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**School Climate
and Violence in Schools.
Results from the German
Part of the European
Survey on School Life**

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1 Introduction¹

Talking about violence, aggression or bullying in schools most often also implies to detect points of departure to implement measures to tackle this kind of behaviour – a behaviour, sometimes also called dissocial or anti-social behaviour.

The European survey on school life draws attention on the social relations in school and other relevant factors of the so-called school climate. It also draws on different aspects of aggression and violence in the school context and allows the researcher to combine information on both aspects of school life. The questionnaire of this survey was constructed to be used in an international comparative way and has been in the field in countries like France, Britain, and Spain. In this paper I will present selected results from the German survey on school climate and violence in schools (cf. Funk 2002), and also point to some measures already practised by schools participating in this survey.

In May and June 2002 about 1.742 pupils out of 73 classes took part in the German part of the “European survey on school life”. These pupils came from six different schools out of the counties Lahn-Dill and Limburg-Weilburg in the federal state of Hesse.² The pupils were interviewed in a classroom situation utilizing the German translation of the English language questionnaire of this comparative study. The classes participating were chosen randomly by the researcher, i. e. statistically significant results may be generalized to all pupils of the schools participating in the survey. I also should mention, that each participating school got a separate analysis of their data, so that they can see their specific strengths and weaknesses.

2 Assessment of the school climate

The climate in the schools participating in the German part of the “European survey on school life” is assessed by the pupils as being clearly positive (cf. figure 1). In the

¹ Revised version of the paper presented at the „Second International Conference on Violence in School: Research, Best Practices and Teacher Training“, Québec City, Québec, Canada, May 11 – 14, 2003.

² I would like to express my great gratitude to Mr. Hartmut Schrewe, Director of Education of these regions, for enabling and promoting this survey in his sphere of responsibility, the headmasters of the participating schools, the parents giving their consent and, last but not least, the pupils answering our questions.

general assessment of the school, which here may be utilized as a proxy for school climate, the same proportions of pupils (that is in each case more than four out of ten) assess their school to be “average” or “good”. The assessment of girls is more positive than the assessment of boys, older pupils or pupils visiting higher classes express worse assessments than younger pupils or pupils visiting lower classes. Finally the school is assessed better by pupils of higher secondary schools [*Gymnasium*] and comprehensive schools [*Gesamtschule*] than by pupils of lower secondary schools [*Hauptschule*] or intermediate secondary schools [*Realschule*].

The pupils justify their opinion with the perceived quality of the teacher-pupil-relationship, the school rules being in force, the courses and other facilities offered, the equipment or the construction of the school as well as the occurrence of violence or drug problems. As you most probably know, all of these issues are well-known determinants of the school-climate.

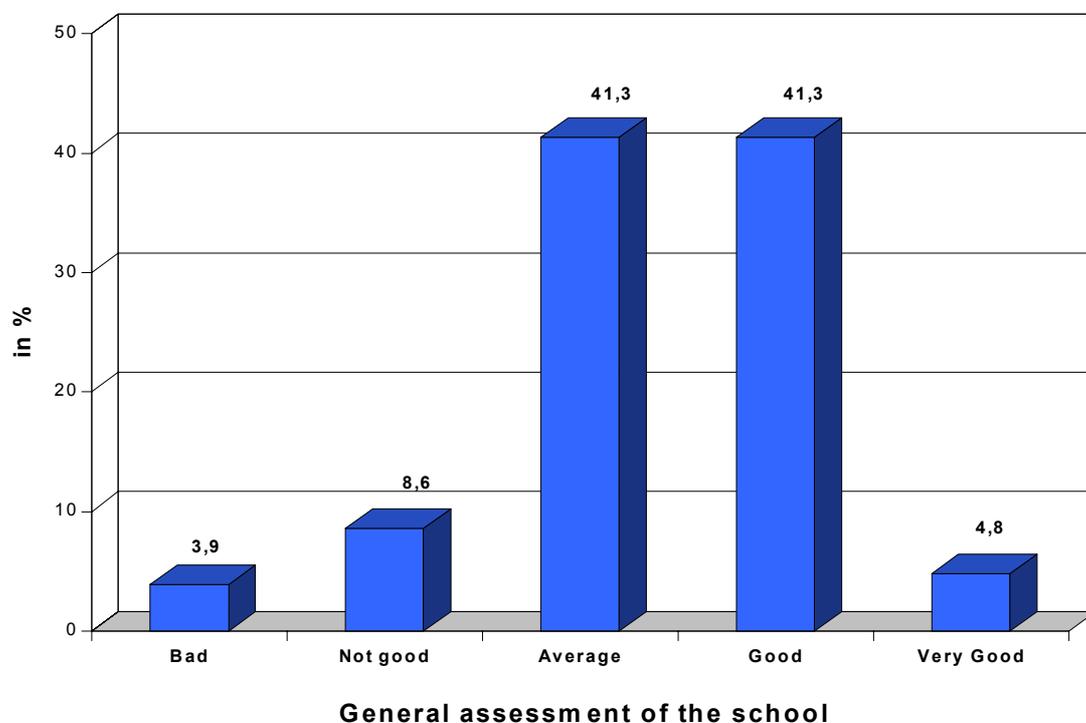


Figure 1

2.1 Social relations at school

The relationship between pupils is also assessed predominantly positive (cf. figure 2). While nearly half of the pupils describe this relation as being “average”, more than a third of the respondents explicitly call it “good”. Differences between subgroups of the pupils may only be generalized regarding to the school type visited: The relations between the pupils are assessed worst in lower secondary schools, and always better from pupils in intermediate secondary schools, higher secondary schools, and comprehensive schools.

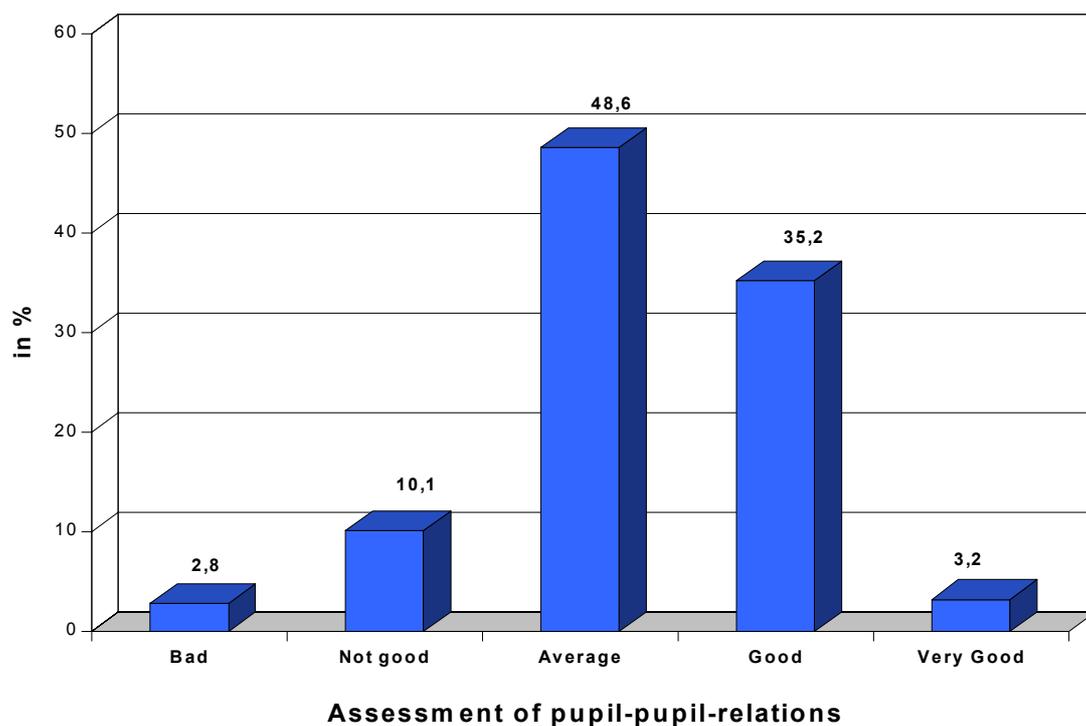


Figure 2

Similarly positive the pupils assess the pupil-teacher-relationship (cf. figure 3). Again almost half of the respondents call this relationship “average” and nearly one third explicitly consider it to be “good”. The youngest pupils or the pupils at class level 5

and 6 express the most positive assessments of the teacher-pupil-relationship. Up to age 15 or up to class 8 the assessments steadily become worse, before they get better again among older pupils or pupils in classes 9 and 10. Regarding the teacher-pupil-relationship the same differences between school types can be generalized as introduced in the context of the assessment of the relations between pupils.

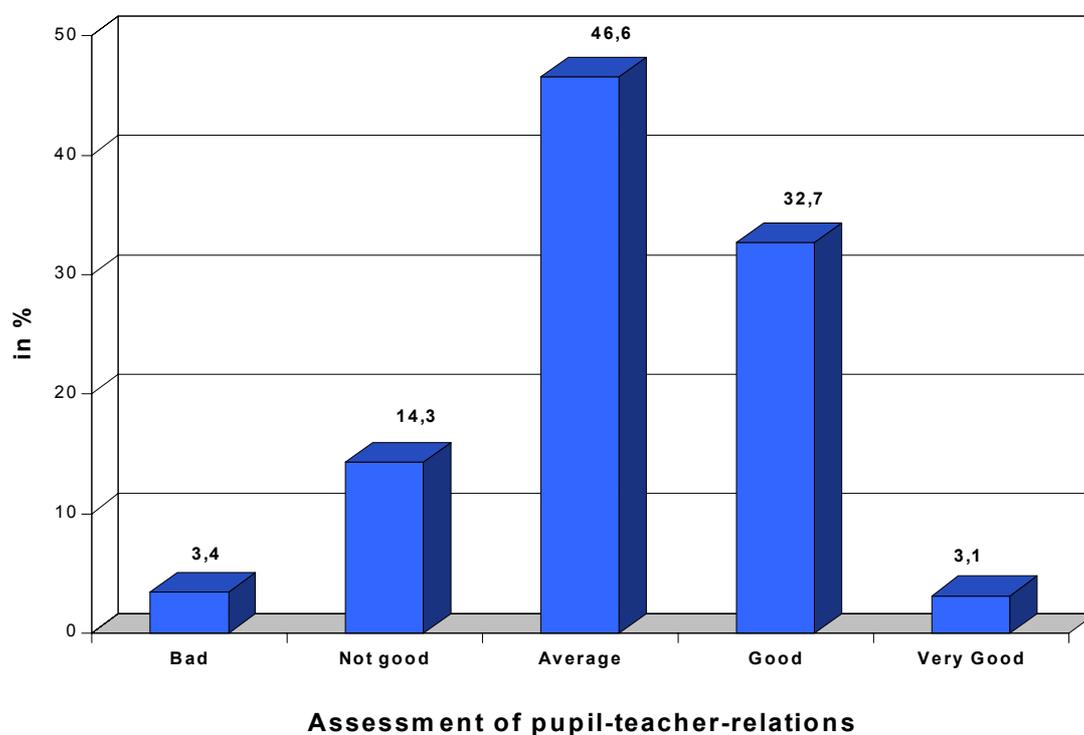


Figure 3

The pupil's relations to other adults (principal, other staff, etc.) is felt a little worse than their relationship to the teachers, with the general tendency remaining again positive though (cf. figure 4). Again with increasing age and class visited the assessments become worse until the age of about 15 or the visit of the ninth class. Older pupils or pupils visiting class ten again express more positive assessments concerning their relationship with other adults. Differentiating for the school type vis-

ited, pupils from lower secondary schools and higher secondary schools assess their relationship with other adults at school worse than pupils from intermediate secondary schools or comprehensive schools.

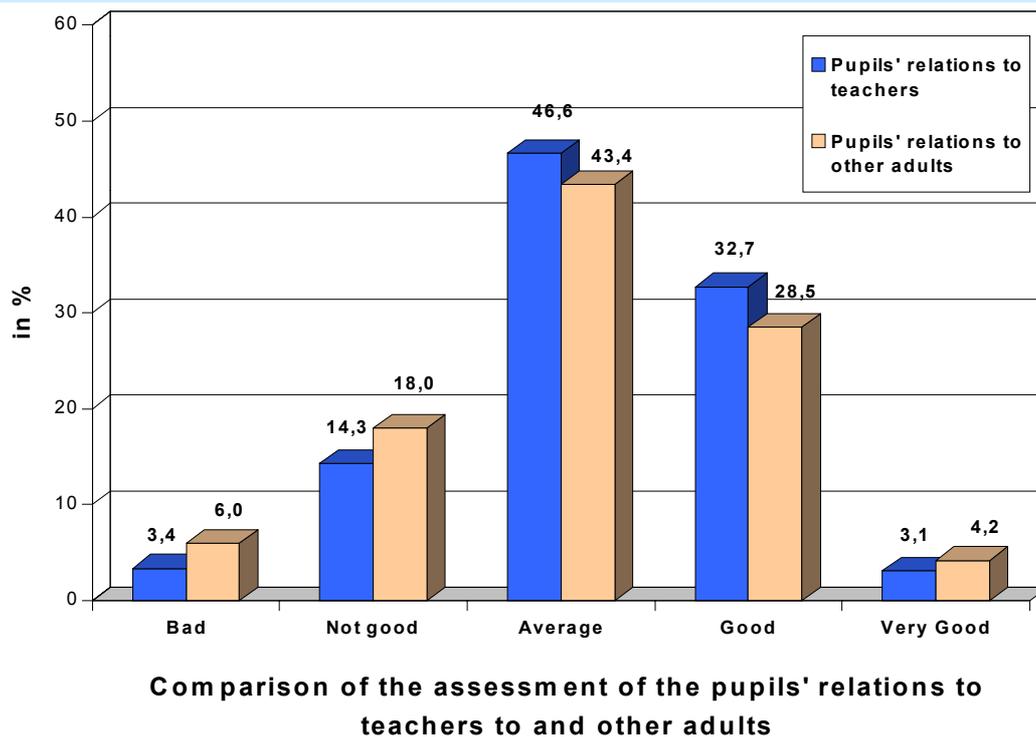


Figure 4

In this context the only generalizable difference between pupils without a migration background compared to pupils with a migration background³, in all the questions regarding the social relations at school, can be found: Pupils with a migration background assess the relationship with other adults better than their fellow-pupils without a migration background. It also seems to be interesting, that there are no gender dif-

³ „Pupil with migration background” means, that the pupil himself or at least one of his parents was born in a foreign country.

ferences to be generalized in any of the questions regarding the social relations at school.

2.2 Learning climate / Participation possibilities

The assessment of the learning climate at school is also clearly positive (cf. figure 5), although the assessment gets worse with increasing age or increasing class level of the pupils. Respondents from higher secondary schools or comprehensive schools assess the learning climate at their school considerably better than pupils from lower or intermediate secondary schools.

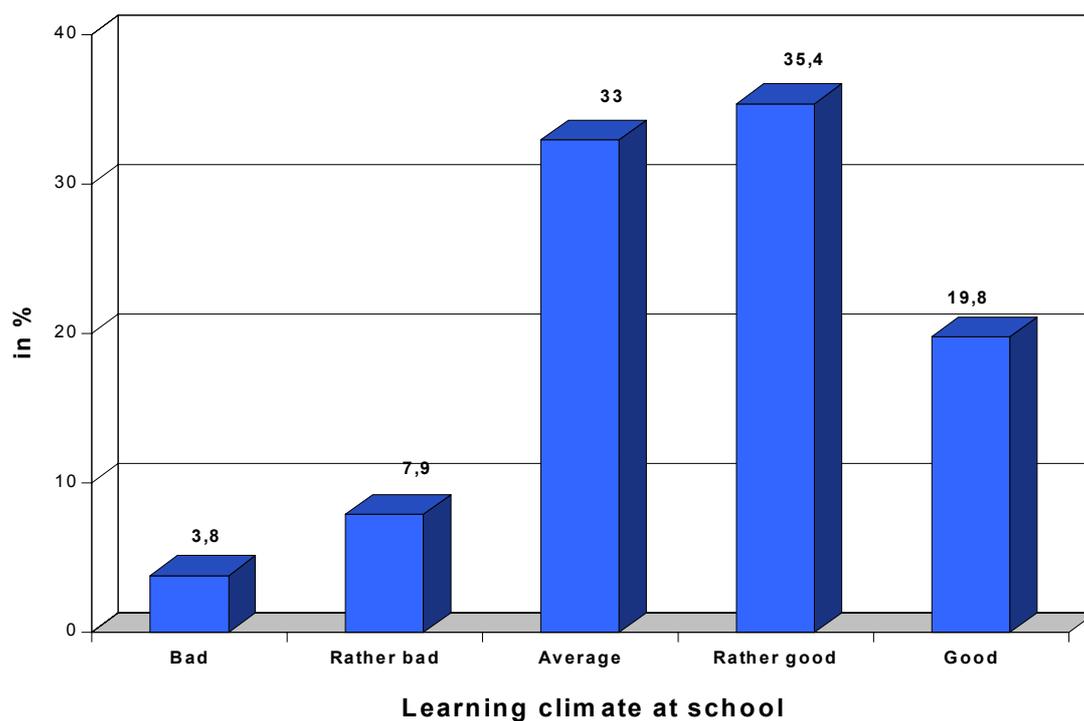


Figure 5

The pupils show no illusions according to their possibility to participate in or to have a say concerning school policy (cf. figure 6). Nearly half of the respondents see “little” chances for participation in school. Girls see better chances for participation than boys do. Here again, up to the age of 15, or the ninth class level, the assessments get worse with rising age or class level and recover a little at older ages or in class ten. Pupils from higher secondary schools or lower secondary schools are most pessimistic, pupils from comprehensive schools see the best chances to participate in decision making processes at their school.

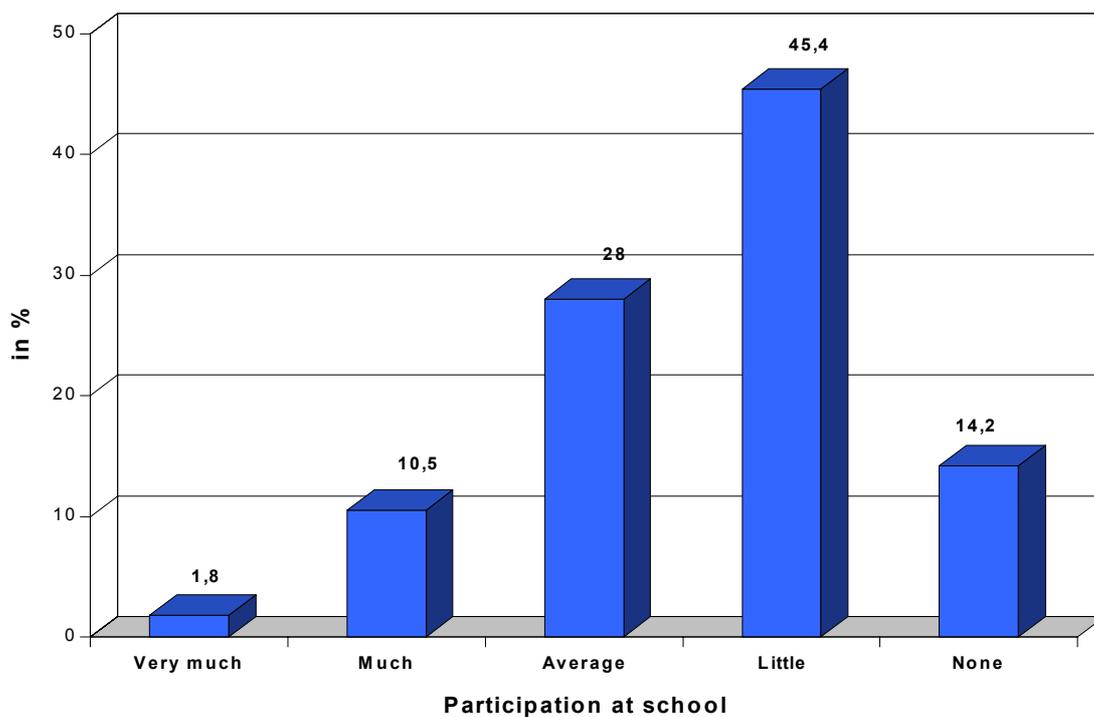


Figure 6

2.3 Empirical analysis of the determinants of school climate

Figure 7 displays the results of a linear regression analysis aimed to “explain” the pupils’ assessment of the school climate as a result of several determinants. Signifi-

cant results are displayed in a coloured way with a red cell indicating, that this variable is worsening the perceived school climate and a green cell indicating that this variable is improving the perceived school climate. Please note, that this kind of analysis explicitly assumes a certain direction of influence (causality), that is: independent predictor variables influencing school climate as the dependent variable. Since my survey is a cross-section, this assumption is not always clear and without doubt.

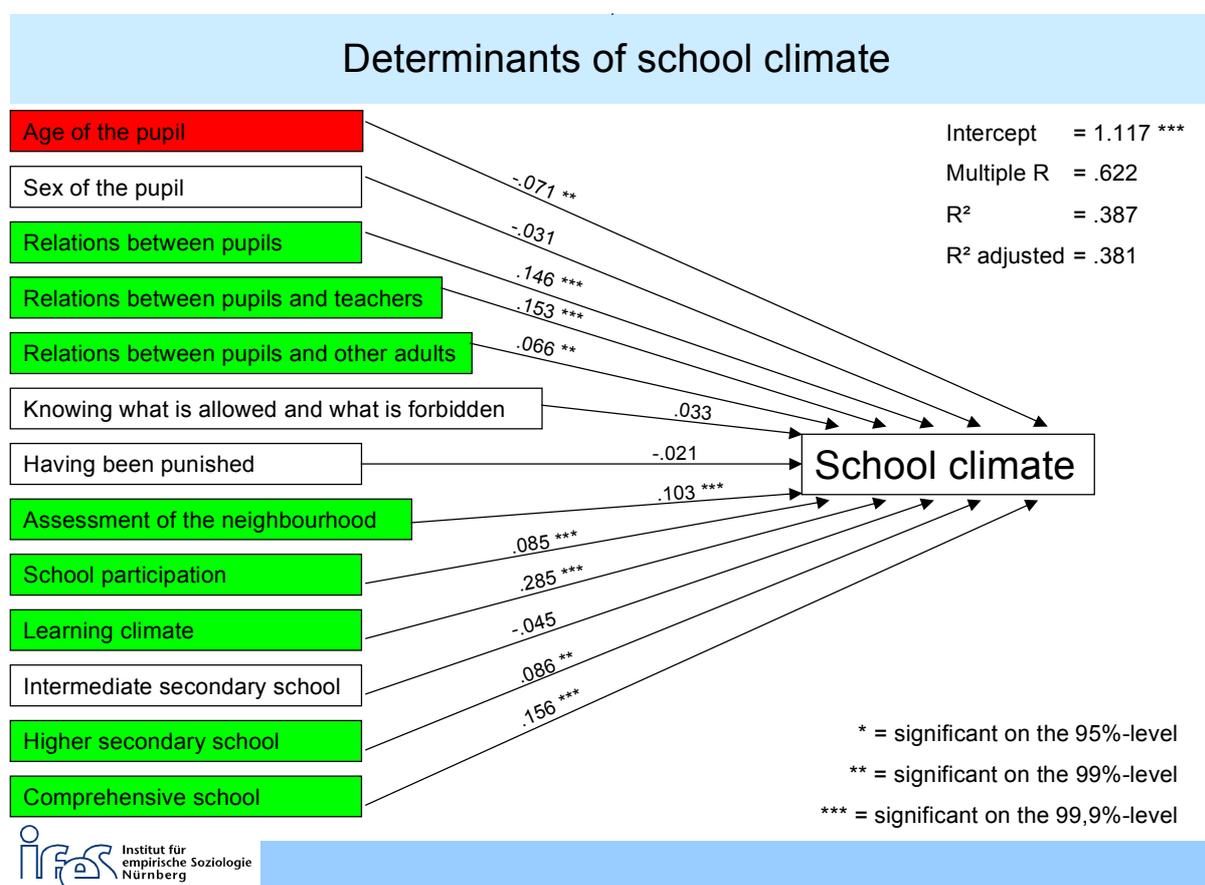


Figure 7

Looking at the regression results we see the following influences:

- Level of the person (pupil) itself:
 Looking at the age of the pupils, the negative Beta coefficient means that the older the pupils are, the worse they assess the school climate. The sex of the pupils shows no significant influence, although boys assess the school climate worse than girls do (as indicated by the negative coefficient).

- **Social relations**

All three indices of social relations show significantly positive influences on the assessment of the school climate. That means: the better the relations between pupils, the relations between pupils and teachers, or the relations between pupils and other adults are assessed, the better also the school climate is assessed by the pupils.⁴
- **School rules**

Knowing the school rules seems to improve the perception of the school climate, and having been punished in the current school year seems to worsen this perception. But both influences are not significant, though.
- **Neighbourhood of the school**

The better the neighbourhood of the school is perceived, the better the school climate is assessed.
- **School level**

The more possibilities for participation the pupils see, or the better the learning climate is assessed, the better is the assessment of the school climate.

The coefficients of the three school types shown in the figure have to be interpreted against the fourth missing school type, which is the lower secondary school. So in the context of the predictor variables given, visiting an intermediate secondary school seems to worsen the perception of the school climate. But this influence is not significant. Clearly, being a pupil at a higher secondary school or a comprehensive school improves the perception of the school climate.

All together these predictors are able to explain about 38 % of the variation of the general school assessment / school climate. In sum, this is not bad at all. But looking at the single relations is even more interesting. The regression results clearly offer the promoters of school development a whole bundle of starting points for measures to improve the school climate: This are the improvement of the social relations be-

⁴ For the impact of the pupils' social relations to their parents, teachers, and peers on their own verbal-aggressive or physically-violent behaviour, cf. Funk (1998, 2001).

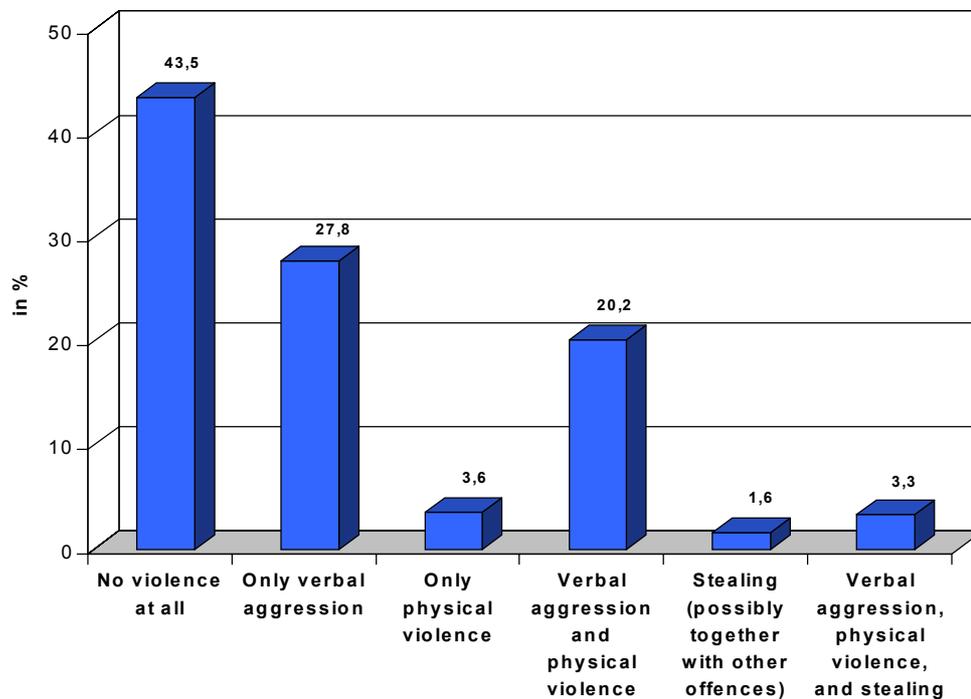
tween the different groups of people acting in the school, the participation possibilities, and the learning climate. These are promising starting points for the improvement of the school climate. And, as I will point out later, improving school climate by itself can be used as a measure to prevent violence in school.

Also the pupils interviewed in this survey clearly express their view, that a further improvement of the school climate is best to achieve by improving the social relations between all persons acting in the context of the social institution school. They most often speak for trying to improve the pupil-teacher-relationship, and they also expect a better understanding and more fairness on the side of the teachers.

3 Aggression in school

Let's now have a look at different kinds of aggression and violence in the schools participating in this survey. Looking at the pupils as perpetrators of aggressive or violent acts in school, the questionnaire gives the possibility to distinguish between verbal aggression, physical violence, and the stealing from others. More than four out of ten pupils (43.5 %) in the sample report none of these dissocial kinds of behaviour at all (cf. figure 8). Nearly three out of ten pupils report having been verbally aggressive or calling names. 3.6 % of the pupils confess having only been physically violent. Every fifth pupil in the sample says that he has been verbally and physically violent. Only 1.6 % of the pupils confess that they have been stealing from others (possibly together with other offences) and 3.3 % even answer that they have been verbally aggressive, physically violent, and stealing from fellow pupils.

While 43.5 % of the pupils have committed none of the offences at all, approximately one third of the pupils (32.1 %) report having committed one kind of violent act, every fifth pupil (21.1 %) confesses having been committed in two kinds of violent acts, and only 3.3 % of the pupils say that they have been active in all of the three distinguished kinds of violence and aggression in schools.



Pattern of aggressive and violent behaviours

Figure 8

Figure 9 shows that just a third of the boys but more than half of the girls report no dissocial behaviour at all. Approximately a third of both of the sexes report having committed only one aggressive or violent act, with boys acting physically violent nearly double as often as girls (14.0 % versus 7.9 %). Boys more than two times as often as girls report having committed two acts of aggression or violence (28.6 % versus 13.2 %). Also every twentieth boy (4.9 %) but only 1.1 % of the girls report all three distinguished aggressive or violent acts.

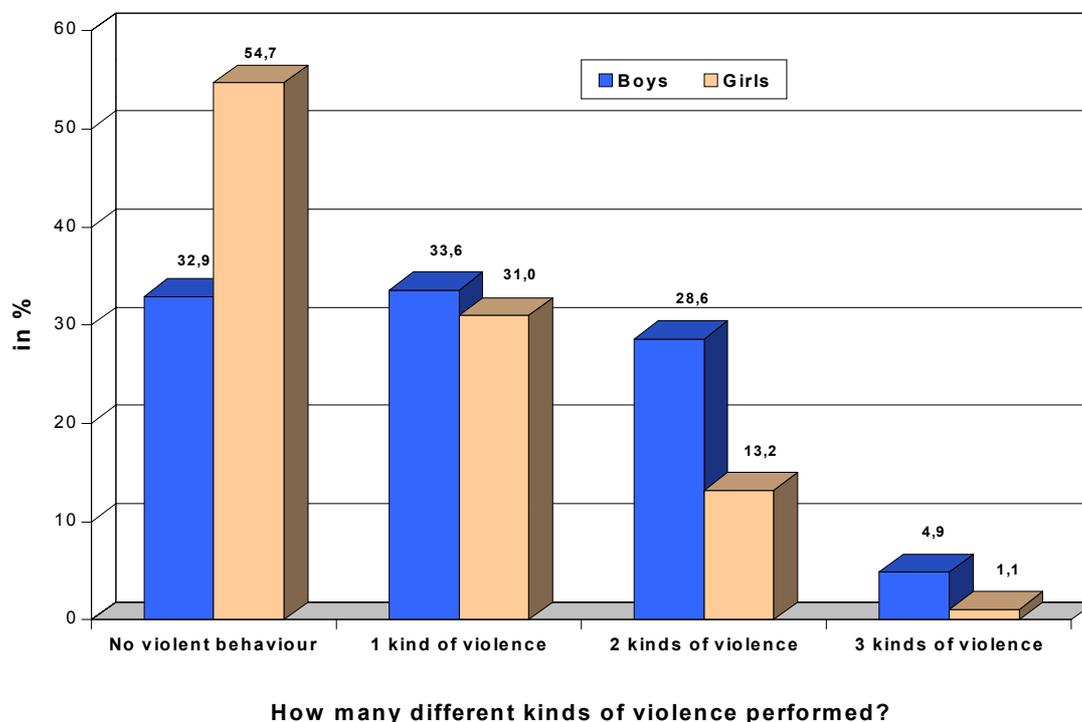


Figure 9

Looking at the figure that differentiates the number of violent acts committed by the kind of school visited (cf. figure 10), pupils from higher secondary schools, followed by pupils from comprehensive schools, and pupils from intermediate secondary schools clearly are less violence prone than pupils from lower secondary schools. While the proportion of pupils reporting only one act of aggression or violence is more or less the same in all four kinds of school, pupils from lower secondary schools again clearly show the highest proportions of respondents reporting two or three different acts of aggression or violence.

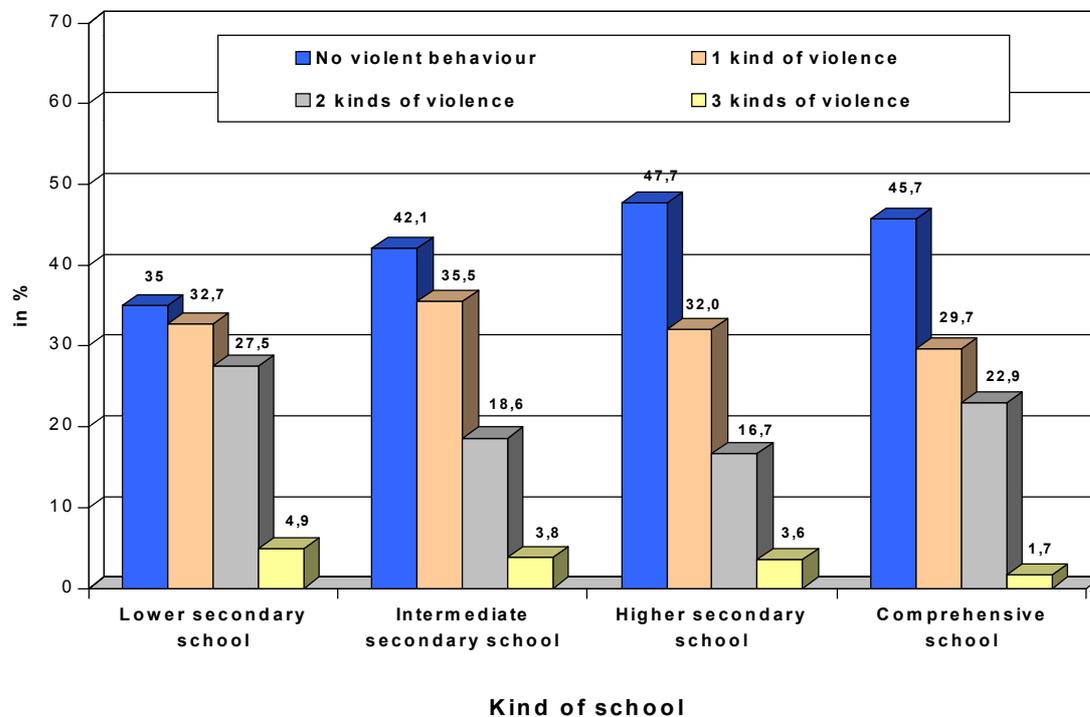


Figure 10

4 Violence / Aggression in school and school climate

Looking at both of the aspects of school climate and violence in schools we get an impression of their interdependence:

- The correlation coefficient Person's r between the number of different kinds of violence performed by the pupils and the assessment of the school climate is $-.189$ and significant on the 99 %-level. With the variable categories given, that means, the more kinds of violence a pupil performs, the worse he assesses the school climate.
- The correlation coefficient Person's r between the perceived amount of violence in school and the assessment of the school climate is $-.314$ and also significant

on the 99 %-level. With the variable categories given, that means, the more violence and aggression the pupils perceive, the worse they assess the school climate.

Mean assessment of school climate — by different levels of perceived and performed violence in school

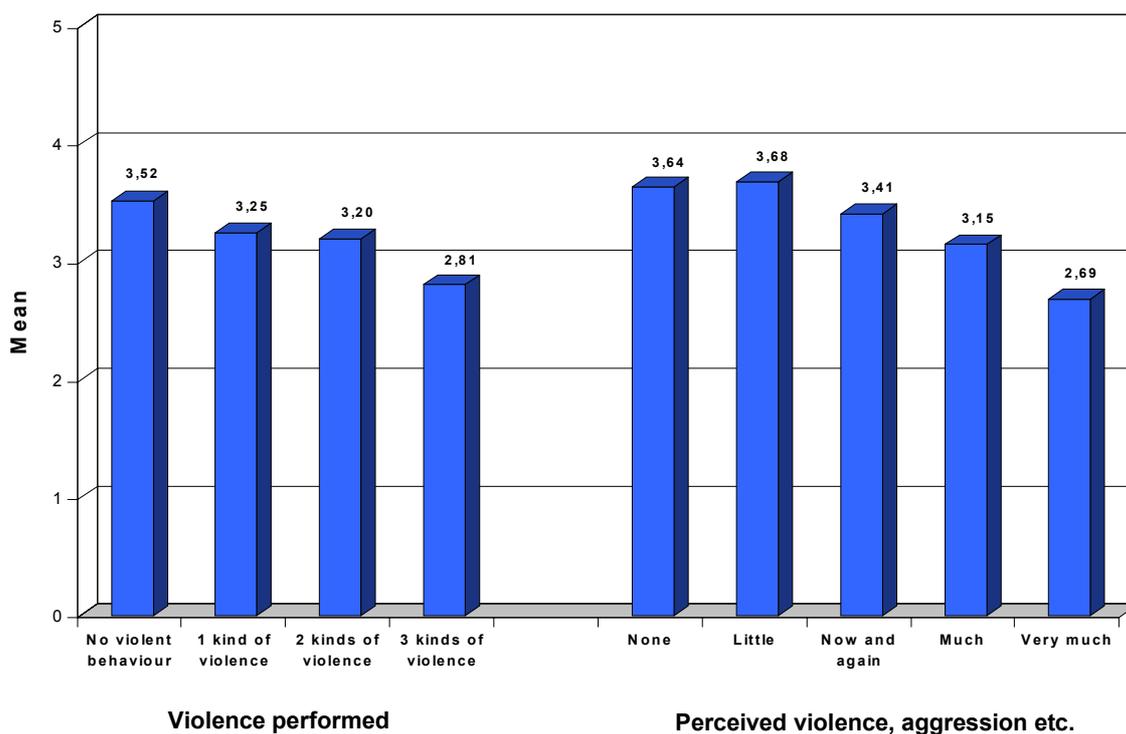


Figure 11

While the first correlation reported is just minimal, the second is a little stronger but still quite small. Nevertheless there are clear differences to be shown in the assessment of school climate by the number of different kinds of violence performed or the perceived amount of violence (cf. Figure 11). All these differences are statistically significant.

5 School development by improving the school climate

As a result of the empirical analyses, we see that there is good reason to try to improve the school climate as a prevention measure against aggression and violence in schools. School authorities in the counties Lahn-Dill and Limburg-Weilburg consider school climate to reveal itself in at least the three dimensions of

- a **psycho-social level** which consists out of the social relations between all of the acting people or groups of people in the social context of schools.
- an **organizational level** which has to do with the ethos or model of good practice, a school is trying to follow, and
- the **products of school** which are a good performance of the pupils, and an achievement-oriented working ethos (cf. Balser et al. 2003: 20).

Looking at the **social relations** between the groups acting in the context of a school (that is the so-called **psycho-social level**), the authors relate to eight different factors, which – in their view – influence the school climate (cf. Balser et al. 2003: 20ff):

1. Information

The spreading of information to all groups acting in the context of the school is essential for the development of a good school climate.

2. Communication

Here the focus is on the way people talk to each other. How do members of a school community handle name-calling or insults?

3. Openness / Trust

This aspect draws on the every day problems of pupils and the possibility to reveal them to teachers. The same is true for the social relation between teachers and their headmaster.

4. Integration

Is it possible to integrate outsiders in a group or class community? To achieve this goal it is necessary to show understanding.

5. Cooperation

This aspect draws on the possibility to bundle up individual capacities and to aim at a common goal.

6. A readiness to achieve

A good school climate promotes a good achievement. Achievement-orientation has to be accomplished by the promotion of individual motivation.

7. Assumption of responsibility

This aspect draws on the possibilities to participate in school processes. Such participation improves the pupils' identification with the school, the learning motivation of the pupils, and the teachers' satisfaction with their work.

8. Health and movement

Last but not least this aspect covers health education or programs of motopedagogics, like daily time for physical exercises.

Looking at the **organizational level**, relevant aspects are

- the organizational structure (for example school type, the size of the school, the quantity of teachers and pupils as well as regional aspects),
- the time structure given (that is the 45 minutes rhythm of schooling in Germany, time for other activities besides the lessons),
- the available space inside and outside the school buildings,
- as well as other resources (cf. Balsler et al. 2003: 22f).

Considering the **products of school**, the authors see a reciprocal relationship between school climate and the performance of pupils (cf. Balsler et al. 2003: 23).

6 Measures of schools participating in the network “Taking over of responsibility and prevention of violence” to tackle violence in schools

Schools in the counties Lahn-Dill and Limburg-Weilburg in the German Federal state of Hesse now for years try to tackle violence by means of prevention that draw

- on cooperation of all the participants on different levels (pupils, teachers, parents, scientists, the police) and
- on different steps to improve the pupils' sense of self-esteem (cf. Balser 1997).

Violence prevention is understood as a process best embedded in what is called school development (cf. Schubarth 2000: 116f; Balser et al. 1999: 9). I will try to outline the main strategies and introduce a range of projects.

Trying to improve the self-esteem of the pupils seems most promising, since acts of aggression and violence can be interpreted as a struggle for appreciation. So the aim is to strengthen the pupils' self-esteem and to make him experience borderlines by taking over responsibility for certain social aspects in school (cf. Balser et al. 1999: 10). This procedure calls for various steps to be taken by all participants in the social context of a school, for example:

- The aim of a certain measure has to be developed commonly with teachers, parents, and pupils.
- All of the participants have to learn about a new way of dealing with conflicts.
- Looking behind the “rim of the plate” calls for integrating school-external expertise, and to keep in mind the learning child, the co-operation inside school, and the cooperation between school and actors outside the school (cf. Balser et al. 1999: 12f).

On the part of the pupils there are certain social skills that have to be developed or improved:

- Competence in conversation, that is to listen to others, to negotiate, to convince others, to make compliments, to defend the own rights or to ask for help.
- Learning to handle emotions, like to express own emotions, and to understand the emotions of others.
- Learning to cope with frustrations, like to react on failure or mobbing.
- Learning about conflict solving, that is to cope with a charge, with group pressure, or to stay out of trouble (cf. Balsler et al. 1999: 13f).

To achieve these goals measures on the different levels already outlined above were introduced (cf. Balsler et al 1999: 14ff; Balsler 1997). Balsler (1997) introduces several examples already realized in different schools participating in the network:

- Measures on the personal **level of the pupil**

Coaching for kids / student sponsorship

Students of psychology or pedagogics look after maladjusted or educationally subnormal children and youth during their practical term or for a reimbursement through the social welfare office. The students go on from fields of success of the pupil and try to extend these experiences. On the other hand they try to reduce burdens and stress. During this process, the students get supervision.

- Measures on the level of the **school class**

Bicycle workshop

With the help of donations a bicycle workshop was established. It is assumed that pupils want to be active in lessons responsibly and on their own as much as possible. The choosing of the bicycle workshop as a lesson is optional.

Relaxation

School psychologists started to train pupils in relaxation exercises. In the meantime this course is continued by teachers.

- Measures on the **level of the school**

Daily time for physical exercises

In a primary school each class has 20 minutes per day that can be individually used by the teachers in their lessons to work against signs of fatigue, signs of overtaxation as well as to reduce tensions. There is a broad range of materials that can be used for the exercises, like balls or table tennis bats. These materials can also be used in the breaks.

Motopedagogics

Motopedagogics in school follows the principle of education by means of therapeutic exercises. In play situations pupils gain experience by means of exercises and perception in the fields of their body, the used materials, and their social relations.

Bistro

Pupils responsibly planned and decorated a room as a bistro which invites them to chat and relax. It also developed as a meeting place for parents and teachers.

Break radio

Break radio is an independently run project by pupils who are on air twice the week during the long break. Their programme consists of playing music and providing information. Interested pupils work as technicians, work out the contributions, and present them.

7 Summary

As a summary the findings presented indicate that there is no dramatic situation concerning violence and aggression at the schools participating in the German survey on school climate. Conversely the results summarized do not lead to the conclusion that the issues of an improvement of the school climate or the case of violence in schools appear to be settled.

Obviously there are enough points of departure for the improvement of the school climate, namely the improvement of the social relations between pupils and teachers or other adults at school. For example, the often demanded deeper understanding of teachers for the interests of pupils, or the missed fairness of teachers could be improved by increased communication efforts on the side of the teachers. The other way round the explicit commitment of the pupils on a code of behaviour – which most favourable should be formulated by teachers, pupils and parents together – is highly recommended. Such a codex could act as the basis for understandable sanctions.

I hope that the results presented here give the schools participating in the survey many suggestions for further prevention or intervention measures to improve the non-violent living together of all groups of persons in the context of the schools.

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