

## VIOLENCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS, AS EXPERIENCED BY TEACHERS AND PUPILS

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**T**oo little objective knowledge is available about violence in primary schools, whereas it is increasingly thought that the phenomenon is reaching down to the primary school level and that "increasingly young authors" are involved. The present research, funded by the Nord/Pas-de-Calais IUFM and the CESDIP, was conducted by a ten members team, from several disciplines (physical training, French, mathematics, philosophy, sociology and education) and several institutions (Nord-Pas-de-Calais IUFM, CNRS, Lille II and Lille III Universities).

### A Quantitative Approach Based on the Respondents' Experience

Victimization surveys, first implemented within the French school system in 1994<sup>1</sup>, look at violence from the viewpoint of one of the main but often overlooked actors – the victim –, rather than from the perspective of some institution, and question victims on their experience. The present quantitative survey pursues this vein, which is already a veritable tradition at the CESDIP. Its peculiarity, however, lies in its association with a survey on self-reported violence: respondents were also asked whether they had ever committed some violent act. Those two dimensions, combined with their perception of violence in their school, constitute the three indicators used by this study to depict violence. This approach yielded a comprehensive grasp of violence in terms of its perception, of its perpetration and of the way individuals experienced it, without separating the three. Although there is the risk, with this approach, of extending the definition of violence to any breach of a normative order, on the other hand it does enable us to account for the relative, subjective and contextual dimensions of violence. It is, moreover, coherent with the theoretical approach of the sociology of interactions. By rendering the viewpoint of the actors, it helps uncover the shapes taken by the phenomenon in the lives of 7 to 12 year-olds and of primary school teachers.

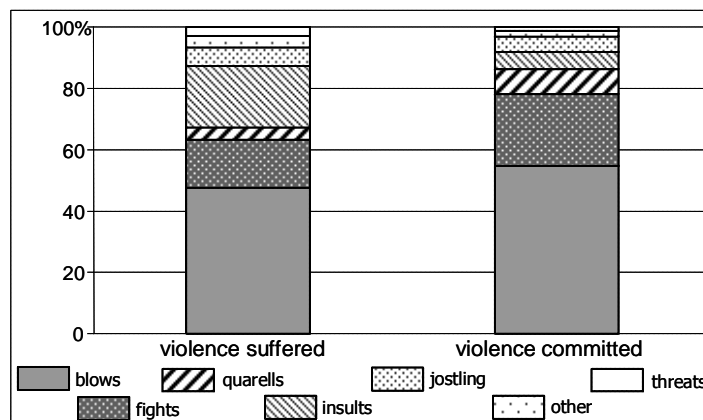
The survey covered a representative sample of primary schools in the Nord *département*, constructed on the basis of three broad criteria: category of the school ("ordinary", "high-priority"<sup>2</sup>, "violent area"), size and geographic location. The sample included 31 schools, the characteristics of twelve of which being close enough to allow for comparisons. Members of the team handed the questionnaires out to CE1 (second grade) and CM2 (fifth grade) pupils and their teachers in April and May of the 2003-2004 school year (the latter were then relieved of their classroom duties so they could fill out the questionnaires). Questionnaires for pupils included 74 questions and those for teachers, 125. Questions touched on violence suffered, committed or witnessed since the beginning of the school year, their circumstances and consequences, as well as the respondent's perception of the school climate. Criteria

pertaining to the school's location and the pupils' social milieu were included in the questionnaires, which included both closed and open questions, which were submitted to content analysis to construct categories of violence. Over 2,000 pupils' questionnaires and about one hundred teachers' questionnaires were analyzed.

### Violence Among Pupils, Mostly Unmentioned in Official Statistics

According to statistics – established by the National Education Department (the "Signa" data based on reports by school officials) – acts reported in primary schools represent somewhere around one incident per one thousand pupils. Furthermore, most involve verbal violence, committed by pupils or their family on teachers. Now, in our study, when asked "Was someone violent with you this year in your school?" 41.3 % of pupils answered "yes". Furthermore, when asked "Were you yourself ever violent with someone in your school this year?" one third answered in the affirmative.

The answers 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 us an idea of the contents of the acts reported as violence by pupils who were on either the giving or receiving end. Blows and fights are the majority of those mentioned.



**Graph 1 : Distribution of victims and authors (pupils) according to type of violence experienced**

Analysis of pupils' reports uncovered the various logics underlying these confrontations, including showing one's superiority, settling an argument (especially about some incident when playing), response to verbal violence, reacting to disrespect for a basic rule (hitting a small child). Quite often what is at stake is membership in a group, which requires that one demonstrate allegiance to its norms and defense of the group against what is viewed as an intrusion by outsiders: "they kicked me because I was playing football and the others didn't want me to". But also, anger or irritation causes the person to hit back, or to return an insult: "I hit some schoolmates because they

<sup>1</sup> CARRA C., SICOT F., 1997, *Une autre perspective sur les violences scolaires: l'expérience de victimation*, in CHARLOT B., EMIN J.C., (dir.), *Violences à l'école. État des savoirs*, Paris, Armand Colin, 61-82.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, *zones d'éducation prioritaire (ZEP)* high priority educational areas were delimited, with the purpose of giving greater backing to schools in underprivileged neighbourhoods.

were annoying me, those girls were talking nonsense", or "he began to get on my nerves, I hit him".

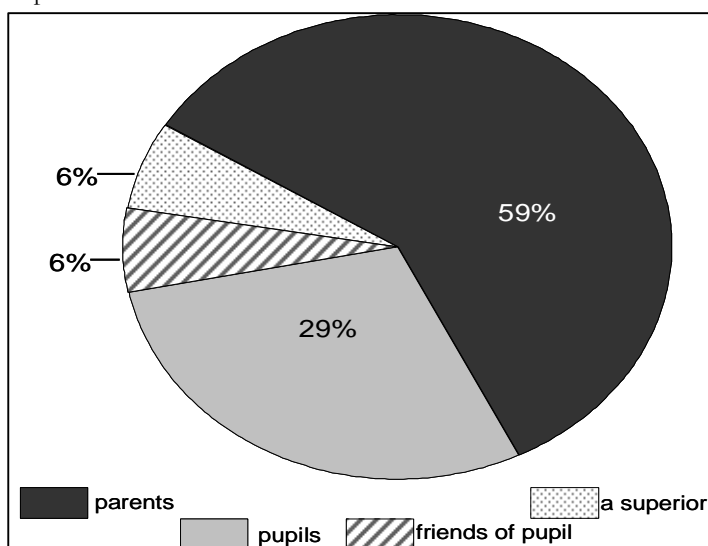
As opposed to the children's perception, adults tend not to view "fighting" and "physical confrontation" in the school playground as violence. They are considered traditional forms of youthful sociability not requiring adult intervention unless there is some definite danger. This is illustrated by some of the children's comments: "The teachers on duty don't care at all, they say that we'll stop after a while, and after we'll be friends, but that never happens". However, when the school is attended by pupils from working-class areas, teachers are more apt to qualify acts as violent. Whereas the proportion of pupils who think there is "a lot" of violence is only 4.6 points higher in "high-priority" schools than in "ordinary" schools, there is an 11.8 point differential among teachers.

Characteristically, pupils who claim to have committed violence are male, live in single-parent or recomposed families, have three brothers or sisters and are at least 11 years old. The same traits are shared by pupils claiming to have been victims, thus indicating the proximity between the two groups. When questions on victimization are crossed with self-reported violence, a very significant correlation is found between those who claim to have been victims or to have committed violence, and especially for pupils who reportedly had inflicted violence "at least four times" and those who felt they had been victims "at least four times" (23.3 %).

Among teachers as well, those who claim to have been victims or to have committed violence are to some extent one and the same, but they ascribe a totally different nature to the violence when they exert it and when they suffer from it (as will be seen below). Exasperation and exhaustion are the main reasons given by teachers who report having committed violence. One of them uses the term "saturation" to explain his behavior, described as follows: "I caught a pupil by his clothing and threw him out forcefully". Some feel that their violence is a necessary response to the children's violence. One teacher, for instance, says that he "stopped two pupils who were fighting" because "you have to put a stop to those little boxers or karateists who think they can set the rules here, like they do at home!".

### Violence Against Teachers: Parents at the Heart of Occupational Hazard

One third of teachers reported to have suffered violence at least once, with young women over-represented. With the exception of blatant physical violence ("I was hit, pinched, insulted and threatened by a girl who refused to work or change seats"), all instances involved verbal violence, mostly by parents.



Graph 2 : Authors of the violence experienced by teachers

Violence inflicted on teachers by parents mostly takes the form of conflicting relations, and in far fewer cases, of threats and insults. In most instances the teacher's status is challenged, when the parent questions a decision concerning the child. Descriptions of the violence are very eloquent in this respect : "I wrote a comment about a girl. Her mother took it very badly. She didn't agree !"; "One mother felt I was unfair with her son"; "Conflicts with a parent who backed up the child (first quarter)"; "Arguments with parents who didn't agree with us and told us so face-to-face or on the phone"; "A mother, discontented at the beginning of the year and frustrated by her son's failure in grade 1 with his last year's teacher". Teachers construe territorial conflicts pitting parents against them as violence, a point Dubet had already made a decade earlier<sup>3</sup>. What he described as "armed peace" over the spheres of intervention of each actor tends to turn into open warfare for some teachers, which propels parents toward violence, and by the same token, illegitimacy.

Teachers who claim to be victims of violence tend significantly more than their colleagues to contend that their profession is not given proper consideration. They also tend more to have a negative perception of pupils (behavioural problems, poor achievement and limited learning ability). They say that teaching is the part of the job they prefer, whereas they feel that the role of the school is to socialize children. There is a contradiction between what they value in their profession and what they can and must do on the job, and also between how socially valuable they feel that work is (social usefulness is mentioned twice as often as by teachers who are not victims) and the little social recognition they perceive. These teachers feel themselves to be in the difficult position where the impression that the mandate previously conferred on them<sup>4</sup> is now being withdrawn, thus endangering the existence of their profession. Loss of this mandate – or in other words, of their recognition – as well as threats to their licence, that is to their authorization to exercise their profession, are viewed as so many attacks. Denouncing violence may then help them to win back recognition by society, as they pose as "the last rampart of a besieged Republic".

### Differentials in the Vulnerability of Schools to Violence

An attempt was made to uncover the processes at work in the construction of a feeling of violence among respondents, as well as inter-school differences in rates of violence, in a study which distinguished between externally imposed contextual effects (size of groups, social background of s and peculiar features of the school location) and constructed effects (the school climate, which depends on how it is run and its system of norms).

Debarbieux, who analyses the phenomenon using three broad series of indicators (indicators of victimisation and offences, indicators of school climate and indicators of insecurity), has shown years ago that the secondary schools most affected by violence are middle schools (*collèges*) located in working class areas<sup>5</sup>. Are primary schools as affected by this social violence as the secondary schools? The correlation observed by Debarbieux was only found for a single variable in our research, that of teachers' perceived level of violence in their school. This perceived level is indeed higher in "high-priority" and "violent area" schools than in "ordinary environment" schools. At the

<sup>3</sup> DUBET F., (dir.), 1997, *École, familles : le malentendu*, Paris, Les Éditions Textuel.

<sup>4</sup> Hugues shows that obtaining licence (exclusive authorization to exert a profession) and a mandate (society's request that one ply an occupation whose social utility is judged essential) conditions the shift from an occupation to a profession, with all the prestige involved therein. HUGUES E.C., 1971, *The Sociological Eye*, Chicago, Aldine-Atherton.

<sup>5</sup> DEBARBIEUX É., 1996, *La violence en milieu scolaire. Tome I : État des lieux*, Paris, ESF.

same time, whereas the distribution of acts reported by pupils is identical, with physical violence predominating, it is nonetheless noteworthy that blows and fights are more frequent in "violent area" and "high-priority" schools, while there are more insults in the others. The extent of the phenomenon, on the other hand, as estimated on the basis of the nature and frequency of victimisations, is hardly affected by the category of the school, whereas differences may be tremendous from one school to another.

### Importance of the School Climate

The phenomenon of violence in primary schools is not mechanically correlated with the social categorization of schools. Comparison of schools with similar profiles but differing patterns of violence shows the importance of the school climate, with three components: the "achievement climate", the "educational climate" and the "fair treatment climate".

The "achievement climate" is measured by the proportion of pupils who feel they are doing well at school, who think they are in a class that studies hard, and within which the pupils feel they get help from the teacher. The "educational climate" in turn is measured by the proportion of children who feel that their teacher treats them equally (few or no "teacher's pets" or

scapegoats) and gives out few negative sanctions (be it for schoolwork or for behaviour). Lastly, the "fair treatment climate" measures a high proportion of pupils who feel they are treated fairly. These three components are significantly correlated with a low or nonexistent climate of violence, measured by the level of perceived violence within the school, as well as of self reported victimisation and committed violence.

A study of schools that are comparable with respect to geographic location and type of pupils showed some specific features depending on the local context. In some "high-priority" schools, for instance, another component turned out to be important for the school climate: that is, the climate pertaining to regulations. Regulations are instrumental in establishing an order that propagates explicit norms produced in part by the pupils themselves: schools that are otherwise comparable in terms of size, category and geographic location may differ in this respect. Pupils' perception of violence is fed, then, by the type of *educational* relationship developed by teachers, and the latter depends on how those teachers relate to their work, their pupils and their pupils' families.

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