

**The relation between democratic socialization  
and delinquency in schools  
in a post-socialist country**

**Research project**

**for the  
Criminological Research  
course**

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*‘It’s easier to hit than to set the table.’  
(School director about the student’s right)*

**1. Introduction**

During the political transition from socialist to democratic system, several problems arose in the Central and Eastern European societies. One of these difficulties is the significantly increased degree of criminality, especially in children and juveniles.<sup>1</sup> Both theoretical and empirical studies have shown an association between the different forms of problem behaviours<sup>2</sup> (for instance a correlation between school delinquency and committing other types of crimes), and the possible preventive role of schools<sup>3</sup>.

Since the specific problem of violence and discipline in schools also raises the general problem of moral education, one of the theories of school-based prevention focuses on developing ethics and values for living in a democratic society.<sup>4</sup> The following research project investigates whether there is any correlation between democratic socialization and the degree of school delinquency in the Hungarian schools. If there is, how can the knowledge of, and attitudes towards, legitimate rule enforcement, and democratic conflict resolution skills of teachers, school administrators and students be described, and what kind of preventive programmes could work

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<sup>1</sup> In Hungary, according to the official prosecution data (2001), the number of juvenile delinquents per 10 000 juvenile inhabitants was 161 in 1985, increased to 217.4 by 1994, and 225.9 by 1999. The number of child delinquents (under age 14), which is an indication of the future trend of juvenile delinquency, increased from 2 557 in 1975 to 4 128 in 1993, and in 1999 4 133 children committed crimes. This tendency shows an even more significant increase in juvenile delinquency, if we consider that the absolute number of people under age 18 has decreased and the number of multiple delinquencies has increased.

<sup>2</sup> Elliott, D.S., Huizinga, D., and Menard, S. (1989), *Multiple problem youth: Delinquency, substance use, and mental health problems*, New York: Springer-Verlang.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Hawkins, J.D., Farrington, D.P., Catalano, R.F. (1998), ‘Reducing Violence Through the School’, in Elliott, D.S. et al. (eds), *Violence in American Schools: a new perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Bybee, R.W., Gee, E.G. (1982), *Violence, Values and Justice in the Schools*, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, p: 17.

effectively, based on democratic socialization and alternative conflict-handling methods, considering that in a post-socialist country, not only the students, but also teachers need to learn the democratic language and tools of law enforcement and compliance?

Following a summary of the theoretical background and hypotheses of the proposed research, I intend to explore how this approach could illuminate the present difficulties in Hungarian schools and effective prevention. Finally, I will focus on the methodology of the project.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The main **theoretical approach** to the research is that a school, based on democratic principles and processes, can have an effective preventive role in problem behaviours and delinquency. This kind of democratic atmosphere can be created by a school management system:

1. which has clear, fair and consistently enforced rules;
2. where the staff uses the enforcement of rules as an opportunity to teach students about fairness, justice and personal responsibility, thereby increasing self-control and belief in the validity of conventional rules;
3. which encourages students to get involved in formulating rules, discipline procedures, student rights and obligations;
4. and where teachers themselves are also aware of the role and structure of the rules.<sup>5</sup>

Based on Elliot Aronson's and Lawrence Kohlberg's theories, a school – as a social environment - can focus on improving *compliance*, *identification* or *internalization*<sup>6</sup> of rules in students. Kohlberg emphasises three main stages, determined by the reasons why one might follow rules: 1.) to avoid punishment and receive compliments (preconventional level), 2.) to fit the expected rules (conventional level), or - at the highest moral stage – 3.) because one believes in the rules' universal,

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<sup>5</sup> Based on several studies summarised by Bybee, R.W., Gee, E.G. (1982), *Violence, Values and Justice in the Schools*, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, p:6 and Gottfredson, D.C. (2001), *Schools and Delinquency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p: 86.

<sup>6</sup> Aronson, E.(1999), *The social animal*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed, New York: Worth: W.H. Freeman.

ethical content (postconventional level)<sup>7</sup>. According to these two theoreticians, a school, which effectively socialises students by inculcating democratic principles, aims to make students accept rules through internalisation; it also fosters a post-conventional moral stage in the students, even if ‘the majority of teachers are at the conventional level of development’<sup>8</sup>.

However, my **hypothesis** is that - because of their political and cultural roots - teachers in Hungarian schools: lack complex knowledge about the socializing role of laws; don't possess the knowledge or expertise required to enforce rules; are unaware that they risk encouraging improper attitudes towards the law by using illegal means to discipline students (e.g. by ignoring their rights); fear that equal rights and obligations might lead to anarchy; and lack constructive conflict resolution techniques which could help them to enforce rules according to democratic principles. Hence schools where the presence of these conditions is more likely show a higher rate of problem behaviour. Therefore, shedding light on the roles and mechanisms of law-related factors could help in preventing school delinquency.

## 2. Previous research and findings

Several experimental - mostly preventive - programmes have been run both internationally and in Hungary, examining the association between school atmosphere and delinquency.

According to O.J. Harvey, teachers’ dictatorialness and punitiveness correlate significantly and negatively with student performance. An American study, called 'Violent Schools – Safe Schools', also found that it is more important to ‘get consistent’ than to ‘get tough’ with clear rules and consequences of rule violation. In fact, schools where students perceive the disciplinary practices to be unfairly administered have higher rates of violence, and where teachers express authoritarian and punitive attitudes toward students, experience greater amounts of property loss. This is consistent with Kounin and Gump’s findings. They argued that children who have punitive teachers

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<sup>7</sup> Kohlberg, L. (1984), *The psychology of moral development*, New York: Harper and Row, p: 44.

<sup>8</sup> Bybee, R.W., Gee, E.G. (1982), *Violence, Values and Justice in the Schools*, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, p:157.

display more aggression in their misconduct, are less concerned with learning, and are more ambivalent toward unique school values.<sup>9</sup> Gottfredson also concluded that by modelling appropriate behaviour and establishing a fair and just discipline system, staff reinforce student beliefs in the validity of rules and laws.<sup>10</sup> It might strengthen the sense of community which - according to Sampson and Groves' theory about the integrative role of collective efficacy<sup>11</sup> - is crucial in order to decrease delinquency.

While several **preventive programmes** (e.g. the 'BASIS', or the 'Effective Schools Project') showed the significant role of consistent rule enforcement, the 'Law-Related Education' programme emphasised how effectively delinquency can be reduced by developing appreciation of the legal processes, encouraging responsible participation, and developing moral and ethical values.<sup>12</sup>

In **Hungary**, in spite of several descriptive studies undertaken over the last decade on the democratic socializing aspects of schools, and the current skills and attitudes of teachers toward these principles<sup>13</sup>, no research has analysed the effect of non-democratic school management on school delinquency or the possible preventive effects of consistent law enforcement in schools. In fact, there hasn't been any research on the prevalence of delinquency and bullying in Hungarian schools, even though the problem is becoming more acute, and its association with the crimes committed by children and juveniles has often been demonstrated.

In addition to these approaches, a number of **innovative programmes** have been implemented in elementary and middle schools in order to decrease school delinquency by involving students, and sometimes their parents, in the processes of rule formulation and decision-making. These programmes have involved: organising consultancy days to discuss rights and obligations,

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<sup>9</sup> Summarised by Bybee, R.W., Gee, E.G. (1982), *Violence, Values and Justice in the Schools*, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, p:110 – 118.

<sup>10</sup> Gottfredson, D.C. (2001), *Schools and Delinquency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p: 91.

<sup>11</sup> Sampson, R. J. and Groves, W.B. (1989), 'Community structure and crime: testing social disorganisation theory', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: 785-786.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid (n. 10 above, p: 139-145)

<sup>13</sup> e.g. Ligeti, Gy. (2003), *Gyűjtős - Iskola, demokrácia, civilizáció [School, democracy, civilization]*, Budapest: Új Mandátum Publisher or Horváth, Á. (1998), 'A jövő polgárai [The citizens of the future]', *Új Pedagógiai Szemle*, 1.

teaching alternative conflict resolution techniques to teachers, or improving social and communicational skills of students. In spite of the wide scale of these innovative programmes, there is a lack of systematic evaluation, monitoring or cost-benefit analysis, especially in matters of efficiency.

The proposed research seeks to fill the gaps left by the research discussed above. Firstly, based on a national survey, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, it would offer a general overview of delinquency in Hungarian schools. It could describe how deeply the democratic principles exist or don't exist in these institutions, and could map the main attitudes and skills of teachers relative to consistent law enforcement and effective conflict resolution methods. Secondly, by implementation and evaluation of a semi-experimental programme – based on the findings provided the survey and the interviews, and the input of the teachers -, helps to create an effective preventive school-based method, which could be later adapted and developed by other schools in Hungary.

### **3. Detailed research plan**

The world of education, the attitudes and knowledge of teachers, the propensity of students to delinquency, and the process of democratic socialization are all very complex phenomena. Therefore, if we want to analyse the cause-effect mechanisms, and the possible ways of future prevention, we also have to use complex methods in order to have relevant measures. Hence, the proposed research follows the method of triangulation while combining different, qualitative and quantitative approaches to exploit the strengths of each. In the following, I explore the planned steps in the research, and detail the concepts behind the chosen methods and sample design (for summary, see Table No. 1 and No. 2).

The proposed research addresses three main issues:

1. Present situation in the elementary schools

- 1.1. The degree of school delinquency in the Hungarian schools

1.2. Present answers to delinquency, conflict-handling methods in schools

1.3. Structures of regulation and policies of schools

2. Attitudes of teachers to rights and obligations and to democratic ways of rule enforcement
3. Intervention programme for effective prevention

## **1. Degree of delinquency in schools, answers to them, conflict-handling methods of teachers**

### **1.1. Questionnaire among 1 500 teachers**

An approximately 30-minutes-long face-to-face questionnaire will be conducted with 1 500 elementary school teachers. The questionnaire will ask teachers about the number of problem behaviours they experience in the school, including ‘cussing at a teacher, shirking homework, being late to class, writing on school walls, cheating on tests, bullying classmates, lying, fighting, stealing, drinking alcohol, selling drugs, assaulting or robbing others’<sup>14</sup>, etc. The questionnaire will also ask the teachers about the conflict-handling techniques they use in general and in relation to different specific cases, which will be detailed in the questionnaire. Moreover, the knowledge of teachers will be examined by asking them about student’s and teacher’s rights. The questionnaire will contain both open and closed questions, which offer opportunities to the teacher to explore his/her opinion in detail. All data will be anonymised before the analytical stage. Every participant will be made aware that their identities will be protected. This kind of survey will produce a representative database of teachers’ reports on school delinquency, their conflict-handling methods and their legal knowledge. Open questions and face-to-face interaction will provide additional, more complex information about the examined questions. Furthermore, at a later stage, this information will assist in selecting a sample of teachers who seem open to longer discussions for interview.

The **sampling** will be a combination of quota sampling and random selection. According to the quota table (Table No. 3) an appropriate number of teachers will be randomly selected from each quota category. Our sample will be representative of the entire teacher population for the type of settlement and the region; secondly, all the teachers in each category will have the same chance to be

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<sup>14</sup> Behaviours within delinquency by D.C. Gottfredson (n. 10 above p: 4).

included in the sample. Before finalising the questionnaire, a pilot study of 50 questionnaires will be conducted, in order to ask the most relevant questions through the finalised survey.

## **1.2. Analyses of schools' rules and regulations**

It will be useful to analyse the official documents of schools where the 1 500 selected teachers work, because it will provide significant information about the school-managements' traditions and attitudes towards rule formulation, declaration, enforcement: what do they prohibit, how do they prohibit it, what are the sanctions, are these regulations in line with the Law of Education, who signed it, etc? These will be collected when the interviewers contact the teachers. The analyses will follow a list of indicators, which might for instance measure the existence of due processes in the regulations.

## **2. Attitudes of teachers toward democratic principles in education**

This issue will be investigated using **semi-structured interviews** with 100 teachers, 90 students and 90 parents, participant observations and focus groups. The aim of the semi-structured teacher interviews is to explore the rationale(s) behind teachers' attitudes (culture, traditions, fears, personal aspects, successes-failures, skills, resources, family background, etc.) toward rule formulation, punitiveness, and conflict resolution. Interviews with students and with one of their parents will show how they see the same teachers, situations, conflicts in the school, and how they describe the attitudes of teachers.

Due to the structure of the interviews, on the one hand, the information gained will be comparable; on the other hand, the answers will provide a much deeper and detailed view, and will probably explore new, but relevant dimensions in the issues examined, which might not have been anticipated by the questionnaire. All the interviews will be recorded on tape, and will be fully transcribed later, in order not to lose any of the information.

Fifty teachers will be selected from 10 schools by quota **sampling**; hence both the schools and the teachers will be representative for the type of settlement and the region. The selection of the interviewed teachers will not be randomised, since the probability that all the randomly selected

teachers may be willing to talk to the interviewers is limited. Besides the quota limits, the selection will be influenced by the previously conducted questionnaires, which means that those teachers who have been more open to the discussions before will be asked to give interviews. The students and their parents will be selected by snowball sampling, which means that they will be interviewed 'informally' and will be referred by other respondents. Because of the abstract and complex nature of the issues about democratic principles, rights and obligations, and conflict-handling methods, only 13-14 years old students will be selected for interviews.

**Participant observation** will explore how coherent the teachers' words and acts are with each other. **Two classes per each interviewed teacher** will be visited and investigated according to a list of indicators, measuring the verbal and non-verbal mechanisms and the different social network systems of the teachers.

The third way to measure the attitudes of teachers will be **focus groups**. It will have three functions in the research. Firstly, it can provide more information about the thoughts and attitudes of teachers than the interviews conducted with them, since they will be in another social context (i.e. with their colleagues and not with an outsider interviewer face-to-face). Secondly, it will be an important opportunity for participant-observation; the activity and attitudes of each teacher in this situation will well reflect their behaviour in social contexts. And lastly, it is not impossible that this way of sharing the experiences and feelings related to school conflicts with each other will be new for some of the teachers – even if this kind of supervision would be crucial in such a type of work -, and they might benefit from the information these meetings could provide for them. **One focus group** will be organised **in each school** where teachers have given interviews.

### **3. Intervention programme for prevention**

In the final stage of the research project, a one-year long semi-experimental intervention programme will be implemented. Based on the questionnaires, the interviews and the participant observations, the two most problematic schools will be selected from each quota category. Hence, there will be 9 experimental and 9 control schools representing each quota category. The

experimental and the control institutions will have similar characteristics, because the region and type of settlement they represent will match. Level of delinquency and problem behaviour would be similar in them as well.

Similar to the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*<sup>15</sup>, this intervention will take place at classroom, teacher, school, and parent levels.

Both at **classroom** and **teacher** levels, two training protocols will be introduced: one will focus on law-related issues, especially on the rights and obligations of students and teachers<sup>16</sup>; the other will instruct participants on the theory and practice of alternative conflict resolution, particularly the method of mediation and conferencing. On the **school level**, an experimental student committee will be created to represent student rights to school management. Besides this, current school conflicts will be handled by an alternative technique (e.g. mediation or conferencing), similar to the *Real Justice* programme<sup>17</sup>. During the academic year, a general conflict resolution forum will be set up, where all students, teachers, and other members of staff would participate, and where some problems could be discussed. The forum will employ the same facilitating technique used to handle the everyday conflicts of the school. The **parents** will be kept informed by personal consultations, open days and booklets about the structure and main messages of the implemented programme. The finalised version of the intervention programme will focus on the main problematic issues, which emerged out of the previous data collection. In order to gain comparable data after the research project, it is important to organise the intervention programme in a standardised way, and implement the same elements in the different schools.

After one year, the **effects** of the intervention programme will be **measured** by repeating the survey, the semi-structured interviews, and the participant observations in the 9 experimental and in the 9 control schools. A systemic **evaluation** will measure the teachers', students' and their parents'

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<sup>15</sup> summarised by D.C. Gottfredson (Ibid. n. 10 above p: 128-129).

<sup>16</sup> similarly to the *Law-Related Education* programme, summarised by D.C. Gottfredson (Ibid. n. 10 above p: 143-145).

<sup>17</sup> [www.realjustice.org](http://www.realjustice.org)



### Categories for the quotas<sup>18</sup>

There are 96 701 teachers in 3 412 elementary schools in Hungary. Several previous sociological studies showed that the most important independent variables related to teachers' attitudes are the types of settlement and the region of the school they teach in. (It reflects the general significant differences which are caused by these two indicators in Hungary). Hence, in order to produce results, which may be generalised to the entire teacher population, the teacher sample in this research has to be representative of the type of settlement and the region. It means that the same percentages of the selected teachers have to belong to villages, town, cities, western, central and eastern schools, as in the entire teacher population.

| Type of the settlement/Region | West         | Central      | East         | Altogether  |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Village                       | 156 (10,42%) | 94 (6,3%)    | 237 (15,77%) | 487         |
| Town                          | 107 (7,16%)  | 113 (7,5%)   | 222 (14,8%)  | 442         |
| City                          | 133 (8,85%)  | 274 (18,24%) | 164 (10,96%) | 571         |
| Altogether                    | 396          | 481          | 623          | 1500 (100%) |

Table No. 3: Frequencies of the 1500 teacher in the different quota categories

## Summary

This research proposes to survey the prevalence of delinquency in Hungarian elementary schools, to help understand the association between democratic principles, conflict-handling methods and problem behaviour in schools, map the main attitudes and motivations of teachers towards these principles, and finally, show what elements a national preventive programme should include. If we consider that all criminals once sat on the school bench, these results could be relevant not only to child and juvenile delinquency prevention, but to criminality in general.

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<sup>18</sup> Based on a national database on elementary schools collected by the Information Centre, National Public Education Institute, Győr, Hungary.

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