SCHOOL AS THE SCENE
OF SOCIAL COHESION OR VIOLENCE?1

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This briefing note summarises the principal lessons and points discussed in WP 6 “Social Cohesion and Crime Prevention”, which was held in Brussels on February 19 and 20, 2009 on the theme “School as the Scene of Social Cohesion or Violence?”

Let us make it clear that it is not meant to be an exhaustive summary, so rich were the contributions, so diverse the different angles from which the problem was tackled, both at the methodological – from quantitative surveys to ethnographic surveys – as well as at the disciplinary levels – i.e. from the psycho-sociological, sociological, criminological perspectives – and in view of the special themes taken up.
Synopsis of the Crimprev workshop
on Social cohesion and crime prevention
(Brussels, 19-20 February, 2009)

For a long time no doubt the scholastic universe was seen as safe from incidents of violence and insecurity. In European countries, for the past fifteen years or so, school has become the focus of political controversies, research and local initiatives that consider school both a problem and a solution in relation to violence and insecurity. What are the realities and the specificities of the phenomena of violence in school? What answers are given at the different levels? With regard to the issues of social cohesion and insecurity, is school a problem or a solution?

To organize and articulate the various research findings presented during the Brussels workshop, we have structured our synopsis on the basis of four questions:

1. What exactly are we talking about? What do we know about the phenomena of insecurity and violence in school?
2. What explanatory models do we propose?
3. What measures by way of response have been implemented in the various European countries?
4. What are the main points and perspectives that need to be studied in greater depth?

I – School violence. What are we talking about?

We know, especially in the matter of “violence” and “insecurity”, that data is not “given”. It is constructed. It reflects and channels categories of perception, half way between experiential perception, the institutional construction of the “problem” and their scientific questioning and resolution. Especially when it involves insecurity, it is important to select the right indicators. Should one stick to penal facts? Take into account all the factors of indiscipline as defined by the rules and regulations of the various establishments or as perceived by the teachers and students?

In the scientific field also, an appreciation of the phenomena
of violence in school is dependent on the disciplinary perspectives, more or less highlighting a particular level (symbolic or institutional, for example) of the phenomena under consideration. Schematically two perspectives can be distinguished. The first, which we generally designate as “school violence”, stresses the interpersonal actions, whose protagonists in school are either the authors or the victims. This perspective highlights deviant and “anti-social” actions and behaviours.

The second approach to analysing problems focuses more on violence by the school, designating symbolic and institutional violence engendered by the functioning of the educational system.

An additional feature of this initial and divergent approach compares explanations on aspects and players within the school with those that focus on forms of violence imported into the school from outside.

1 – Violence in school

The initial approach concentrates on the individual and collective behaviour of students who challenge the school order. The categorizations proposed by the major surveys on “victimization” include and describe in detail three types of offences or violence: verbal threats, physical aggression and vandalism of property.

Several findings were highlighted in the papers on victimization presented at the workshop:
- “The most frequent offences are verbal insults, followed by vandalism. Physical violence is quite rare. It is even more rare with regard to teachers;
- What affects the quality of life in schools most (perceived violence, feeling of insecurity, depression) is rejection by one’s peers, followed by repeated verbal insults and a selective and stressful educational climate;
- As regards the teachers, the problems that affect them
most are conflicts with colleagues and with the principal, followed by verbal insults by students, and student indiscipline”.

These findings underscore the importance of relations between peers, whether they are students or teachers. In fact, those individuals who perceive themselves as being most isolated are the ones who are most affected.

2 – School, overrun or protected?

In her paper, Helen Jeffery, principal of a secondary school, cited the example of a school completely overrun by violent street culture, its dress code, not to mention the sub-culture of gangs. Here the quasi-inability of the school to check this invasion by the external environment is emphasized?

In the same way, on the basis of an ethnographic survey in a secondary school in Brussels, Philippe Vienne has described how some schools have tried to protect themselves from intrusions by placing security guards at the school gates.

However, the extreme situations experienced by some establishments are not a common feature. On the whole, as Benoît Galand states, school is a protected space. The risk of victimization is much less inside the schools than outside, but when there is violence it is school students who are responsible for most of the reported incidents.

3 – Violence by the school

Several contributions emphasised the structural logic of exclusion, school failure and marginalization produced by the education system. Although the scale may vary from one national context to another, study options and schools are

2 Findings presented by Benoît Galand, Faculty of Psychology, Université Catholique de Louvain : Le rôle de l’environnement dans le développement des conduites violentes.

3 Helen Jeffery, principal, George Mitchell School.

4 Philippe Vienne, Institute of Sociology, Université Libre de Bruxelles : Comprendre les violences à l’école.
subject to a hierarchy, resulting in the segregation of students in accordance with their social background and ethno-cultural origin. A fraction of students are relegated to “schools of the last chance”, generally considered “garbage schools”. Several contributions highlighted the importance of the educational marginalization of students belonging to ethno-cultural minorities\(^5\).

II – What are the explanatory models proposed?

We can distinguish the different analyses of the phenomena of school violence according to the explanatory level at which they are situated. We can thus distinguish:

- Macro-sociological explanations that refer to factors and structural logic affecting the organization of the society and the education system as a whole;
- Meso-sociological explanations that focus more on the dynamics of a school, as a special organization;
- Micro-sociological explanations that give importance to individual characteristics and interactions between people inside the school.

1 – Macro-sociological explanations

A – “Socio-cultural handicap and symbolic domination”

The first type of explanation – which the popularization of the social sciences has been largely responsible for disseminating – pertains to the “socio-cultural handicap”. The youth who “decide to act” are mostly from families whose socio-cultural and socio-economic status is very low and who, not having the benefit of proper education and not being able to express their dissatisfaction through language, eventually “explode”. These youths express the frustrations of family life and their backwardness in comparison with the

\(^5\) Dario Melossi, Esther Massa, Facoltà di Giurisprudenza, Università di Bologna: The «children of immigration», deviance, social control : a study in the schools of Emilia-Romagna; Ural Manço, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, Violence symbolique et dynamiques identitaires de jeunes Schaerbeekois; Klara Kerezsi, National Institute of Criminology, Budapest : Dropping out or being marginalized: Roma children in the Hungarian school system.
standards set by the school (educational, academic, cultural) through violence. We also find an “ethnic” version of this kind of explanation when it involves young people of foreign origin whose difficulties in school tend to be imputed to the “handicap” that their origin constitutes.

These apparent explanations that impute the “cause” of the behavioural problems to the characteristics of the youth and their social and family background, have another more critical version of the explanation in terms of the symbolic and institutional domination. If we agree that the divide between youths from working class or foreign origins and school is greater, it is not regarded so much as an intrinsic characteristic than as a product of the symbolic and institutional domination exerted by the education system itself. School violence is thus really violence by the school through the mechanisms of selection and relegation that it promotes. Dario Melossi and Esther Massa’s presentations show the considerable stigmatization that students of foreign extraction have to bear.

B – The diverse effects of socio-cultural transformations

In addition several contributors stressed the socio-cultural transformations that take place in schools, affecting the various categories of youths in different ways. Like the reality shows in which the “weak link” is eliminated, not on the basis of “merit” or “work” but because of “personality”, young people are especially subjected to the market logic of competition when seeking employment, whose requirements keep increasing, but also to the logic of the “education market”. In view of these injunctions, a fraction of the youths often find themselves in a contradictory and paradoxical situation. There is a big divide between those who can count on economic, cultural and social resources for their self-realisation, and youths who are barred from the job market yet dependent on consumption in order to affirm their social identity. We can thus talk of entering the process of transformation “from the top” because one has substantial resources (interesting studies, foreign trips, mobility, information technology and cultural links…); and access from the bottom for those who daily face insecurity or exclusion and ghettoisation in one’s
neighbourhood. Where some “surf” others “slog”. At any rate, it is the “basic malaise” of youth that constitutes the humus on which “high-risk behaviours”, depressive or expressive, are bred.

2 – Meso-sociological explanations: the “school” effect

If these structural explanations are indisputable and constitute the backdrop to violence by the school and in the school, they are not adequate enough to understand the phenomena. Firstly, these explanations do not take into account the significant differences in the school trajectories of students from the same socio-cultural category. In one socio-cultural category, all youngsters are not equally disadvantaged in relation to school. Some of them have even become part of the dynamics of success and development. Contributors specifically underlined the better success rate of children (specially girls) from an immigrant background, given identical social conditions. Secondly, an umbrella argument does not enable one to explain and understand why, given an identical population in terms of age, origin, and study options, all schools are not equally concerned by problems of violence and failure. Victimization surveys as well as the perceptions of stakeholders and observers clearly show the importance of the school as an explanatory factor.

A good number of these differences are linked to the mixed composition of the school-going population. Whereas schools with a good reputation can depend on a stable population, schools at the “bottom of the ladder” have to deal with an unstable student population, with the turnover sometimes being as much as 65% from one year to the next and hence being subject to considerable school backwardness (a significant percentage of the students are majors). This turnover also concerns the staff. School hierarchy can also be seen in the degraded environment (physical and living environment) and the “de-qualification” of certain study courses, which make it difficult to envisage any academic and social future.

However, certain establishments, although in the minority, are peaceful despite the considerable social insecurity of the
students. Galand’s survey shows that, given analogous groups, certain establishments seem to engender violence more than others. The factors that intervene positively are without doubt the educational and pedagogic quality of relations between the teachers and the students, the quality of leadership shown by the principal and the senior staff, and solidarity among the teachers.

3 – Micro-sociological explanations

As an add-on and follow-up to the theories of domination and relegation, while easily fitting into the context of normative crisis-transformation, several participants emphasized the capacity for resistance of dominated and relegated students. School protagonists, even the dominated ones, have the capacity to resist the dominant school culture. Far from being total “victims of the system”, these students also try to be actors on the school stage and their experiences thereon. On the basis of these ethnographic observations, Philippe Vienne thus described the numerous informal negotiations conducted by students in their interactions with teachers and educators. As François Dubet’s studies have shown, scholastic experience is characterized, simultaneously, by adherence to scholastic virtues and the mechanisms of resistance to the influence exercised by the school and its rulings. The resistance to school decisions and injustice on the part of teachers are important causes of violence in school.

In the context of a school which has expanded massively by opening its doors to new students, even as the signification of its normative framework has weakened (regulations are not purely and simply imposed, the boundaries of what is permitted, what is banned, of tolerance are constantly being questioned), the theme of justice emerges as a fundamental category governing the relationships between adults and students in school.

III – What measures have been implemented?

Several levels and strategies of prevention and response to violence in school were discussed during the seminar:

1 – Global educational reforms

Under the influence, in particular, of PISA surveys, most European countries undertook reforms of their education systems in order to increase their effectiveness (higher percentage of graduates, reduction in the school failure rate) and sense of fairness. Although the Brussels workshop did not directly undertake a comparative analysis of the outcome of these reforms, we can however ask ourselves to what extent did these reforms contribute in reducing, or paradoxically increasing the gap between the “democratic promise” held out by the school and the effective logic of relegation, regarded as individual disqualification. The same paradoxical question can be asked as regards affirmative action. If the principle of “give more to those who have less” is not disputed, we can however ask ourselves to what extent it is responsible for maintaining segregation in schools, and even stigmatizing students. There too, an in-depth evaluation of the implementation of these reforms and the dynamics they engender in schools is necessary.

2- Initiatives taken at the school level

It is generally at the school level, taken as a unit of action, that various measures are implemented with a view to preventing and tackling school violence. In her paper, Helen Jeffery, head teacher in a reputedly problematical school in London, has emphasized the importance of taking a combination of control measures (surveillance and monitoring of the school gates, restrictions on going out, school dress code, zero tolerance with regard to the possession of weapons in school) and initiatives facilitating the involvement and mobilization of the different players (possibility for students to give their opinion on staff appointments, improvement in communication procedures, development of participative cultural activities). In addition, the school should strengthen its links with its
social environment by cementing partnerships with the various public services and employers and also by involving the local community.

In conclusion, researchers insist on the fact that, for initiatives to really show results, what is important is the quality of the social processes that govern their choice and their application, in order to enable individual and collective involvement in the global dynamics within the establishment.

3 – Special measures for preventing and tackling violence in school: school mediation

More specifically, the creation of the post of a school mediator in the various European countries constitutes one of the preferred solutions to the problem of violence, and more generally, for improving relations between the different actors in a school. John Pitts described various experiments undertaken in Great Britain, Italy and Belgium⁸.

The mediators that take up the appointment have different professional profiles (teachers, psychologists, social workers), but above all they are selected for their “human and relational qualities”. Mediation is meant to sustain or restore a climate of confidence which should govern relations between students, parents and the school. As for its modalities, we can distinguish:

- The choice of primary “internal mediation” is located within the school. Most importantly, mediation at this level consists of relational work between the students and the school. Whenever necessary, it also involves family visits, discussions with members of the educational team and with other social workers.
- The option of secondary “external mediation”, where the mediator is an external intervener. Here the mediator’s role is to work alongside the educational teams in place, helping them with follow-up and advice, providing information and training.

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⁸ John Pitts, University of Bedfordshire, Reintroducing Ethnic Minority Children and Young People into Education and Training: The Findings from a Small Five nation Study.
so that they can act independently (formation of a student delegation from the perspective of participative logic; creation of a space for talking, dialogue, lending a sympathetic ear, conviviality; personalized follow-up of students who have dropped out of school, specific strategies and action against racketeering, maltreatment, addiction, etc.).

If the principle of mediation is based on consensus, it was stressed, in particular by Sascha Schierz\textsuperscript{9}, that its uses could vary: sometimes it is can be a method of controlling and tackling students who violate school discipline and create trouble, at other times, on the contrary, it can be conceived as a modus operandi for reconstructing a new school order based more on negotiation.

It was also noted that mediators often came from ethnic and cultural minorities. Their dual socio-cultural affiliation enabled them to perform intercultural mediation actions\textsuperscript{10}.

**IV – Questions raised**

Today school is not an unsafe place. The risk of being the victim of direct attacks is minimal and really traumatizing incidents are equally rare. On the other hand, for a certain number of students and teachers school is a place of suffering. Violence in school is a symptom that surfaces at the interface between different types of social relationships (of domination, conflict), the micro-interactions between the different protagonists and also at the level of the meso-dynamics of the school system (market competition between elitist schools and “garbage” schools).

\textsuperscript{9} Sascha Schierz, University of Vechta, ISBS, Abteilung Soziale Arbeit : Building Cultures of Conflict? Discourses on School Violence and Mediation in Germany.

\textsuperscript{10} Ural Manço, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, Violence symbolique et dynamiques identitaires de jeunes Schaerbeeks; Klara Kerezsi, National Institute of Criminology, Budapest : Dropping out or being marginalizede: Roma children in the Hungarian school system.
If the concern with the phenomena of violence and more generally with the relational quality within the school has resulted in a bouquet of measures and initiatives, the various options proposed depend on local contexts and national conceptions of education. It should be pointed out that most of these initiatives are not conceived from a strictly security point of view, but in fact are apt to offer new ways of regulating and dealing with conflict in school. As such, their evaluation should take into account the institutional and relational dynamics that they help to kick off rather than a strictly quantitative approach to the “phenomena of violence”, which as we have clearly seen is really a barometer of the prevailing school climate.

In conclusion, we can say that to approach the school issue from the angle of “insecurity and crime” is, politically, a “good bad idea”. Firstly because this category, although polymorphic and polysemous, is not seen as an ideal choice for examining the perceptions of the different protagonists. Rather the important issues seem to be the existing “malaise”, relational difficulties, anomie and sometimes a sense of crisis, or violence, but very rarely “insecurity” and “criminality”. By addressing school issues, and there are many, from the crime angle, we are likely to fuel an “alibi” discourse, reducing the structural, institutional and inter-relational complexity of the different types of scholastic experiences to a highly univocal approach.

Conversely, we can also say that to address the school question through the insecurity category can, heuristically and scientifically, constitute a “good bad idea”. A bad idea for reasons that have already been mentioned, but “good” nevertheless because when it is taken seriously theoretically and methodologically, the approach through the phenomena of violence enables one to envisage the different facets of the school, the tensions and the transformations, while at the same time keeping an open mind and taking note of the experience and representations of the protagonists. It is from this perspective that the different contributors were asked to present papers within the framework of WP 6 in Brussels.
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