Penal Issues

Violence in Elementary Schools. The Difficult Construction of an Educational Order

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The research discussed here was aimed at gaining an understanding of the phenomenon of violence in elementary schools, based on the way it is experienced and perceived by teachers and pupils. The decision to describe acts as violent was left up to the respondents. What teachers and pupils view as violent is then found to differ radically from what is recorded by the statistical instruments of the French Ministry of Education. For example, respondents very rarely mentioned thefts as violence, whereas they represent a large part of the violence recorded by the Ministry's central statistical system (SIGNA, and later SIVIS[1]). The idea was to uncover what respondents view as violence and to gain a perception of how this violent dimension affects educational and professional experience. As will be seen, the outcome is far from validating the representation of schools as besieged, any more than as havens of peace (point 1).

Methodology

The study covered a representative sample of elementary schools in one of France's largest school districts (*académies*), the Lille district. Sampling was based on three broad criteria: category of the school (« ordinary », « high-priority », « violent area »[2]), size and geographic location. It covered 31 schools, twelve of which were matched on these criteria to allow two-by-two comparisons. Members of the research team administered the questionnaires to CE1 (second grade) and CM2 (fifth grade) pupils and their teachers, the latter being relieved of their classroom duties to enable them fill out the questionnaires. Questionnaires for pupils included 74 questions and those for teachers, 125. Questions touched on violence suffered, committed or seen since the beginning of the school year, the circumstances and consequences, as well as the respondent's perception of the school climate. Items pertaining to the school's location and the pupils' social background were included in the questionnaires.

Over 2,000 pupils' questionnaires and about one hundred teachers' questionnaires were analysed. Rates of violence were calculated per school, based on respondents' answers about violence suffered, committed or seen. These rates were used to allocate schools to three groups: the first included schools with significantly above-average rates (« violentschools+ »), the second those with significantly below-average rates (« violentschools- »), while the third contained all the others (« violentschools= »). Synthetic indices were constructed on the basis of respondents' responses to a series of questions on the various components of the school climate so as to determine those weighing most on inter-school variance of violence. They were used to calculate scores, three of which were found to have a highly significant correlation with rates of violence: work, fairness and learning scores. The *learning* climate depends on the stress placed on negative sanctions of behaviour and academic achievement, and on pupils' perception of the type of relationship developed by teachers, in terms of equal treatment. The *fairness* climate is closely linked to that learning climate. It measures whether pupils feel they personally were treated fairly, with respect to both sanctions for behaviour and evaluation of learning. It differs from the former, however, as pupils who claim that teachers have pets or scapegoats do not necessarily view that inequality as unfair. The *work* climate score measures the pupils' assessment of their own academic value, and the teachers' assessment of this value.

This quantitative approach is combined with a longitudinal dimension and supplemented with qualitative data. Thus, systematic data collection from pupils and teachers as well as from parents was conducted in a single « high priority » school, over a three-year period. The qualitative data were collected by direct observation within the school in and outside of the classroom, and by interviews with some pupils and all teachers. The quantitative data were obtained through the administration of a questionnaire to parents and pupils. Year 3 of this data collection coincided with the year when the questionnaire was administered to the sample of schools in that same school district. Another school in the sample, belonging to the same « high-priority » network and therefore addressing pupils with the same social characteristics while suffering from significantly more violence, was matched with the first school. Data collection was completed during the subsequent two years.

[1] The objective of SIGNA was « to make an exhaustive count of "serious" acts of violence occurring in and around schools » (Information note 06-03, MEN, **http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/02/6/4026.pdf**). With SIVIS, the Ministry of Education purports to refocus on the most serious acts. The new nomenclature is divided into 14 items (instead of 26 in SIGNA), under three headings: personal offences, property offences, and threats to safety.

[2] Schools classed in the prevention of violence zone are mostly the same as those in the high-priority educational network. This classification, by the Ministry of Education, includes schools whose pupils come from the most underprivileged backgrounds.
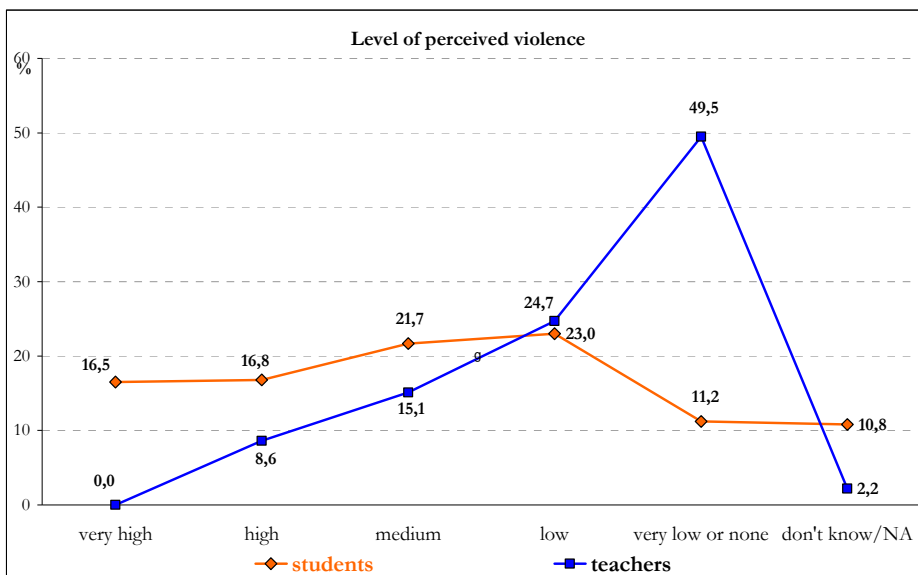
Whereas many studies are content to count incidents, the point here was, over and beyond the measurement of violence, to uncover the way those violent acts reported by respondents are defined, identified, handled and put to use. With this aim in view, we listened not only to the victim's viewpoint, but also to that of the perpetrator, be they pupils or teachers. Investigating both victims and perpetrators in a single study compels to reject the dominant interpretation of a social reality where each side is opposed to the other. Indeed, the boundaries between victims and perpetrators collapse under the weight of research findings (point 2). Even if we adopt the pupils' and their teachers' definition of violence, the rates of violence per school based on survey respondents vary enormously. The social characteristics of schoolchildren are correlated with violence, a case for inferring that its causes are external. However, schools with similar social characteristics may have very different rates of violence, a remark leading to explore the school climate (point 3). The monographic study of a school using the Freinet educational method shows how the school climate there rests on a teamwork that establishes a shared educational order accepted by all (point 4).

Violence as a significant part of the experience of teachers and even more so of pupils

Analysis of answers to the question: « *Since the beginning of the school year, has there been any violence in your school?* » comes to a conclusion that is surprising, at first glance. Pupils have a higher perceived level of violence in their school than their teachers: 33.3% of pupils see a « very high » or « high » level of violence in their school, as opposed to 8.6% of their teachers.

takes the form of conflicting relationship. Conflicts with parents arise when the latter challenge the teacher's decision – grading or punishment – pertaining to their child. Actually, what teachers view as violence is primarily whatever calls into question their authority as a teacher. This interpretation is strongly correlated with their feeling of a lack of consideration for their work and with a negative perception of pupils.

Victims who also report to have committed violence

Because their authority is challenged, and more generally because pupils misbehave, teachers are led to respond in ways that 13% of them describe as violent: « *I caught a boy by his clothes and threw him out violently* », « *one particularly difficult child in my class had overstepped the limits when he struck another pupil on his hand using a ruler: I did the same thing to him* ». Some feel that such violence is a necessary response to the children's violence. One teacher said that he « *stopped two pupils who were fighting* » because « *you have to put a stop to those little boxers or karatekas who think they can set the rules here, like they do at home!* » These reactions seem to be strategies for coping and face-saving: « *a child had a tantrum at lunch. I tried to be firm and composed so as contain him, to calm him down, but to no avail. So I had to carry him bodily into the classroom to finally get the upper hand and control the situation* ». It is noteworthy that over one fourth of teachers who are victims claim to have also committed violence.

Forty-eight per cent of pupils who were victims also reported to have inflicted violence (while 70% of those who committed violence claimed to have been victims as well). Many descriptions mention exchanges of blows and insults. Violence is portrayed as a response to provocation by peers: « *he began to get on my nerves, so I hit him* ». These challenges, which actually may be emotional (as is often the case for girls[4]) or physical, are meant to size each other up. They must be taken up, especially if there are witnesses, as is often the case, barring which one loses face and with it, one's status in the schoolyard society. When asked « *How did you react?* », « *I defended myself* » is by far the most frequent answer (41% of responses) in pupils who reported to have suffered from violence. Responding to an attack is a way of preventing it from happening again. When no other means of regulation inside the school is known or considered efficient, to fight back is a way of protecting oneself through self-defence: « *He tried to ex-*

Level of perceived violence

At the same time, when pupils and adults were asked « *Was someone violent with you in your school, this year?* » 41.3% of pupils answered yes. When asked « *Were you yourself ever violent with someone in your school this year?* » 28.2% of pupils answered yes. The proportion of pupils whose answer to the latter question was don't know amounted to 12.4 %, and 14.5% with respect to victimisation. These statements show that one dimension of pupils' school experience has to do with violence, a much-neglected dimension in public debate (where it is viewed as perpetrated by only a handful of children) but also in research on school violence by French-speaking sociologists. Children's responses to the next two questions: « *Tell about the last time someone was violent with you in your school* » and « *Tell about the last time you were violent with someone in your school* » give an idea of the nature of the behaviours deemed violent by students who were on either the giving or the receiving end. The vast majority

of acts were blows and fights among peers.

That blows and fights are viewed as violence calls into question the adult idea that children do not view this sort of thing as serious.

Violence at school looks very different when viewed by teachers: it is construed in relation to pupils and above all to their parents (teachers who claim to have suffered violence incriminate pupils in 29% of cases and parents in 59%[3]). The vast majority of situations described as violent and ascribed to a pupil were reactions to a teacher's request: « *a pupil who struggles, gesturing violently when refusing to leave the classroom as I requested (because of his unacceptable behaviour)* » or « *a pupil who categorically refused to do what I asked,* caused a rumpus outside the classroom ». When parents are involved, the violence

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[3] The categories « pupils' friends » and « superiors » each represent 6% of the people blamed for having inflicted some violence on teachers.

[4] Girls represent over 46% of the children who reported to have suffered from violence and 37% of those children who reported to have inflicted violence.

tort my snacks from me, but he didn't finish his sentence, finally ».

School climate is a factor affecting the level of violence

Conversely pupils' experience of violence is linked to the experience of being a social outcast, as early as elementary school. Schools in which violence is significantly above average are attended by pupils from those working class backgrounds where conditions are most precarious. The violence reported by pupils is characterised by pervasive physical brutality, is frequently collectively perpetrated, and involves multiple victimisation. More often than elsewhere, conflicts lead to hitting and fighting in the school yard. In this class of schools, 38.3% of reported victimisations were fights, 28% blows, with insults representing 14.6% of reported victimisations (respectively 26.5%, 21.1% and 11% in the class of schools where violence was lowest). In the latter group, on the other hand, rates are very high for quarrels and pushing and shoving. Another differential element for pupils in the most violent schools is the experience of multiple victimisation. Repeated bullying and harassment is ordinary fare among pupils there. Violence perpetrated by groups of more than four individuals is significantly more frequent (over one fourth of pupils claim to have had to cope with more than four assailants, as against 9.2% in schools with the lowest rates of violence).

Social segregation affects the school climate. Nevertheless, pupils' experience with violence may differ considerably in schools with similar social characteristics, including schools within the same high-priority school network or within the same violence-prevention area. Schools with no particular official label also have greatly differing levels of violence. They represent almost half of schools in the category with the highest levels of violence. Feelings of arbitrariness and unfairness are also more developed in schools where violence is greatest. This feeling of unfairness is very significantly correlated with punishment, not only when it sanctions pupils' behaviour, but for academic achievement as well. This is shown by the spatial proximity of these variables on the chart below.

ment, the less they have experiences of violence to report, and the more they seem to respect the school's norms. The issue raised, in the last analysis, is that of the legitimacy of school norms, which legitimacy rests more on the teacher's behaviour than on their status, and secondly, more on the internal functioning of the individual school than on the educational institution as such. This legitimacy develops through actual situations. It makes children's socialisation its focal point rather than a prerequisite for learning.

Joint construction of an educational order around a central objective

Climate is a differential factor among schools, then. Sometimes it is the product of a well-thought-out, deliberate educational project conducted by a team of teachers, as in the school studied here. Before the arrival of a new team inspired by Freinet's teaching method, people fled the school, whose very existence was threatened. Located in a suburb of Lille, it is attended by children from particularly underprivileged backgrounds and ranks fifth in the sample on the basis of social criteria (the highest rank having the greatest concentration of disadvantaged children). The control school, located in the same high-priority education network, ranks sixth. Three years later the school's bad reputation had disappeared, violence was no longer endemic, and academic achievement had improved significantly. Whereas the Freinet school was then in the average bracket in terms of violence, the control school stood out as having one of the highest rates (5th among the 31 schools in the sample).

Comparison with the other schools in the sample on year 3 shows a specific profile for the Freinet school. Pupils there reported to have been hit and insulted less, but to have experienced over twice as many quarrels and pushing and shoving, with the latter two types of incidents most frequent with children from the more affluent backgrounds. The differences are more significant when we look at the pupils' perception of violence in their school. They were asked, « *Is there any violence in your school?* » and « *If there is, what kind of violence?* » The category « *fights* » shows a difference of nearly 20 points between pupils at the Freinet school and the rest of the sample (respectively 20.2% and 39.8%). Analysis of responses to open questions over the three-year period shows a change in the nature of the acts described as violent, shifting from hitting and fights to pushing and shoving, and from insults to quarrels. At the same time, the percentage of non-response and « *don't know* »

Chart 1. Violence and feeling of unfairness at school (multiple correspondence analysis)
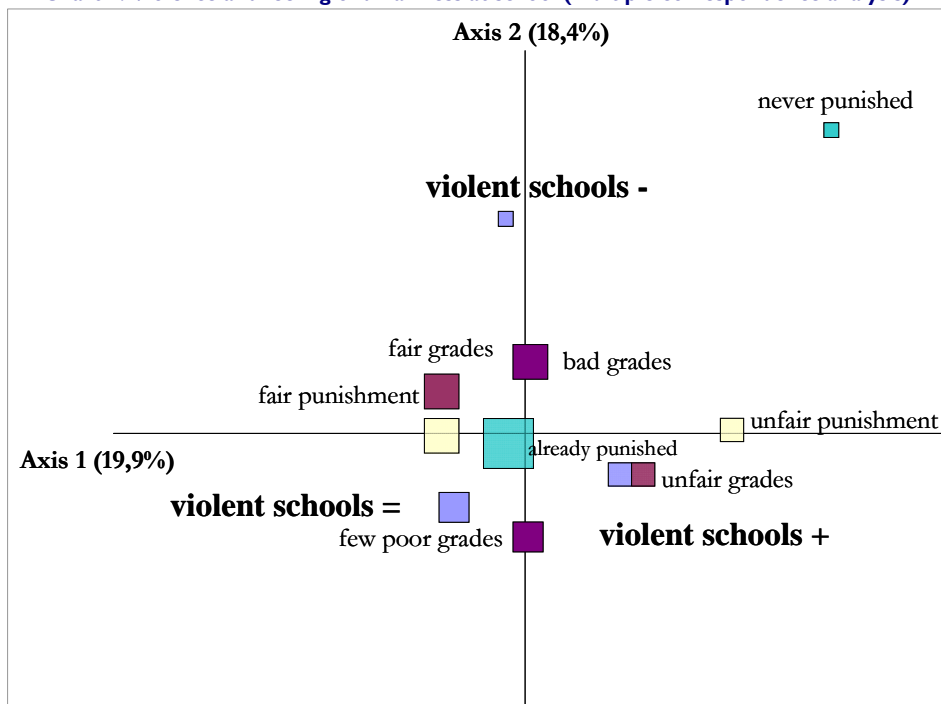
Note: This chart displays the positions of all 11 possible responses; the two factorial axes account for 33.8% of the variance.

Statistical analysis therefore points to the importance of the educational setting in accruing or attenuating experience of violence. The school climate has three components: work, learning, and fairness. The correlation is highest between rates of violence and scores for work. This is an intrinsically academic factor. Pupils in schools with the highest rates of violence are perceived as poor learners with no prospect of improvement and unworthy of receiving support from their teacher. Scores for work are significantly correlated with scores for fairness and for learning, which in turn are significantly correlated with scores for violence.

Conversely, the more pupils feel they are addressed as students capable of progressing and worthy of their teacher's support, within a school where everyone seems to receive equitable, fair treat-

declined, showing that violence is a meaningful notion for a growing number of pupils. This leads to the conclusion that representations of violence have changed, as shown by pupils' interpretation of situations as well as by their perception and labelling of incidents.

« Children's council » meetings helped pupils to assimilate a different perspective on situations and different ways of regulating them. In this council scheme the whole class, including the teacher, meets and deliberates on classroom issues and the problems encountered in schoolwork and behaviour. Everyone can make proposals in response to the difficulties voiced, and a vote is taken. This is a locus for socialisation, where new social skills for regulating school life are acquired. The core idea of this scheme is that rules should not be rooted in a teacher-pupil power-based relationship but should arise from a collective decision by the individuals subjected to those rules. The effective, ongoing participation of pupils in the regulation of school life, and the enforcement of rules voted by them produce a particularly strong feeling of fairness in that school.

The work climate is especially good here. When asked « *How do you like your school?* », pupils there massively responded « *it's great, it's fantastic* », explaining, « *I like my school a lot. You learn a lot* » or again, « *I really like what we do in the classroom, with the teachers. Activities. You learn things* ». They like to go to school and share the feeling that they really learn, as illustrated by these quotations. Aside from these positive evaluations, they also differ from the rest of the sample on year 3 by their answers to the question on what they like best in their school. There is a very significantly higher preference for the category « *learning activities* » (63.4% in the Freinet school as against 43.3% for the entire group of respondents): « *you learn about nice things, like medieval villages* ». If the category « *work* » is added, the differential rises to 27 points, with 82.9% and 55.7% respectively. The gap is even wider when this school is compared to others in the high-priority area. Deviant behaviour is not regulated by handling « *problem* » pupils individually in an attempt to socialise them so as to be able to teach them (a very strong tendency in some high-priority schools)
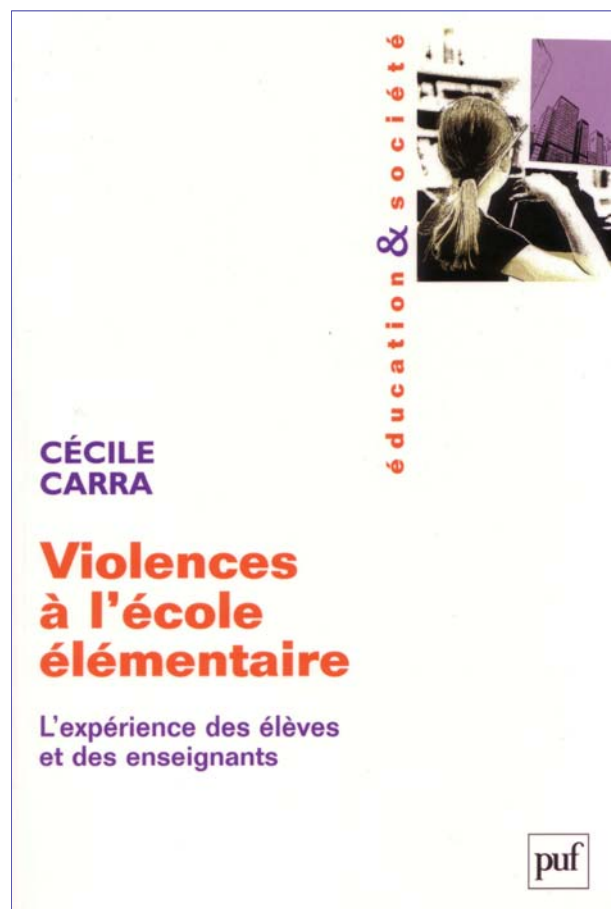
but rather, through learning projects and the classroom collective.

The structure of relationships within this school and with its environment is based on a vision to which teachers all adhere, and is attended by considerable teamwork. This teamwork leads to the construction of a « *standard* » for the school, producing extremely coherent educational practices focusing on learning.

More broadly speaking, comparison with other schools in this sample shows that these teachers' practices are based on a more collective approach of teaching, generating a school climate in which violence tends to be less pervasive in the experience of both children and staff. These practices also rest on the teachers' view of their work and of pupils that is less concerned with the lost grandeur of their profession than with actual relations with pupils. They view their task as a combination of socialisation and teaching, and conceive educational situations as a way of helping children to progress.

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