The Impact of an Educational Institution's Mode of Operation on the Level of Violence perceived in Schools

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Abstract

The research focuses on the importance that the institutional mode of operation can have on the level of violence perceived by different actors (students and professionals) within a school structure. 26 public middle schools from the northern department of France participated in the study. 3192 students and 361 staff members were interviewed. The obtained data enabled the identification of modes of thinking and action of professionals in scholastic institutions; they were related to a number of factors commonly used to attempt to explain the phenomena of violence in schools. The results show that institutional operation is key in detecting violence. Furthermore, they demonstrate a singular and common operation of the educational institutions surveyed, which is likely to undermine their fight against violence. Recommended actions to promote wellbeing at school are also proposed.

Keywords: violence, institutional mode of operation, middle school, institutional responsibility

1. Background

It has been widely demonstrated that institutions have an impact on the emergence of *violence* in schools. In fact, the policies and pedagogical practices (Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Hyman & Perone, 1998; Galand & *al.,* 2004), consistency among members of the teaching staff, education and leadership (Debarbieux & al., 1999; Astor & al., 2009), school climate (Welsh, 2000; Carra, 2009, Joing, 2010; Hurford & al., 2010), openness of the surrounding environment (Moignard, 2008) or even leadership style are all factors that may influence the level of violence within a school. Consequently, it becomes difficult to examine the phenomenon of violence without questioning the operation of the school itself. In a French context, where the government seeks to externalize the management of violence in schools, it seems essential to reconsider the school's share of the responsibility. The question may then be asked: did the school suddenly experience *violence*, or could the violence have arisen from inappropriate operation?

The goal of the study is then to identify the operation of schools and evaluate its impact on the level of violence experienced by different actors (students and professionals). It is then to propose a singular approach to an *impact institution* by questioning the professionals' modes of thinking and acting.

1.1. Measurement of the Level of Violence—what Violence are we Speaking of?

Our work focuses on the violence that is experienced and felt by individuals.

In scientific literature, the definition of the concept of *violence* is far from being obvious and discussions often conclude that it is impossible to build a definition. The fact that a definition of the concept cannot apply to the economy or the objective side (related to the facts) or the subjective side (related to individuals) may be an explanation. A definition of *violence* by the objective side (the qualification and quantification of facts) may be insufficient in two regards. First is the risk of incomplete facts: managerial insufficiencies, omissions ("non-facts"), failure to act, or even discrepancies that may constitute violence, unless they are qualifiable *in situ*. Then there is the problem of standards. To define facts as violent or nonviolent, there must be defined normative benchmarks. However, these vary according to individuals, time periods, places, and social structures so that the violence and its perception is socially, spatially, and temporally contextualized. These limits invite us to adopt a more phenomenological approach to the concept and to define violence as *"that which the individual defines as such"* (Debarbieux, 1990). This position assigns importance to the individual and therefore to the subjectivity of the concept. The cause of the violence is not always identifiable (there is not necessarily always an aggressor); furthermore, it should not be confused with violence and insecurity (a teacher may experience violence even though he/she feels perfectly secure in his/her institution); finally, it is important to make sense of the discomfort of the actors (students and professionals). Therefore, it seems more accurate to speak of *violence experienced* in schools. This scientific positioning in no way obscures a phenomenological approach to the facts but restores meaning to the "invisible violence," which can be for example, a negative school climate (Welsh, 2000; Gottfredson, 2001; Soule &Gottfredson, 2003).

1.2 Identification of Institutional Operation

Two types of school violence can be detected: the serious matters whose criminal nature is evident constitute the first type. They are widely disseminated by the media and feed the sensational speech related to this issue. The "harder" violations however, remain the exception in France (Carra & Sicot, 1997) and are the ones located in isolated institutions. The small daily acts of violence related to antisocial behavior make up the second type. They are, as Blaya points out (2006), a set of accumulated facts, punishable or otherwise, of petty crimes or offenses not taken into consideration that, repeated, lead to a sense of disorder in the school, a sense of non-compliance. It is these acts of *micro-violence* (Debarbieux & al., 1999) that is to say *"these small repeated breaches rather than isolated serious matters, seem to have the most impact on the quality of life in schools"* (Galand & al.,2004).

Our work then is based on the following general hypothesis: could the more widespread and implicit "contemporary" school violence (micro-violence) be the result of a mode of operation that is equally as widespread and implicit? In other words, it seems interesting to study the level of consistency and clarification of academic institutions (schools) and to examine its relationship to the level of violence experienced (by the different actors).

The diversity of educational institutions is referenced on the basis of the conative pedagogical model developed by Bui-Xuan (1993, 1998; Joing & al. 2011). It allows for the categorization of institutions according to the guidelines and meaning (structure, function, technique) that principally drive them. A curriculum of institutional operation has therefore been defined on the basis of this model. Five stages were identified in connection with the level of consistency and clarity of the system.

The more the professionals in an academic institution are guided by the will to adapt their practices to the characteristics of the school population, to the surrounding environment, or even to the infrastructures, the more consistent the institutional operation is.

The more the professionals of an academic institution are guided by the will to formalize the different processes, procedures, and projects in writing, and to set referential axiological, ethical, and teleological benchmarks that are able to work together, the clearer the institutional operation is.

The more an institution *advances* in the conative curriculum (defined by the five stages of operation), the higher the level of coherence and clarity:

Stage 1: structural stage; a base institution; a « spontaneous » operation

The institutional « operation » is spontaneous and intuitive; it is based on the common sense allegedly shared by the different actors and on the charisma and vitality of the actors. There is not really any clarification within the institution, the different processes, and procedures. This is a basic operation empirically based on the oral tradition of the institution: the projects do not exist or are not formalized and the professionals are mainly guided by the will to « do their job the best they can » without clear principles of behavior management having been collectively defined. Teamwork is virtually non-existent: where it does exist, it is teams or peer groups.

Stage 2: operational stage; a questioning institution, uncertain operation

The *institution* questions a little more. There is increased reflection, *at least*, and eventually challenges to the initial insights. The questions are shared with some of « the team. » However, the operation remains uncertain and empirical ; the level of clarity and formalization is quite low. The institution still operates primarily on an oral tradition. The « team » work is difficult and the idea of « group » more accurately describes the collective organization; each person remains isolated, in spite of similar questions. Many ethical, axiological, and technical differences exist. When objectives and projects are formalized in writing, they are generally not shared among all of the actors: therefore, no common project exists.

Stage 3: technical stage, a procedural institution, controlled operation

The institution was questioned on the means of operation of the efficient structures and the established routines of operation that have been jointly clarified. Operation is mastered: the team exists, shares technological, deontological, and axiological references and demonstrate coherence in their operation. The procedures are mastered, the operation is systematic, and the *techniques* are subject to strict enforcement. Projects are defined; commitments and the means of fulfilling them are clear.

Stage 4: Techno-functional stage; an adaptive institution, optimized operation

In addition to mastering the operational routines, the institution knows how to adapt them to changes and needs, not only from the school population, but also to the characteristics of its environment and professionals. Operation is optimized: the institution considers the effectiveness of its techniques in terms of the uniqueness of the school population and its environment and analyzes the successes of other institutions. The processes are agile; an internal evaluation system identifies system and existing regulations failures. Techniques are thoughtfully applied to make them efficient. The institution works to propose an intelligent system, or in other words a system that is able to adapt.

Stage 5: Expertise stage; an expert institution, innovative operation

The institution increasingly uses the elements of the preceding steps, the charisma and the dynamism of the actors to propose a unique and innovative service.

2. Methods

The methodology aims to identify the academic institutions, first by their conative operation curriculum (global approach to institutional operation based on the level of consistency and clarity) and secondly on the indicators that may be relevant in explaining a perceived sense of violence. These characteristics of the establishment are identified with the goal of measuring the level of violence perceived by the different actors (*establishment effect*).

2.1 Participating Institutions

The 26 public secondary schools that participated in the study represent 12.8% of the target population (public secondary schools in the Northern department). The latest social departmental survey conducted by the education inspectorate ranks the 203 public secondary schools in the North from the most deprived (1) to the most favorable (203). The results show excellent ecological validity of the chosen sample; its distribution is very representative of the target population.

2.2 Sample Description

3192 students participated in the study: 1573 females and 1470 males (149 blank responses) between the ages of 11 and 16. 361 staff members participated in the study. 73.9% of them are teachers and the rest are members of the administrative, educational, social services, or health staff. The structure of the sample is relatively homothetic with that of the school population.

2.3 Instrumentation

In order to understand the level of violence (perceived by the actors) in the institutions, all of the interviewed actors responded to the following question: *"On a scale of 1 (no violence at all) to 10 (lots of violence), how do you estimate the level of violence in your school?"* This question then allowed us to obtain an average score out of 10 describing the level of violence for each institution in the study.

The professionals also responded to a questionnaire that allowed us to understand what mobilized them in their practice and therefore to situate their establishment in the curriculum of institutional operation.

The utilized questionnaires were constructed in two parts; they exhibit a good internal consistency (r>0.5). The procedures for distributing the questionnaires sought to limit the problem of "social desirability:" anonymous, instructions to the students ensured that there were no "right answers," collection of questionnaires in a sealed box for staff members.

The *dashboard* of each establishment is a collection of characteristics from IPES evaluations (Piloting Indicators for Academic Institutions). The indicators chosen for this study were grouped into six factors. They are presented in Table 1.

3. Results

3.1 Factors related to violence

A classification of data into two *clusters* has been evidenced and supervised by the "ZEP" qualification. Thus, the first *cluster* is comprised of nine establishments classified in the Priority Education Zone (sample 'ZEP" – establishment are the population of concentrated social and economic problems); the seventeen other secondary schools that do not have this classification constitute the second *cluster* (sample "non ZEP").

Correlation studies were then conducted to determine the principal factors associated with tracking the perception of school violence. Tables 2 and 3 present the significantly correlated factors (Pearson correlation coefficient r>0.50, p<.05) to the level of violence perceived by the students and professionals for "ZEP" establishments (Table 2) and "non ZEP" establishments (Table 3).

Regarding institutions located in the Priority Education Zone, the results show that the level of perceived violence is negatively and significantly correlated with the institutional operation (conative step of operation) both for students (r = (-.84)) and for professionals (r = (-.75)). In other words, the clearer and more coherent the operation of the establishment, the lower the perceived level of violence. This result is also valuable for the "non ZEP" establishments, particularly for the professionals (r = (-.59)). Thus, more professionals are guided by the willingness to adapt their practices to the particularities of the context (coherence) and to formalize projects in writing, as well as to define common frames of reference (to an ethical, axiological, and teleological level).*Moreover, the results show that certain factors related to the characteristics of the school population are also determinants of a high or low level of violence regardless of the type of institution. Indeed, the rates of bursary students as well as the academic level of students entering the sixth year (entering secondary school) are the factors associated with the level of violence. The more disadvantaged the population (low level of achievement on secondary school entry tests), the higher the level of violence perceived by different actors. Concerning the "non zep" establishments, it is interesting to note that the factors related to the academic success of the population are also determinants of the level of violence perceived by professionals only. In other words, the lower the level of academic success (averages earned on the secondary school certification), the higher the level of violence experienced by staff members. These factors are not statistically significant for the level of violence experienced by students.

The study of the factors associated with the level of violence perceived by the different actors then highlights three aspects. First, the recurrence of the institutional operation as an indicator of the level of violence that suggests the important opportunities for intervention and prevention must be stressed. Next, the results reiterate the importance of factors related to the school population. Finally, they reveal that factors related to the characteristics (social and especially academic) of the school population (particularly in socially advantaged institutions) have a more significant influence on professionals than on students. The first two aspects put into conflict on one hand the importance of the institutional responsibility and on the other hand the inevitable role of social determinism in the issue of school violence. The third aspect again raises the question of the first two and does not act in favor of any determinism.

In fact, by highlighting a greater influence of factors related to the school population on professionals than on students, do the results not reveal an institution that would tend to confuse difficulties of users and violence, a cultural gap and/or lag behind the expectations for academic success and violence? Finally, do the professionals not have expectations that are likely to generate a sense of violence? Would the professional identity of teachers not have an adverse effect on expectations? By desiring an academically and socially "standard" student, does the institution not transform a "shift" in perceived violence?

Finally, the results again bypass[i] a view widely held in the field that would make the provision of resources (financial, human) an effective means of combating violence. In fact, the results show a significant positive correlation between the resources allocated to schools (rate of supervision, number of students per class) and the level of perceived violence. Therefore, the structures with the most resources are those in which the actors (particularly the professionals) suffer the most from violence. It seems essential to be cautious with this result since it is true that structures receiving additional resources are often those where the sense of violence is important ("ZEP" establishments). Furthermore, the attribution of the "ZEP" qualification in France (ability to secure additional resources) seems to stigmatize and cause pessimism in the actors (Guillaume, 1998) that is capable of creating, by the effect of expectations, a greater sense of violence. However, if it seems difficult to conceive of resources as harmful, it is possible to question the ability of French academic institutions to effectively utilize this asset. Considering the results, it is essential to ask whether the institutions would benefit from further questioning the *intelligence* of operation before attempting to make efficient use of resources.

In any event, the results lead us away from a fatalistic vision of school violence and suggest that it is possible to take action, particularly by adapted operation. In this respect, it is necessary to inquire specifically as to the characteristics of the institutions studied.

3.2 Operation of the Surveyed Institutions

The study of arithmetic means obtained for each of the institutions surveyed ($N = 26$) shows that the majority of establishments (88.5%; $N = 23$) lie between steps 2 and 3 in the curriculum of institutional operation (figure 1). In other words, there is a tendency toward unreliable operational modes. In fact, the averages of the establishment range between 1.89 and 3.17 ($M = 2.53$) with a standard deviation of 0.29, which means that 68% of the surveyed institutions are between 2.24 and 2.82 in the curriculum of operation and 95% of them are between 1.95 and 3.11.

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If it should return to the characteristic operation, it must nonetheless emphasize the importance of evolutionary opportunities for the institutions. In effect, it is ultimately *micro-actions* that allow the institution to move more toward step 2 or more toward step 3 and that seem to have *macro-effects*[ii] on the level of perceived violence.

4. Discussion: Toward a Functional Responsibility of Academic Institutions for the Wellbeing at School

Analysis of the results leads us to believe not only that the institutions carry within themselves the means to act (institutional functioning is determinant), but also that they develop an operational mode that weakens them in their daily fight against violence. In fact, their mode of operation leads them to *play* the role of tightrope walker and to adopt paradoxical postures in regard to the existing educational culture: in opposing the cultural environment of the French school, the patterns of thought and action developed by the institutions appears to be detrimental. Our reflection is organized around three aspects characteristic of the operation of the institutions studied: the oral culture, the lack of evaluation, and the stigmatization of difference as a source of unease.

4.1 An Oral Culture

The first paradox identified is the presence of an oral culture in a French school that greatly values writing in the evaluation of students.

The majority of academic institutions surveyed have an operational mode characteristic of a functional stage; they are therefore characterized by an uncertain operation in which the level of written clarity and formality is relatively weak. The axiological, ethical, and teleological references, as well as the operational procedures, have not been collectively clarified. The projects defined by the institution have a purely administrative value and although some professionals develop a feeling of unity, the latter remains very fragile in terms of divergences and a lack of clarity. The operation is thus characterized by an oral culture as opposed to a written culture, which is to say of formality and clarity. The professionals surveyed will tend for example to spontaneously think that the principles of professional ethics have been defined collectively, whereas within the same institution each person will be able to stand behind the concept of ethics that he sees fit (Joing& al., 2010). The operation is therefore based on "common sense" supposedly shared by all and contributes to a particular oral culture not conducive to the written clarity and formality of elements that shape the institutional operation. However, it should be noted that the educational system advocates the continuance of a written culture: students are regularly evaluated under this form and they are required to successfully develop this skill. The institution thus seems committed to the value of writing; provided it rarely develops the way it operates.

4.2 A Lack of Evaluation

The second paradox of operation identified is the lack of evaluation in a school that continually assesses students.

The functionality also characterizes the "concerned" institutions that question without any method. In other words, the institutions reflect and implement actions, but at this stage their effectiveness is rarely assessed. This operation, characteristic of a functional step (step 2), introduces an uncertainty about the effectiveness of the actions undertaken and may prevent advancement in the absence of remediation. Finally, institutions act and think that the established actions benefit the student; however, they rarely question them to see if they are truly beneficial. Similarly, they believe that there is more or less violence but few of them have recording and/or measurement methods (Joing & al., 2010). This lack of evaluation again implicates the academic institution in the role of tightrope walker since it is true that the educational system has a significantly evaluative operation. In other words, the institution continually evaluates students, even though it has difficulty implementing an evaluation culture for itself.

4.3 Stigmatization of Difference as a Source of Unease

The third paradox of operation identified is the tendency to stigmatize difference as a source of unease in a school that nevertheless promotes the integration and inclusion of the difference (February 11, 2005 act requires the accommodation of others in all of their differences).

The results show that factors related to academic success have a greater influence on the perceived level of violence for professionals than for students. In other words, it seems that the difference (that is to say the "gap" between expectations and results) is stigmatized as a potential source of unease and violence perceived by professionals. The institution thus appears to live the difference rather poorly and, as part of the policies of integration and inclusion, it is possible to ask whether the French institution will again develop a mode of operation that would prevent it from progressing effectively in its fight against violence.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the operational mode of the professionals of French academic institutions in order to assess their impact on the level of violence perceived by different actors (students and professionals). The main limitation of this study is the restriction to the French context. The operational mode of French academic institutions is so singular that it seems difficult to generalize the results. However, the results showed that the operational mode of the professionals is determinative in the sense of violence regardless of the actor and whatever the type of school. Furthermore, they demonstrated a singular operation of the academic institutions surveyed that may impede their fight against violence. In effect, patterns of thought and action that appear to "paralyze" them revolve around an oral culture (as opposed to a written and formalized culture), and an absence of evaluation (non-evaluative culture), these two aspects jeopardizing the level of coherence and clarity within the institution. Moreover, it appears that there is a stigmatization of difference (social, academic, cultural) as a source of unease (and violence). These modes of thought and action may be more detrimental as they oppose the cultural environment of the French school: a written culture that should develop the students, an evaluative function and an integration-inclusion policy.

If these conclusions are of purely interpretative value, the results lead us to develop complementary studies to verify whether or not the gaps can be considered "harmful" for the schools. They also support the numerous international studies that suggest that the school has the means to act (Benbenishty&Astor, 2005; Astor & al., 2009; Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1985; Payet 1995) in response to the phenomenon of violence. Therefore, professionals should examine the consistency of their operational mode to prevent violence and promote school health.

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Tables and Figure

Table 1: Indicators from the IPES Evaluations Included in the Study

Factors relating to the school population	Percentage of PCS (Professions and Professional Categories) disadvantaged, medium, and favored; Ranking in the departmental social survey; Percentage of students receiving grants; Rate of a 2+ year delay in entering middle school; Rate of success in first year of middle school evaluations for French and mathematics
Factors related to averages	Average number of students per class; Supervision ratios (number of education staff/number of students); Average finances: Global Staffing Schedule (in relation to the total number of students) and Actual Overtime (in relation to the total number of students)
Specific indicators of violence	Number of incidents of violence as indicated by SIGNA1 (in relation to the total number of students); Number of permanent exclusions and disciplinary councils (in relation to the total number of students); Particular classification (ZEP, ZUS, RELEV, sensitive) from French national bodies assessing achievement and violence
Factors related to educational practices	Number of peri-educational actions (in relation to the total number of students); Rate of doubling at the end of each four year of middle school; Point differential between the first and final tests (National Certificate diploma) in French and mathematics
Factors related to academic success	Success rate on the National Certificate Diploma; Average grades obtained in French, mathematics, and in history-geography (on the National Certificate Diploma)
Others	Coefficient of attractiveness (image of the establishment); Number of students (factor related to the structure of the establishment); Rate of participation in the election of parent representatives to the council of the establishment (participation of families).

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficient r of Significantly Correlated Factors, at p< .05, to the Identification of Violence for "ZEP" Classified Establishments (N = 9)

|		Violence perceived by students	Violence perceived by professionals	Global level of violence (students and professionals)
	Violence ressentie par les élèves	1.00*	.93*	.99*
Factor related to operational mode (conative curriculum)	Institutional operation	-.84*	-.75*	-.80*
Factors related to the school population	Operation of students (conative curriculum)	(-.60)	(-.61)	(-.61)
	Grants	.67*	.72*	.71*
	PCS favored	(-.31)	(-.51)	(-.45)
	French Evaluation 6th	-.81*	-.89*	-.87*
	Mathematics Evaluation 6th	-.69*	-.73*	-.72*
Factors related to averages	Supervision ratios	(.62)	.72*	.69*

() Given the "ZEP" sample size (N = 9), a statistical test allowed for the identification that the high-intensity correlations with a coefficient higher than 0.66 are to be considered significant. This data puts the significance of the result into perspective.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Coefficient r of Significantly Correlated Factors, at p<. 05, to the Identification of Violence for "Non ZEP" Establishments (N = 17)

		Violence perceived by students	Violence perceived by professionals	Global level of violence (students and professionals)
Factor related to the mode of operation	Violence ressentie par les élèves Institutional operation	1.00*	.68*	.89*
		-.24	-.59*	-.50*
Factors related to the school population	Classification of the establishment	-.40	-.60*	-.56*
	Grants	.51*	.58*	.60*
	French evaluation (1st year of middle school)	-.63*	-.57*	-.64*
	Math evaluation 6th (1st year of middle school)	-.45	-.54*	-.54*
Factors related to averages	Number of students per class	-.36	-.54*	-.51*
	Supervision ratio	.35	.68*	.59*
Factors related to academic success	French average on the certification (exam in the 4yh year, in secondary school)	-.13	-.56*	-.41
	Math average on the certification (exam in the 4th year, of middle school)	-.08	-.46	-.33
	History-geography average on the certification (exam in the 4th year, of middle school)	-.26	-.54*	-.46
Factor related to the structure	Number of students	-.03	-.52*	-.34

Figure 1: Distribution of the Operational Stages of the Surveyed Institutions

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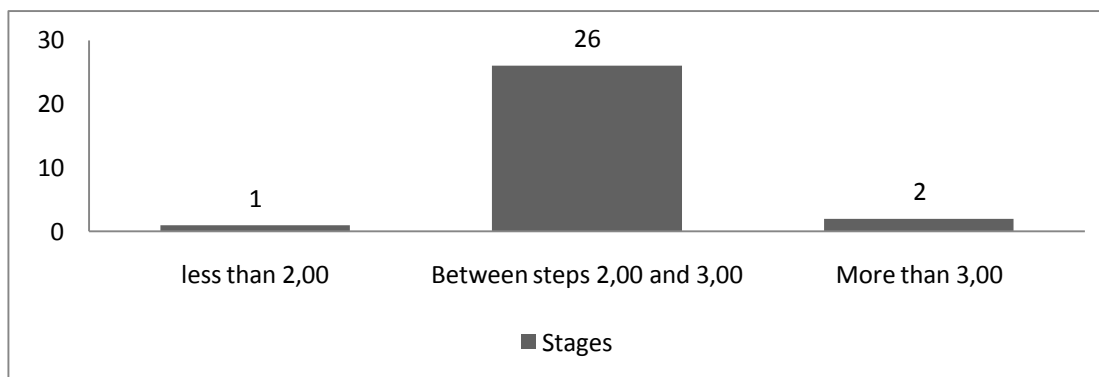
[i] Scientific studies conducted in Western countries indicate no systematic relationship between resources dedicated to education systems and the performance of those systems (Farley 1982; Good and Brophy 1986; cited by Galand, 2001). Similarly, Dubet (2002) references Thélot, C. and Joutard, P. (1999). Réussirl'Ecole, Paris, Le Seuil, who found that, "both in terms of education and pedagogically, the supervision ratio has continued to increase."

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