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**Violence in German schools:
Perceptions, reality
and safety policies**

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1 Introduction¹⁾

1.1 The federalised structure of education in Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany is a democratic welfare state (see Article 20 of the German Constitution) with a federal structure. Article 7 of our Constitution places the entire education system under government supervision, while Articles 70-75 confer 'cultural and educational sovereignty'²⁾ - and thus overall responsibility for education policy - on the individual Länder. Since the incorporation of the former German Democratic Republic on 3 October 1990, Germany has consisted of 16 Länder, each with its own separate education policy.

1.2 Violence in schools as a social problem

In recent years there have been increasing reports in the German media about increasing brutality and violence among school pupils. This media exposure has rapidly revealed shortcomings in educational and sociological approaches to the issue of violence in schools, and has prompted calls for up-to-date empirical studies. However, this is not an entirely new issue. But until a few years ago, there was no up-to-date scientific data on the current scale of the problem, and in particular there was no data to support the repeated claims in the media that violence in schools is on the increase. The last major empirical findings in the mid-eighties did not lead to comparable follow-up studies which might have allowed scientifically substantiated conclusions to be drawn as to whether violence in schools is increasing or decreasing.

The topic of violence in schools returned to scientific discussion at the beginning of the 90ies with the work of the German Independent Government Commission on the Prevention and Control of Violence, the so called 'Violence Commission' (see Schwind et al. 1990). This Commission came to the conclusion 'that there is no evidence of a continuous increase in aggressive behaviour among pupils in German schools' (Schwind et al. 1990: 71). However first-hand experiences of teachers and the media coverage spoke another language and so the

¹⁾ Paper presented at the conference 'Understanding and preventing violence in 8 European countries', 12 - 13 October 1998 in Bordeaux (France).

²⁾ This means that the individual Länder are assigned primary legislative and administrative responsibility in the fields of education, culture, science and research (see Secretariat of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany 1997: 33).

renewed focus on the issue of violence in the school setting has led to the widespread initiation of new research projects on the subject.³⁾

2 Description and analysis

To date there have been no quantitative studies representative of Germany as a whole on the issue of violence in schools. The topicality of this issue has admittedly led to a series of local and regional surveys on the subject among head teachers, teachers, pupils, parents, etc.⁴⁾ However, partly because classroom research of this kind is necessarily subject to ministerial approval at Land level, such surveys have always been limited to the Länder concerned and can therefore only provide evidence about individual Länder, or in some cases only about certain local authorities.

The current situation of the German research on the topic of 'violence in schools' might be characterized as follows: After a

- \$ phase of scandalizing this topic in some parts of the media, there
- \$ followed another phase of growing awareness of research needs, again
- \$ followed by local or regional surveys and the
- \$ summarizing of the main results (see Holtappels et al. 1997) and trying to get an impression which preventions or interventions are used in single schools.

Part of the researchers are now working towards

- \$ a replication of their original surveys to get an impression whether violence in the school setting is increasing or decreasing.

³⁾ For a current state-of-the-art-report of the German research on 'violence in schools', see Funk (1997).

⁴⁾ For a list of these surveys, with an appraisal of the methodology, see Krumm (1997). The theoretical underpinning of the surveys is examined in Holtappels (1997).

2.1 Definitions

While the key concepts in the literature in languages other than German often are 'bullying' and 'anti-social behaviour', the debate in Germany has centred on the concept of 'violence'.⁵⁾ Innumerable diverse definitions of 'aggression' and 'violence' can be found in the literature.⁶⁾ Current German studies of violence in schools tend to use the definition provided by Hurrelmann in his special report to the Violence Commission:

'Violence in schools comprises the entire spectrum of activities and acts which result in physical and mental pain or injury to individuals operating in the school setting, or the aim of which is to damage objects on school premises' (Hurrelmann 1990: 365).

This broad definition covers acts of physical violence and verbal or psychological forms of violence - including threatening or sexist - that are committed by or directed at pupils, teachers or other individuals, as well as violence directed at property (vandalism). This relatively abstract definition has been made more specific operationally in empirical studies, i.e. by inquiring about specific acts occurring in the school setting.

To give an impression of the violent or aggressive acts or victimization in German schools, I will draw on results from my 'Nuremberg Pupils Survey 1994: Violence in Schools'.⁷⁾ In this survey, pupils were asked how often they themselves had committed 20 specific acts of aggression or violence during the previous half of the school year.

⁵⁾ In fact, in the current German version of Olweus the verb 'to bully' is actually translated as 'mobben' ('to victimise') and the noun 'bully' as 'Gewalttäter' ('perpetrator of violence') (see Olweus 1996: 11). For a short summary of the German research on 'bullying' see Funk (1998).

⁶⁾ Schubarth (1993: 31) has noted a broadening, differentiation and pluralisation of the concept of violence in recent years.

⁷⁾ In this study 1.458 pupils from the 7th, 8th, and 9th classes out of lower secondary schools (Hauptschule), intermediate secondary schools (Realschule), and higher secondary schools (Gymnasium) were interviewed in spring 1994. The sample consists of 62 classes out of 38 schools and is representative of the city of Nuremberg (Nuremberg is located in the northern part of the Federal State of Bavaria in the south of Germany and has approx. 500.000 inhabitants). For the theoretical introduction to this study and its methodology, see Funk (1995a).

Percentage of "violent" pupils by sex (in %)

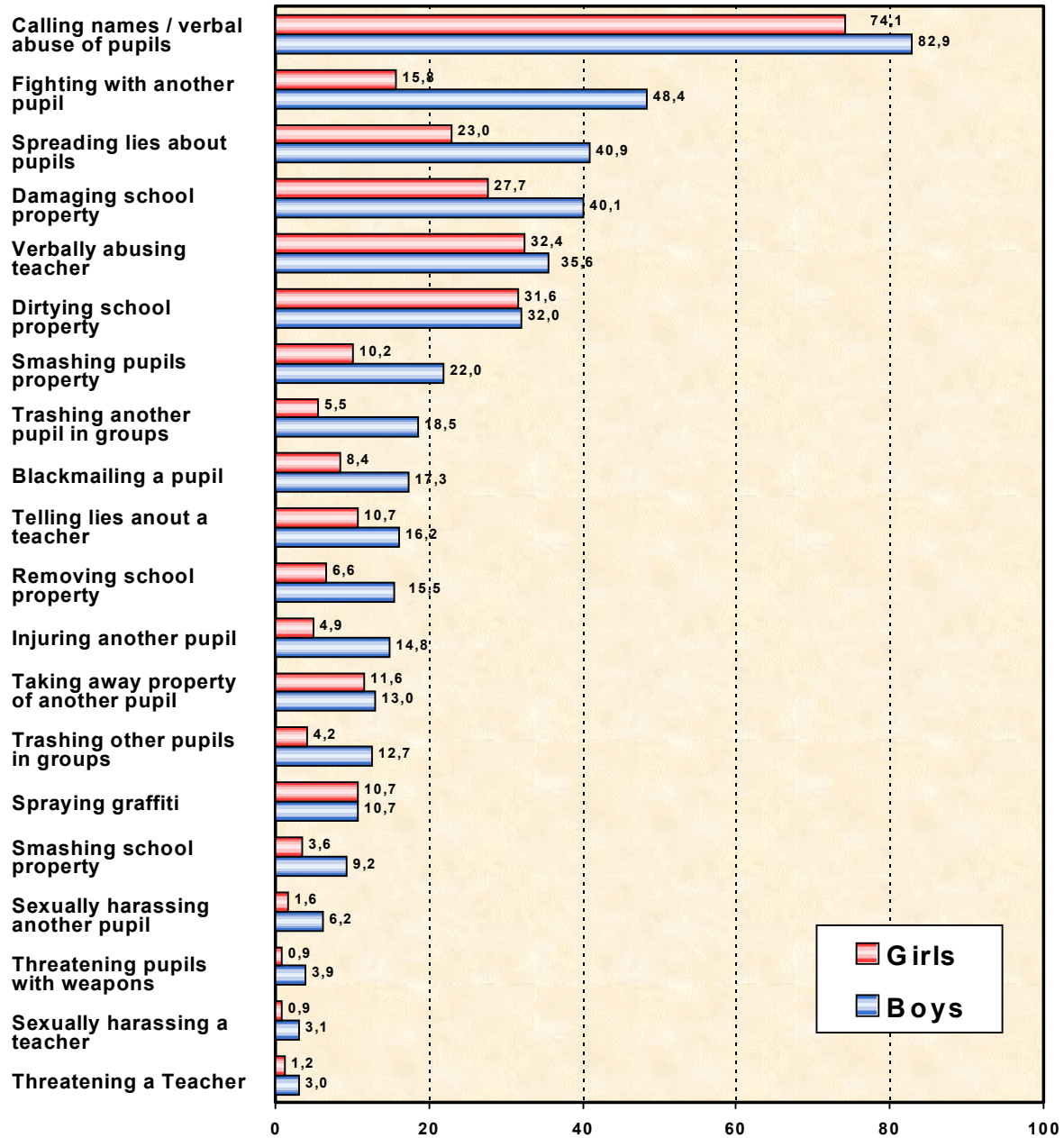


Figure 1 summarizes the respective results: Calling other pupils names or subjecting them to verbal abuse was quite clearly the commonest act of violence or transgression (boys 82.9%, girls 74.1%). This finding, which confirms the predicted high frequency of verbally aggressive behaviour patterns, has also emerged in other studies. Fighting with another pupil (boys 48.4%, girls 15.8%), spreading lies about pupils (boys 40.9%, girls 23.0%), verbally abusing teachers, whether or not to their face (boys 35.6%, girls 32.4%), and damaging (boys 40.1 %, girls 27.7%) or dirtying (boys 32.0%, girls 31.6%) school property were also common transgressions. The following transgressions, in contrast, were mentioned relatively rarely: sexually harassing other pupils (boys 6.2%, girls 1.6%), threatening them with weapons (boys 3.9%, girls 0.9%) and in particular sexually harassing teachers (boys 3.1 %, girls 0.9%) or threatening them (boys 3.0%, girls 1.2%) (cf. Funk 1995b: 43).

2.2 Supposed causes of violence in schools

In a very broad view, Hurrelmann seeks the causes of violence among pupils wherever a `clear reduction in self-esteem and in opportunities for later personal development [is] perceivedA (1990: 368).

In my own research I identify the following specific factors as influencing young people's aggressive or violent actions:

- \$ *individual personality traits* (e.g. approval of violence, readiness to act violently, social isolation, need for stimulation, conscientiousness) as well as *demographics* (sex, age),
- \$ *family background* (e.g. a controlling or assisting upbringing, good relationship to the parents),
- \$ *peer group* (e.g. relationship to peers, violence of peers),
- \$ *school setting* (e.g. pupil-pupil-relations, teacher-pupil-relation, school participation), and
- \$ exposure to *media* (consumption of action or horror movies) (see Funk 1995a: 13ff.).

3 Political aspects

In the political sphere, owing to Germany's federal structure, `local activities [are] initiated, carried out and promoted by the relevant local authority, Land-wide activities by the Land ministries, and central federal activities by the Federal ministry, all acting on their own responsibility and independently of one anotherA (Anonymous 1995: 3).

3.1 Federal level

Since `cultural and educational sovereignty` lies with the individual Länder, there are no Federal activities focussing entirely on the issue of violence in schools. However, the school setting is dealt with in the appropriate places as part of broader-based political activities in relation to violence. For example, the `Independent Government Commission on the Prevention and Control of Violence` (or Violence Committee) was set up by the Federal Government on 16 December 1987, because of `... the (perceived) escalation in violence, not only in families and schools, but also in sports grounds, streets and public places` (Schwind et al. 1990: 28).

3.2 Land and local level

Violence of young people is not just an issue that schools have to face with. So an interesting starting-point at the local level is the involvement of schools, as well as families and neighbourhoods, clubs and churches in the police's community crime prevention schemes (see Feltes 1990: 333ff.). Although this approach has been discussed in Germany for some time, it is only now being tested by means of pilot schemes in a number of towns. In these networks, schools are expected to work in their own field, that is they are expected to look for a pedagogical solution to the problem (BaySUKWK 1994: 21; 1995: 46). Schools are therefore required to encourage the `integral development of the personality` and `the development of a stable, positive sense of self-esteem [...] consideration for others and social responsibility` (BaySUKWK 1994: 32).⁸⁾

⁸⁾ Among other things, this means emphasising the school's role in upbringing, guidance in relation to values and social skills, conveying a sense of belonging, community and responsibility in the school environment, stimulating pupils in a differentiated manner in accordance with their talents and interests, equipping them to co-exist peacefully with other cultures, helping attention seekers and disadvantaged young people, supporting and motivating pupils, and increasing the degree of school cooperation with parents and extramural institutions (see BaySUKWK 1994: 32). A similarly intensive approach to the issue of youth and violence - which cannot, however, be gone into here - is reflected in the policies of other Land governments.

3.3 School level

Both researchers (see Schwind et al. 1990: 150ff.) and politicians (for example, see BaySUKWK 1994: 32) have called upon schools to review their educational role.⁹⁾ The key issues here are

- \$ transmission of social norms and values,
- \$ development of social skills,
- \$ development of a sense of discipline with regard to work, and
- \$ consolidation of pupils' sense of self.

4 Examples of 'good practice'

Generally speaking, because of the Federal structure of the German education system no single strategy to tackle violence and aggression in the school setting can be detected. Rather, single schools being affected with problems of violence try to implement strategies of intervention on their own. Also, there are first steps to exchange experiences in networks of intervention and prevention projects in single regions (see Balsler et al. 1997a, 1997b) (see chapter 4.1). Also there is experience in the use of a certain intervention programme in a whole Federal State (see chapter 4.2). In the following section I will present two examples of 'good practice'.

4.1 Development of coping strategies with violence in school in a rural region in middle-Hesse (Balsler 1997)¹⁰⁾

The pilot project 'Development of coping strategies with violence in school in a rural region in middle-Hesse' was located at the state-school office for the Lahn-Dill district (Staatliches Schulamt für den Lahn-Dill-Kreis).¹¹⁾ 10 schools participated in the pilot project: five primary schools, two comprehensive schools and three vocational schools. The project dated from January 1, 1994 to December 31, 1996. Several steps taken or school projects founded still go on working today.

⁹⁾ 'The task of schools is generally considered to be the education and upbringing of pupils. ... There are many who claim that the two concepts are synonymous, since other major languages supposedly make no distinction between them. Education ['Bildung'] relates more to people's knowledge and judgment, and upbringing ['Erziehung'] to their will and actions' (Geissler 1988: col. 1081).

¹⁰⁾ This chapter is a commented summary and translation of Balsler (1997).

¹¹⁾ The pilot project is introduced in Balsler et al. (1997a, 1997b).

The main theme of the pilot project summarized is:

The prevention of violence in school happens by means of cooperation of all participants on different levels (pupils, teachers, parents, police, scientists) and by means of steps to improve the sense of self-worth.

The pilot project was based on two ground pillars: **sense of self-worth** and **cooperation**. To stabilize the sense of self-worth or to offer the pupil a perspective, the project steps initiated try

- \$ to reduce threats and burdens,
- \$ to set up possibilities for confirmations and coping strategies,
- \$ to follow a multi-level approach, with the levels of the individual pupil, the system and the region.

This multi-level approach is closely comparable to the line of action suggested by the expert meeting at the European conference on 'Safe(r) at school' held by the European Commission in Utrecht in February 1997 (cf. Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 1997: 6; Mooij 1997). On the *system level* it is tried to open up new fields of success for the pupils in school, in the family, and with the peers. It is also tried to establish links between these systems. On the *level of the individual* resources have to be mobilized and promoted in a way, that the individual pupil successfully learns to cope with threats. *Reinforcements out of illegal fields* of success ought to be prevented. The mobilization of *regional resources* is aimed at with the consolidation of the cooperation of different institutions.

Steps of the project

\$ Arrangements for conflict solving

Teacher training in communication in conflict situations

Teachers are trained in their communication skills in conflict situations. They are enabled to use the mediation-model. Out of this training a concept called 'About dealing with conflicts' followed, that can be used to train pupils.

Office of arbitration at a vocational school

This office of arbitration is responsible for disputes between pupils. With the help of at least one neutral person an acceptable solution of the conflict for both sides should result.

\$ **Transforming lessons**

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.

\$ **Therapeutic exercises in school: a "restless" 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. Since 1993 in one primary school three groups exercising motopedagogics meet once the week in the afternoon, to work against deficits in a playing way. 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.

\$ **Organization of the school**

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.

\$ **Events for parents**

Parent academy

An event called "Current parent conversation" is a forum for the exchange of experience. A whole spectrum of topics has been discussed, like social relations (generation gap), the consumption of the media (performance of violence), prevention of drug use, stress (theory and relaxation exercises). The main focus is on the strengthening of the capacity to act.

Evening meetings to discuss the topic of hyper-activity

Parents, teachers, pediatricians and psychologists together look for an adequate way to deal with hyper-active children and for ways of prevention. Theory and experience of hyper-activity are addressed.

\$ **Cooperation with the police: Trouble line**

Police, the project team and the schools form a working group to tackle criminal offenses of young people more constructively. In a police station a telephone connection was installed. Here callers can ask for advice, report their observations, and express their fears. With the help of postcards and the media coverage the trouble line is well known and well accepted by pupils, parents, and teachers.

\$ **Student sponsorships for pupils**

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. The students get supervision.

Experiences and perspectives

The cooperation of the heads of the schools proved to be of great importance for the success of the project. The development of projects in school optimally is a process from the bottom (pupils, teachers, parents) to the top (head of school, other institutions). It seems to be important to clearly follow the method of common interests of the participants. It also turned out that for the team of psychologists and other project members supervision is necessary. Finally it is important to enable the transfer of well-tried steps to other interested schools and to share the experiences made, for example by using new media like the internet.

4.2 Violence prevention in schools (Olweus-programme) in Schleswig-Holstein

In the most northern Federal State (Land) of Schleswig-Holstein the prevention programme of Dan Olweus (1996) was translated and offered to the schools in this Federal State for joining in. 47 schools with approximately 15.000 pupils took part in the programme. This sample is self-selected since the schools themselves decided to join in or to stay out. This project started in January 1993 and finished in October 1995 (see Hanewinkel and Knaack 1997 for detailed information). Since the single elements of the Olweus-programme are not new at all, there are several aspects that proved to be helpful for the schools:

- \$ the chronological order of the actions to be taken;
- \$ the focus on rules on the level of school classes;
- \$ restriction on realistic fields of actions to be influenced by single schools;
- \$ including all participants of schools (pupils, teachers, parents);
- \$ survey of the pupils at the beginning and in the end to give motivation and to evaluate the success of the programme.

The evaluation of the programme pointed out a quite differing picture:

- \$ Pupils up to class 10 claimed direct mobbing to having been reduced;
- \$ In classes 11 to 13 in grammar schools no reduction of the number of victims could be realized, rather their number increased;
- \$ While a distinct reduction of actions of mobbing could partially be noticed, there hardly was a change in attitudes towards mobbing;
- \$ Also forms of indirect mobbing (excluding or isolating others) hardly were reduced.

5 Outlook

Concerning further research not only the replication of cross-sectional studies out of the early 90ies should be aimed at, but also a comprehensive overview on prevention and intervention strategies is urgently needed. Further research also seems to be necessary to evaluate the actions taken to tackle aggression and violence in the school setting. Exchange of experiences in a wide knotted network of researchers and practitioners could prove helpful.

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