus groups. Immediately after the focus groups, the registered data were deleted.

In the second round of focus groups, students discussed their most vividly remembered collected experiences. Exercising restraint, the moderator only prompted to exploring the lived experience more deeply, to make sure that conversations addressed a minimum of one experience from each participant and to ensure that all participants contributed. The focus groups in the second round lasted 60–100 minutes each.

In each round of the focus groups, considerable time was unexpectedly spent on discussion of nonexamples of presence or everyday educational experiences. For example, students discussed a lesson during which they had completely tuned out. They elaborated on the instruction and assignments, how they felt and what they and fellow students did in that particular moment. The moderator's first inclination was to bring the conversation back to the experiences of presence. Here, bridling was particularly conducive to practising 'waiting attention' and to curiosity about the unexpected, in trying to do justice to presence as experienced by the students and to see it with all its horizons (e.g. K. Dahlberg et al., 2008). Specifically, she did not intervene in students' conversation and listened attentively so as to gain an understanding of the inherent meanings as expressed by the students.

Data analysis

Data analysis aimed at describing the commonalities as well as the variations and nuances within students' experiences of presence. We used the following data analysis strategies: holistic reading, analytical structuring and development of themes. Following the hermeneutic principles of reflective lifeworld research, these strategies were not strict sequential steps, but continuous back and forth movements (K. Dahlberg et al., 2008).

Holistic reading

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. By relistening, reading and rereading the data, we familiarised ourselves with the transcripts and gained a preliminary understanding of the data as a whole.

Data analysis research question 1

The analysis of how students talked about presence included data related to students' everyday educational experiences, revealing a broader perspective on how students spontaneously talked about presence. Holistic reading incited analytical questions regarding the interaction among students (cf. Morgan, 2012), the connections they made between experiences of presence and everyday experiences, and the dominance of particular experiences or situational contexts. These analytical questions were the guiding principle for an analysis per group. Here, bridling was applied by questioning our first understandings and by going back to the data, for example, re-listening to some focus group discussions. We moved back and forth several times between the data and the preliminary results, changing our understandings over time. For example, we initially

understood that students situated presence in opposition to the habits and routines in their everyday practice. Later, we gained a more nuanced view of students' talk about presence as transcending these habits and routines. Finally, the answers were structured and analysed per analytical question in order to reveal meaningful patterns across the groups.

Data analysis research questions 2 and 3

Focusing on students' experiences of presence and the situational context, these data were analytically structured by marking meaning units that reflected individual or shared meanings of students' experiences of presence within a particular situation. By selectively reading each meaning unit, significant statements by students were identified capturing the meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2014). These statements were compared and integrated into codes that reflected a commonality and, then, on a more abstract level, clustered into themes. For example, significant statements about noticing a new interest, quality or opinion when being present were clustered under the initial code 'New self-knowledge'. We developed additional codes such as 'Coming to understand it' and 'Getting a new view on things', which were close to the students' statements. We generated codes that captured a pattern in students' experiences and that included the individual and situational variations in students' lived experiences. Subsequently, when clustering codes that seemed to share a unifying feature together into themes, we noticed, for example, codes that seemed to cluster around what we initially called 'New awareness and understanding'.

In addition, patterns and variations within the themes and dynamics within the situations 'that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon' were identified (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 80; K. Dahlberg et al., 2008). During this process we moved several times dialectically between concrete meaning units, significant statements and codes on the one hand, and abstract formulations of themes on the other (K. Dahlberg et al., 2008). For example, examining our codes and significant statements within the theme 'New awareness and understanding' in more detail, we identified that the codes clustered either around the students' self or around the subject matter. We then constructed one theme using all of the codes relating to the students' new awareness of themselves – 'Discovering oneself' – and moved the newly labelled codes 'Coming to understand the subject matter' and 'Seeing relevance to the world/life' to a cluster of codes around the subject matter, which we finally labelled as 'Engaging with the subject matter'. Application of the hermeneutic circle deepened our insight into the codes that reflected a unique and specific feature of students' in-the-moment experiences. For example, an initial code, 'Putting in effort to reach a personal goal', appeared to be a variation of 'Being focused and energetic', and was therefore included therein. Additionally, some codes were removed because they referred to what students had experienced afterwards and not in the moment, such as 'Retaining learning'. We used verbs in naming the codes and themes to underscore the active character of students' experiences of presence in class. As we wished to remain as open as possible to students' experiences of presence, theory informed our interpretive understandings in the final stage of data analysis (Vagle, 2014) and illuminated meanings that were present in the data, but that were hidden before (H. Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020).

The process of data analysis resulted in three themes that show the variations in participants' experiences of presence, as relating to the subject matter, the interaction and to the 'self', which are formulated as 'Engaging with the subject matter', 'Belonging and connecting in interaction' and 'Discovering oneself', respectively (see [Table 2](#) for an overview of themes, codes and illustrative examples).

Trustworthiness

To support trustworthiness, the first author kept an audit trail in which she described her considerations, decisions with justifications, steps taken during data collection and data analysis and (preliminary) results and conclusions (Akkerman, Admiraal, Brekelmans, & Oost, 2008). Particular attention was paid to the act of bridling by reflecting critically on her understanding and preconceptions as meaning was being produced. Additionally, two types of dialogic dependability checks were conducted, based on intersubjective confirmation (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009). First, in meetings with all authors – once every six weeks – the recent part of this audit trail was discussed and consensus was reached through discussion and mutual critique of the process, the preliminary results and each researcher's interpretation. In this way, decisions, rationales and potential consequences within the entire research process could be consciously considered and the rigour of the process verified (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, and in greater detail, in the final stage of data analysis, the third author checked the themes and codes for the appropriateness of the first author's

Table 2. Overview of themes, codes and illustrative examples (RQ 2 and 3).

Themes	Themes and codes	Illustrative examples
'Engaging with matter'	Being focused and energetic	... with all my attention, only working on that. I also asked a lot of questions.
	Being interested/emotionally involved	It was out of my own drive. Because I found it really interesting, I wanted to know all about it. Then I also sort of started to enjoy it.
	Thinking and visualising	... that I really started to imagine it, [...] thinking up examples myself, not just facts.
	Doing and sensing	... that you can see it, hold it in your hands, finding out what it is. I just really took it in.
	Coming to understand the subject matter	I realised: 'I get it!' And then I thought: 'This was really useful' and I wanted to get on with ...
'Belonging and connecting in interaction'	Seeing relevance to the world/life	... and then I thought: 'So that's how you can understand why someone like Trump came to power!'
	Enjoying togetherness	Because all of us were very focused, thinking about the best way [...] it was also much more fun!
	Being interested in others and other points of view	Then you see that there are all these opinions, for me that is very interesting to listen to.
	Enjoying being an active part of instruction	I really enjoyed it and I was really into it ... then you read a piece of text and you know what that movement is, then you want to discuss it.
	Feeling acknowledged and valued	Then you also have the feeling that you matter, that you contribute to the understanding of the material.
'Discovering oneself'	Feeling self-confident/proud	Yeah, oh wow, suddenly like: I can do it! I am not always the last girl tagging along.
	Opening up of new perspectives	That you can look at it in a different way. That's what you suddenly get, hey, your world, it's not just about your world.
	Sensing where one stands	Because of this I know what I am passionate about, I can take that along.

interpretations. Differences in interpretation were discussed and resolved, and 100% agreement was achieved. These discussions led, for example, to adapting the code ‘Thinking, visualising and connecting to own experiences’ to ‘Thinking and visualising’, because students did not connect with their own experiences in all meaning units; it turned out to be a variation. In addition, the labels of some codes were adapted to use terms closer to the language of students.

Results

The research questions structure the descriptions of the results. First, we describe how students talked about presence. Because the students did not experience presence in isolation, their experiences of presence (second research question) and the situational aspects that surrounded their experiences (third research question) are described together (cf. Vagle, 2014).

Students’ talk about experiences of presence

In the first round of the focus groups after we had introduced the topic and asked for students’ experiences, many groups immediately started to give examples, while a few discussed that they rarely have such experiences. However, even among the students who did give examples, the occasional nature of the occurrence of presence became a topic of discussion.

Furthermore, in the second round, students compared their lived experiences of presence to everyday experiences in class. The reason for this was that they only experienced presence a few times during the previous 10 days in which they had collected their experiences of presence: maybe once each school day or – exceptionally – twice. Their everyday experiences were either characterised as neutral – ‘paying attention and doing what has to be done’ (student group J, 8th grade) – or by ‘boredom’, ‘repetition’ and ‘predictability’. It is important to emphasise that students did not perceive the routine in itself as a problem; several groups explicitly discussed that certain structures and schedules were viewed as necessary and even pleasant. However, for them presence implied transcending such habits and routines, and the teacher played a crucial role in this. The excerpt below is an example of such a conversation among students (group K, 11th grade). This conversation started after student 1 (S1) had shared her lived experience of presence in History class and told about the teacher (excerpts have been translated from Dutch and we use numbers to refer to students).

S1: [...] He really engaged in conversation with us.

S2: Yeah, while with a lot of teachers, it just keeps coming and you don’t have time to digest it. [...]

S3: Yeah, or often you just get an assignment: ‘Explain this or that ... in four words.’ You know exactly what’s coming. [...]

S2: You lean back a bit and take in some of it ... or not.

S1: With W [teacher] I realised I have never even thought of that [...] I started to imagine it, because I related it to what I experience myself.

S4: Yes, yes! I think that is also because W is very interested in his own subject and he includes us as if we are one big history group. He really wants us to think. [...]

S1: While in many classes you totally don't feel useful.

Several elements of this excerpt are exemplary for the focus groups. First, students talked with enthusiasm. Second, students reflected together on how different teacher behaviour and attitudes influenced their experiences of presence. Third, the main part of the conversations consisted of sharing and comparing their experiences of presence. For example, in one focus group, two students (group B, 12th grade) explained how they were totally immersed in instruction about plants in Biology class: one by listening attentively and the other by drawing the elements of the plant. For a third student, this lesson was not an experience of presence at all. By discussing both their mutual recognition and the differences, this group developed a shared meaning of the significant elements in their experiences of presence: teachers' interactive teaching style and variations in their personal preferences for a learning style (e.g. learning from theory, by doing or within interactions). Apart from that, students related differences to variations in their needs (e.g. structure, autonomy) or in sympathies with a teacher, or to various perceptions of the meaning of the subject matter. Differences between the focus groups mainly pertained to the extent to which the students explicitly reflected on these significant elements. Fourth, in many focus groups, students delved deeper into the meaning of interaction as the most frequent situational context for their experiences of presence.

Students' experiences and situational contexts

Students' experiences of presence can be understood as falling within three themes relating to the subject matter, to interaction and to their self, which are formulated as: 1) 'Engaging with the subject matter'; 2) 'Belonging and connecting in interaction'; and 3) 'Discovering oneself'. Students reported their direct experiences. In line with the phenomenological tradition we will describe them in this results section as such.

'Engaging with the subject matter'

The first theme, 'Engaging with the subject matter', consisted of a variety of several elements (see [Figure 1](#)), which differed strongly between the students and across particular situations.

When present, students experienced focused attention and a sense of being energetic: they felt a need or a desire to know more about or to understand the subject matter, to search for meaning or to solve the problem. In one variation, focus and energy were experienced as putting in effort. Here, being present meant deliberately bringing themselves to focus their attention and to direct all their energy towards grasping the subject matter. Usually this was experienced in a situation in which they wanted to achieve a certain goal, for example, doing well on an upcoming test or doing their best for a teacher they appreciated. Below is an example of this. Students (group E, 11th grade)

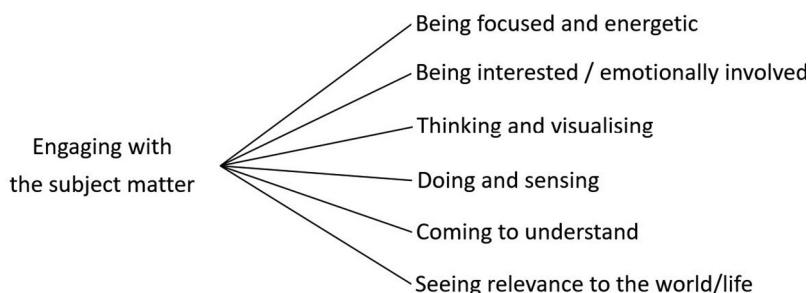


Figure 1. Overview of codes within the theme ‘Engaging with the subject matter’.

talked about an assignment in which they had to give a recommendation about ‘green chemistry’ in Chemistry class.

S1: I was completely concentrating at that moment. That was necessary too; it was hard work.

S2: Yes, because in the end you are expected to give your recommendation and he has high expectations. I was really involved, thinking quite deeply. You really have to understand it well if you are going to draw a conclusion by the deadline.

S3: But I also thought it was all very similar and overdone, I really tuned out.

S2: Not me, I started to find it more interesting, because I was learning more about it and understood it better.

Within their engagement, some students experienced a gradual discovery of what was interesting about the subject matter, whereas another lost interest.

In a variation that occurred much more often, students felt that they were effortlessly focused and energetic. They found themselves taken up with the subject matter. Here, their interest was captured and their curiosity was aroused. This is revealed in the next excerpt, in which students (group A, 7th grade) shared their experiences of presence in a Geography class. In this situation an interactive instruction about natural disasters was combined with an individual assignment consisting of drawing a particular disaster:

S1: [...] She makes us think about the disasters and how they begin.

S2: And because we don’t have them here, you’d like to know more about them. [...] Yes, I was really thinking a lot about how they begin and why we don’t have them in the Netherlands.

S1: I was also thinking about the people who live there [in places where the disasters happen], because we don’t know what that is like. Are they afraid or is it just normal for them, how are you supposed to live if your village is destroyed?

S3: Yes, I paid more attention than normal, I’m usually easily distracted because Geography really isn’t my subject. But because we were also drawing those confetti-streams, I could picture it in my mind.

Students often also experienced becoming emotionally involved. Positive feelings of enthusiasm or fascination for the subject matter, but also feelings of sadness or anger, were often a source of meaning making, as the experience of one student (group B, 12th grade) engaging with the topic of 'slavery' in English class revealed:

I was a bit shocked, yes, sad as well [...] Because of her [the teacher's] passionate story, it became very personal and I thought: 'This is our past!' I really had to ask myself how people could have done that, how they looked down on black people, and yes, maybe didn't regard them as people [...] Then I thought about what we are now hearing about human trafficking.

Additionally, students mentioned feelings of frustration or anger in several experiences of presence, primarily in a situation where they experienced a difficulty, for example, in grasping the subject matter or in developing their own opinion. This was revealed in a student's experience (group C, 10th grade) in Philosophy class. The teacher presented a proposition that the students were expected to discuss:

I just wanted to know how I thought about it. I was really encouraged to think critically, but it was also frustrating. I still don't have a clear opinion on it now.

In a few lived experiences, the subject matter happened to address the students' interests. However, in most situations the teachers played a crucial role in the students' becoming interested. Their genuine enthusiasm, contextual instruction and use of classroom interaction were a distinctive part of the situations in which presence occurred.

Our analysis revealed different ways in which students were engaging with the subject matter. First, they were engaged by thinking and visualising. The excerpts about natural disasters and slavery provide examples of an inner dialogue, in which the students asked themselves questions, made connections and imagined themselves in a situation. Second, students were engaging by doing and sensing, which took place in experiential learning situations. For example, when students (group H, 9th grade) had to dissect the muscles and tendons of a chicken in Biology class, they were present while exploring by touching, smelling and seeing. Both ways could also occur simultaneously.

Their engaging with the subject matter was experienced as pleasant, easy, difficult or frustrating. However, in many cases, engaging with the subject matter was experienced as meaningful for coming to understand the subject matter or its relevance to the world or their own lives.

'Belonging and connecting in interaction'

Many lived experiences of presence occurred in situations of classroom or peer interaction. Presence within this interaction was experienced as a sense of belonging and connecting to the teacher and fellow students. The elements within this theme (see Figure 2) differed strongly between the students and particular situations.

When being present in interaction, students had a sense of being and working together and they enjoyed this togetherness. Below are two examples of this.

Students (group J, 8th grade) shared their experiences of a Dutch class:

S1: It was just really nice with the class. She [teacher] told us about a lot of theory, but now and then she made a joke and lost the plot completely.

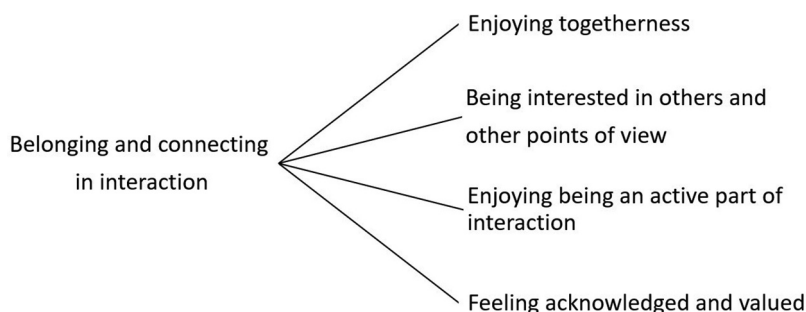


Figure 2. Overview of codes within the theme ‘Belonging and connecting in interaction’.

S2: Yeah, and when she started again, we joked back.

S1: And then there was just a lot of laughter in between. [...] We had fun together.

S3: Yeah, not just bang, bang, bang all the facts. This way, I want to pay more attention.

Four students (group L, 8th grade) who had all gathered multiple experiences of presence in Mathematics classes, shared their experiences:

S1: I actually find maths horrible and I’m also not good at it. But because M [teacher] starts with a really deep question, we all try to figure out what the answer to that question is [...].

S2: Yes, and then everybody says something. We are, like, completing each other’s thoughts and, as a class, we were completely concentrating together.

S3: And he [teacher] was so enthusiastic about what we were doing.

S2: [...] You don’t feel like everything is coming from him, you are all solving that problem. I get really motivated by the others.

The students in the first excerpt referred to an *atmosphere* of togetherness and highlighted connecting socially. They reported how this atmosphere had contributed to engaging with the subject matter. The students in the second example were engrossed in the here-and-now activity of engaging with the subject matter together. They emphasised connecting cognitively. Enjoying togetherness took place within particular situations that depended upon mutual trust and entering into each other’s contributions. Togetherness was not equally important for all students, though. A few mentioned preferring to work independently or listen to instruction.

Students’ interest in others and other viewpoints was also manifest in their experiences of presence. This took place in situations in which they heard new strategies for tackling a problem or new and different opinions and experiences. Being present meant listening attentively and feeling engaged with others. The following excerpt, in which students (group I, 10th grade) talked about an interactive lesson on religion in Geography class, is an example of this:

S1: I found it really interesting when we talked about misunderstandings that can be caused by religion. Everybody had different ideas about this and the teacher and some other students started telling things about themselves, I could only sit and listen.

S2: I also heard a lot of things I really didn't know, about other students that I didn't know are religious, but also opinions that are very different from how I think. It makes you also think: 'Yeah, do I actually think this as well?'

Being present also meant for some students enjoying being an active part of the interaction. They felt a desire to share what they knew, experienced or thought, as revealed in this excerpt from a focus group in which the students (group K, 11th grade) discussed the several lived experiences of presence they had had in History class:

S3: I was sitting on the edge of my chair constantly raising my hand. I really like answering that kind of question from him, then you feel a little bit ...

S2: Yes, confidence and sort of [everyone is talking at the same time, very enthusiastically], yes, I really do understand, I've worked it out! [...]

S4: Mostly because you are part of something ... Yes, almost feeling that if I wasn't here, I couldn't have said it. You help with making sense of the material.

It is noteworthy these students felt that their contribution mattered for coming to understand or make meaning of the subject matter together. Being immersed in active participation especially took place in situations in which the teacher was seriously interested in students' thoughts and ideas, noticed flaws in a respectful way and was open to being surprised by students. Then, they felt safe and free to inquire and invited to participate.

Whether presence was experienced as enjoying togetherness, being interested or active participation varied greatly. An important consistency is that they felt acknowledged and valued as an individual and as a group within the classroom interaction. According to students, this occurred when a teacher expressed care for and commitment to them as persons, to their learning and their future.

'Discovering oneself'

Students' experiences of presence were often accompanied by instances or flashes of self-discovery. Our analysis revealed three aspects thereof (see [Figure 3](#)).

First, and most common, was the experience of self-confidence or pride. This often occurred in a situation in which the students felt they had excelled themselves, as the next example from a student (group D, 10th grade) reveals. In this situation, a new teacher, while instructing, explicitly builds on the materials from last year:

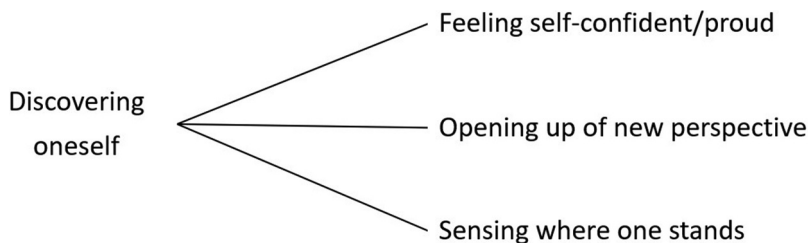


Figure 3. Overview of codes within the theme 'Discovering oneself'.

It was just simple mathematical instruction. New material gets explained and connected to old material. [...] last year I didn't understand any of it. And now? I continued to think it through and was taking notes, I don't always do that. And I was so driven: 'Hey, it's working', and noticed that I began to trust myself and that helped me to stay focused.

The student's description of his experience shows that the feeling of self-confidence was part of the flow of events in a natural way: the awareness of his self-confidence came up and gave way to the next event. Multiple descriptions of students' experiences showed a similar pattern. They had a sudden awareness of self-confidence in the midst of an unexpected accomplishment or the efforts they were making.

The following excerpt provides an example of how students' new perspectives and also sensing where they stand emerged within an experience of presence. The students (group L, 8th grade) shared their experiences of a simulated electoral debate, in which they had to defend the views of a political party that was assigned to them, in Dutch class (in which debating is part of the curriculum). This happened prior to the elections in the Netherlands:

S1: I sometimes really got a bit annoyed, when someone had a proposition and I completely disagreed. Like nooooo, you can't say that! Because you are totally absorbed in it.

S3: Yes, you are really occupied, thinking of: What am I going to say, what do I think, what would the party say?

S4: Yes, and then I really put myself in their position. We had the PVV [Dutch populist political party], and I would never vote for them. But when I looked a bit further, it's hard times for people, you understand that it is probably better for these people when things change. [...]

S2: Look, most kids think: 'Oh, well, the party my parents vote for is the best party' [...] and yeah, now you really look and think about your own opinion.

S1: Yeah, really your own opinion. I ended up with a whole different party than my parents.

By projecting himself into the perspective of the people who might vote for the populist party, a new perspective on the lives of these people had opened up for student 4 (S4). The discovery of new and different opinions also implied – the beginning of – reflection on themselves. They made a connection to their taken for granted views, and started to develop their own opinion. In several descriptions of lived experiences of presence, students referred to such a moment of awareness of a new perspective on the subject matter, the world or themselves. These experiences of presence thereby provide a view of the student's possible change or growth. Remarkably, students from the three schools with an alternative educational programme referred more often and more specifically to an experience of a new awareness of themselves.

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to gain insight into students' experiences of presence in daily classroom practice. Students recognised presence and talked with enthusiasm about their

experiences of presence. At the same time, we found that these were non-regular experiences for them. Students' experiences of presence can be characterised in three ways: (1) Engaging with the subject matter with focus and energy; (2) Belonging and connecting to others and otherness in interaction; and (3) Discovering oneself, often in small and unexpected moments.

The experiences of presence for the students in general seem to connect their selves to their learning. Our analysis reveals how students' self is manifest in each of the three themes that we found. Students' individuality was disclosed in their unique *engaging with the subject matter* (cf. Noddings, 2013) and in making their own connections with the subject matter. When having a sense of *belonging and connecting in interaction*, students felt acknowledged and valued in who they are as individuals and a group and in their contribution to the interaction. The theme of *discovering oneself* reveals small moments of reflection on their individuality that had become manifest while being present. Scholars have likewise acknowledged this connection to the self in relation to presence (Greene, 1973; Peschl, 2007; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Our research has deepened our understanding of this connection by offering insights into concrete and daily classroom practices.

Noddings (2013) suggested that presence is related to students' academic learning (cf. Dewey, 1933; Scharmer, 2007) and personal development (cf. Peschl, 2007). Likewise, Greene (1977) related presence to students' personal development, and in particular to the development of responsible engagement with society. Feeling the need or desire to learn more about the subject matter played an important role in all students' experiences of presence. In addition, we found that the experience of presence in all cases involved coming to understand the subject matter and/or its relevance. In conclusion, students' experiences of presence were clearly connected to their academic learning.

Our findings offer some indications of the relation of presence to students' personal development. Typically, such development was experienced incrementally. We found occurrences of discovering oneself, which may potentially give rise to students' personal development. Within these occurrences, students mainly identified a broadened view of the world and becoming more confident and autonomous in their way of thinking and acting. Reflecting on our results from the perspective of Biesta's (2010) well-known distinction between three functions of education – qualification, socialisation and subjectification – this suggests that presence might not merely contribute to students' qualification, but also to their socialisation and subjectification within subject-oriented classes.

Our analysis also revealed that students' experiences of presence became manifest in various ways. The variation in students' mental, emotional and physical engagement was highly salient. A combination of being mentally and emotionally involved was most common, but other combinations or only engaging mentally occurred as well. Even though we did find confirmation of the integral nature of presence, it was not always articulated as an integral experience by the students (cf. Dewey, 1934). Overall, the many variations that occurred in how students experienced presence and in what particular situations, suggest that experiences of presence are strongly related to who the student is and to what becomes relevant to them in that moment. As far as the situational context is concerned, our analysis does show clear similarities in the nature of the situations. The situations in which students experienced presence had four characteristics: (1)

Meaningfulness of the subject matter and classroom activities; (2) *Student participation*; (3) *Responsivity* of the teacher and fellow students; and (4) *Otherness* of viewpoints and insights. In our view, these situations were new and fresh. In other words, what happened was affected by approaching and involving the students as individual and unique and thereby transcended the habits and routines in daily classroom practice.

The school context seems to be related to how students experienced presence to a limited extent. We found only one variation in students' experiences of presence that might be associated with the difference in educational programmes. Students from schools with an alternative educational programme more frequently and explicitly related experiences of presence to their personal development. A possible explanation may be that these schools aim at stimulating students' self-reflection and awareness.

This study indicates that presence was a non-regular experience for the students. A possible explanation may be found in the current educational context, which is, in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere, characterised by rather fixed curricular content and a strong testing culture, including high-stakes testing (Verger, Parcerisa, & Fontdevila, 2019). Such a context is hardly conducive for using students' subjective experiences as meaningful input in the educational process. And, lastly, given the relational and inter-subjective nature of presence (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), there is strong dependence on the teacher, which also became very clear from our results. The same current educational context may not offer enough opportunities to teachers to go beyond instrumental teaching practices (cf. Mora, 2011).

Towards a further conceptualisation of presence in class

Our theoretical background began from Rodgers and Raider-Roth's (2006) description, which we supplemented with four characteristics of the subjective experience of presence in class derived from educational philosophy and the notion of 'presencing' (Scharmer, 2000; Senge et al., 2004). These theoretical understandings allowed for a profound interpretation of our data, revealing meanings that might have otherwise remained hidden. Now that we have analysed and interpreted our data, we see reasons to revisit the concept of presence in class. We sought to bridge the space between the epistemic and empirical concepts of presence in class by operationalising presence in basic terms that are close to the experiences of students. Because students recognised this operationalisation when the research was introduced to them and because it evoked stories of lived experiences of presence, we may conclude that presence was indeed empirically experienced by them. The characteristics of their experiences may contribute to a further conceptualisation of presence in class. First, what our study contributes is mindful of how students' self – their individual and unique being – is manifest in engaging with the subject matter by making their own connections (Theme 1). Second, our study underscores the significance of others: teacher and fellow students. Within this intersubjective experience, presence was experienced as feeling that one is seen and understood and as connecting to others and otherness (Theme 2). Third, what we specifically add is the active involvement of students when being present, which is revealed in their thinking, visualising, doing and sensing while engaging with the subject matter (Theme 3) and active participation in classroom interactions (Theme 2). Based on the findings in this study, we suggest a new definition, which complements that by Rodgers and Raider-Roth

(2006, p. 267). Therefore, the experience of presence for students is (our additions in italics):

One of recognition, of feeling *that one is* seen and understood *in who one is as an individual and unique being*, not just emotionally but cognitively, physically and even spiritually. It is a feeling of being safe, where one is drawn to risk because of the discoveries it might reveal. *It is engaging with the subject matter and connecting with others and otherness in interaction, and - in the midst of this* – it is the excitement of discovering one's self in the context of the larger world, rather than the worry of losing one's self, in the process.

Due to the exploratory character of this study, we still have limited insight into the status of the three themes we found. Are these themes reflective of three meanings that constitute the actual essence of presence for students? In other words: if one of the three themes does not occur, are we still witnessing presence, or maybe another phenomenon? Or, do these themes indicate individualisations or particulars of students' experiences of presence (K. Dahlberg et al., 2008)? A combination of qualitative and quantitative follow-up research among students that focuses on validating the recognition of these themes in relation to experiences of presence may shed more light on these questions.

Implications for teaching

Presence seems to be a meaningful experience to students for developing a broadened view of the world and becoming more confident and autonomous in their way of thinking and acting. This study reveals that students' experiences of presence were not coincidental. On the contrary, the interaction between students, teacher and subject matter provided the situational context in which presence could emerge. As noted earlier, this situational context was characterised by meaningfulness, student participation, responsivity and otherness. Accordingly, realising such a situational context may have implications for teaching.

First, 'meaningfulness' implies that there must be a motivational arousal of interest for students, something that 'awakens' them for the content. Our findings suggest that teachers' enthusiasm for the subject matter and teachers' contextual instruction are an important incentive. Second, as our results reveal, teaching for presence involves encouraging students' participatory interaction with the subject matter (cf. Dewey, 1938), in order to make their own connections. This implies recognising students as persons possessing unique traits and abilities as well as incorporating students' subjective experiences (of the value) of the subject matter (cf. Bates, 2019). It also implies listening to students and engaging them in posing questions, voicing critique, their own viewpoints and wonder, and thus making space for otherness. This resonates with Schultz's (2003) research on 'listening'. Listening, which Schultz places at the centre of teaching, means attending and responding with deep understanding to students and encouraging students to do so in interactions with each other.

To conclude, teaching for presence ties in with a concept of teaching suggested by several educational researchers as complex and interactive (e.g. Loughran, 2013). This view of teaching means that teachers' work 'depends on making deliberative decisions about how to understand and act on who their students are and what they bring to school [...]

and how to construct knowledge with their students' (Cochran-Smith, 2015, p. 5). Furthermore, presence calls for a relation between teacher and student that is in part open-ended and unpredictable (cf. Säfström, 2003). To this end, educational policy in general and schools in particular could – or may be should – offer more 'free space', in which students may develop as human beings, free from the constant pressure to perform.

Note

1. Because the epistemic concept of presence may be far removed from students' empirical and lived experiences, we operationalised presence in class. To offer students as much space as possible for their interpretations, and do justice to our theoretical underpinnings, we introduced presence as: 'This research is about moments in a lesson, when you are completely involved and you have the feeling that something important is happening. It could be a moment when you feel happy or enthusiastic, but also differently, maybe sad or angry.'

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