

# Recess and school violence: (Case of Tunisia)

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**Abstract:** This paper tries to explain through a study about school violence during recess in primary schools. The basic objective is to comprehend the ways of regression of this particular violence. Otherwise, creating new pathways to fight against this phenomena. This research, conducted in the "Zgana" primary school in Mahdia, is based on an observation of this phenomena within the school playground for two weeks. In addition, it is carried out through a questionnaire intended for these school teachers and a semi-structured interview with the school director. The aim being to reflect on the climate that reigns during recreation. The results show that recreations are routinely and not enthusiastic as active recreations. In order to have an effect on Tunisian recreation climate in particular by the hypothetical decrease of the violence, recommendations which affect all actors in the education system, are proposed.

**Keywords:** Primary school, violence, Active recreation, education system

## I. INTRODUCTION

Violence is a phenomenon that affects all of us and we are all concerned. Even children in schools are subject to violence and humiliation and this can usually affect their personality, their learning and their future prospects.

In Tunisia, for example, more than 34,000 cases of verbal or physical violence within schools were reported during the 2016-2017 school year. An increase of more than 57% compared to the year 2015.

This school violence takes place during learning time in the classroom and especially during recess in the schoolyard. Violence in the schoolyard is becoming a worrying phenomenon, and rightly so.

The recreation area is an open space, surrounded by walls and/or buildings, which is part of a home, an administrative building, or a school. It is also the time given to learners to play or relax. In other words, recess should be considered a break from the conventional school setting in which children are confined to a small environment and spend between 50% and 70% of their time sitting.

The playground is defined as a specific area within a school where learners can relax and move freely in the open air during breaks in the day (recess). In fact, in an elementary school playground, children are most often seen running around, playing ball, etc., while in a middle school or high school, children are more likely to be seen playing with their parents. The playground has a social mission where each learner can situate himself or herself in relation to others.

Julie Delalande (2005), considers the schoolyard as "a common place, frequented for generations by all the children of our country, several times a day and over many years. Recess, a moment of life divided into segments according to the school system's timetable, is part of the child's heritage because it is a moment of transmission of a child's culture. From one generation to the next, students learn games, but also a way of being, allowing their integration into their peer group."<sup>1</sup>

It is clear to us that recreation is a subject that raises passions and emotions. Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that recess is a right, not a privilege. The journal *Pediatrics* also points out that recess is a critical element in the development of learners.

Neuroscience has also shown that memory and attention are improved when learning is spaced out by breaks rather than done all at once. Since these breaks, introduced between sessions, allow for a better distribution of effort and improve the learner's cognitive performance.

Attention begins to wane after 40 to 50 minutes of successive mental work, and sometimes less. Based on this premise, recess should be scheduled at regular intervals throughout the school day. In this way, children are energized and better prepared to learn. Indeed, the length and frequency of recess should be sufficient and the location appropriate for children to mentally decompress. For example, in one elementary school in Texas (USA), students have four 15-minute recesses daily. This school is modeled after Finland, where their overall recess time has increased from twenty minutes to one hour each day. According to the teachers at this school, students are also less distracted, more attentive and less disruptive in the classroom. In fact, although they were nervous about falling behind on their curriculum, the teachers found that the breaks helped them get ahead of the curriculum by the middle of the school year, contrary to what they had originally thought.<sup>2</sup>

During this moment of relaxation and release in the school day, the pupils invest their games and weave "sociabilities"<sup>3</sup> as Julie Delalande (2003) specifies. Indeed, the interaction between children during recess is a unique complement to

<sup>1</sup> Delalande, J. (2005), *La cour d'école : un lieu commun remarquable, Recherches familiales, n°2*, pp.25-36.

<sup>2</sup> <https://apprendre-reviser-memoriser.fr> consulté on March 11, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Delalande, J. (2003), *La récré expliqué aux parents*, Sciences Humaines, n° 143, p54.

what happens in the classroom and necessarily contributes to the achievement of one of the missions of the school: to socialize in order to learn to live better together in a favorable climate. The skills that are acquired there (sharing, conflict resolution, communication, negotiation...) not only form the basis for healthy development, but also become essential elements in making the school experience more enjoyable. In addition, recess time should allow children to socialize and develop positive relationships with their peers. In addition, we also see the development of friendships during recess, as this time is a special time that also allows them to interact differently with other peers than they can in the classroom. So a very important part of education and socialization is missed when they are not allowed to enjoy these break times.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, during recess, students become more agitated when they are tired, very bored, or are required to make considerable efforts to stay focused on the lesson. Disruptive behavior, which interferes with the flow of the session, decreases when students get enough breaks. Also, if fidgeting is becoming more of a problem in the classroom, recess is an appropriate solution, since learners who have regular break times and during which they are notably active are then less fidgety, which predisposes them to success and better academic performance.

In the face of a highly structured school timetable, recess appears to be one of the rare moments of freedom during which pupils can extricate themselves from their role as children, in a specific space and time. The playground appears to be the ideal place for students to play freely, without any adult supervision. It has a special dimension and is seen as "a relative space of freedom, a call to real life, a place beyond the school"<sup>5</sup>. Considering the above, if recess lasts 15 minutes, students should have 15 minutes of play.

We have also focused our interests on the concept of violence, which adopts different definitions as it affects several elements of society, since the world in which we live seems to be more and more violent. Thus, this term depends on the values and criteria in force in a society or a group, at a given time.

Dictionaries define violence as:(a) the act of acting on someone or making them act against their will by using force or intimidation;(b) a natural disposition to brutal expression of feelings;(c) the irresistible force of a thing;(d) the brutal character of an action.<sup>6</sup>

According to the WHO-World Health Organization, the definition of violence is "the deliberate use or threat of deliberate use of physical force or power against oneself, another person, or a group or community that results in, or has

a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, emotional harm, maldevelopment, or deficiency."<sup>7</sup>

No category of society is beyond the reach of this serious phenomenon. The suffering of children injured by people who should protect them, of women mistreated or humiliated by aggressive partners, of the elderly mistreated by their caregivers, of young people threatened by other young people, of people of all ages who inflict violence on each other. In elementary school, "Violent behavior at this age takes the form of shoving, bullying, hitting and biting. In elementary school, the manifestations of violence are multiple; they can range from simple discipline problems (disobedience, teasing) to physical aggression, verbal threats, physical threats and vandalism (Day, Golench, McDougall and Beals-González, 1995)."<sup>7</sup> Violence can occur in both individual and collective ways and includes a long list of behaviors from which it can be comprehensively divided into seven categories.

### 1) *Physical violence:*

According to the definition of Larousse, physical violence is a "direct act that affects the physical integrity (blows, rackets, rapes ...), life or freedom of an individual. It is the whole of the acts characterized by abuses of the physical force"<sup>8</sup>.

This type of violence is quite common in the school environment. "Physical violence, rarely directed at teachers, is carried out in transit areas (stairs, schoolyard...) and usually outside of adult supervision"<sup>9</sup>.

### 2) *Verbal abuse:*

Verbal violence is defined as all the words, insulting remarks and shouts (threats, nasty nicknames, sexist remarks, racist insults, obscenities, disrespect, blackmail...) and devaluing which aim at attacking and humiliating an individual.

This type of violence can be experienced inside or outside the classroom as a phenomenon exerted by the teacher on the learners or by the learners on their teachers or by the students among themselves.

### 3) *Behavioral violence:*

Behavioral violence is defined as any type of unwanted behavior, perceived as hostile and harmful, that affects the physical or psychological integrity of another person, their rights or their dignity. It includes insolence, insults, disrespect, rudeness, lack of punctuality, lack of attendance, as well as improper dress or dress that does not conform to the internal rules of a school.

<sup>4</sup>Romano, H. (2016). *Pour une école bien traitante Preventing school psychosocial risks*. Malakof(France),Dunod

<sup>7</sup>Turcotte,D. Lamonde,G. (2004) *La violence à l'école primaire : les auteurs et les victimes*, Université Laval, volume XXXII:1, Spring 2004 Canada. PP15-37

<sup>8</sup>Larousse, PA. (1905). *Le petit Larousse*, France: Claude Augé.

<sup>9</sup>Debarbieux, E. (1999). *La violence en milieu scolaire Tome 2- Le désordre des classes*. Paris, Esf éditeur.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.peacefulplaygrounds.com> accessed on March 11, 2021.

<sup>5</sup>Barrere,C. (2016.). *La cour de récréation*.sl, éditions Midi-Pyrénées.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 3.

#### 4) *Psychological abuse:*

This type of violence is sometimes called mental cruelty, and is characterized by the adoption of words and attitudes aimed at denigrating a person by the marks and injuries left on the victim.

According to Stevens (1996), any act of violence includes components of psychological violence, because any type of violence suffered causes psychological consequences in the victim of aggression.

#### 5) *Harassment:*

Bullying is considered to be repeated physical, verbal or psychological violence. This violence also exists within the school. It is committed by one or more students against a victim who cannot defend himself or herself. When a child is threatened, insulted, beaten, shoved or repeatedly receives abusive messages, it is called bullying.

School bullying affects all social backgrounds: girls and boys, village and inner-city schools, primary and secondary schools.<sup>10</sup>

#### 6) *Indiscipline:*

It represents one of the most dominant forms of violence in the school environment. It is the act of breaking the rules and rituals that constitute the school order by disobeying the norms of the school's internal regulations.

#### 7) *Sexual violence:*

Sexual abuse includes "unwanted touching, sexual intimidation, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual coercion through sexual jokes, and rape perpetrated by the teacher, or a school staff member."<sup>11</sup>

"Violence is not always striking but it always hurts", proclaimed the slogan of an information campaign on violence against women. This formula perfectly embodies violence in schools, whose most well-known facts are propelled to the forefront by the media, unlike the others which are passed under silence, as if invisible and yet appear just as painful. We also aim to answer the following question through this study: Is the recreation in the Tunisian school qualified as a recreation of happiness?

The guidelines in Tunisia are not available, neither the ministry of education without any considerable efforts. Also the pedagogic committees in primary schools don't debate such a fundamental question.

<sup>10</sup>Romano.H.(2015), "Chapter 1:Understanding," *Harassment in the School Environment*, Dunod, pp.21-70.

<sup>11</sup>Komenandagou.D et al. (2015), Les violences sexuelles en milieu scolaire ivoirien Une étude descriptive d'un échantillon représentatif de 2 200 élèves, *Perspectives Psy*, EDP Sciences, pp.263- 274.

## II. METHODS

In order to highlight this phenomenon of school violence, we rely on data collected using a double methodological approach: a quantitative approach through observation and a questionnaire was administered.

These quantitative data are supplemented by data from qualitative research through a semi-structured interview with the school principal.

A description of the framework of our field study is necessary. This research has for essential object the elementary school of "Zgana" in Mahdia. This school allows students two breaks, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. These two moments constitute the time devoted for our research.

From the outset, it was necessary to systematize the observations in order to create a climate of trust with the children and to progressively erase the double dissymmetry inherent in the researcher-actor and adult-child relationship through several visits to the school. A new relationship was thus established between the students and the researcher, opening the way to a climate of trust conducive to data collection.

Our study is spread over the second week of March and the first week of April 2021 and took place in a state elementary school in Mahdia "Zgana". The latter is located in a rather urban environment that covers 2000 square meters. The school has 390 students and 26 teachers. In this school, there are 10 classrooms and 7 small gardens in each of which there is a chair for children. The data collection of our research is done during the recesses that take place twice a day and each of them lasts twenty minutes.

This research is based on a methodological principle which is the observation of an elementary school playground. Thus, all cycles and classes can be covered. The research is based on an observation grid to report student behaviors, which will allow for tracking of student violent acts during recess over the course of two weeks. According to Hawkins, "the main component of all observation systems is the design of an observation grid that illustrates the different behaviors to be observed."<sup>12</sup>

This tool allows first of all to observe the behaviors and attitudes of the individuals, it thus allows to complete descriptive and qualitative data, to observe the evolution of a group in time and to observe essentially the exchanges between the individuals.

Our study aims to identify aggressive behavior among students in an elementary school during recess. The

<sup>12</sup> Bettaieb, A. (2015), *Réforme LMD, professionnalisation et pratiques didactiques des ISSEP (cas de l'issep de Sfax)*. Doctoral thesis defended at the Higher Institute of Education and Continuing Education. Unpublished.

observation grid is divided into forms and types of violence and the categories of actors of each type.

We also opted to make a questionnaire directed to the teachers of the elementary school studied, in order to understand their points of view on the phenomenon of violence in this school during the recess.

✓ Conduct of the experiment:

- *Observation:*

Observational data collection was done through the following steps:

- *The first step:*

This step is essentially dedicated to obtaining an access authorization from our institute and another one from the administration of the elementary school to attend different recesses.

- *The second step:*

This stage is devoted to discovering the research environment, exploring the working conditions and infrastructure of the institution, and consulting on the time spent on recreation.

- *The third step:*

This stage is devoted to direct observation in the field by the assistant in the playgrounds to get to know the process better and to ensure a certain familiarity with the context of the work being addressed.

- *The fourth step:*

This is the stage of videotaping student behavior during recess.

According to these recordings and our observations during the different recesses alternating between those of the morning from 09:50 to 10:10 and those of the afternoon from 14:50 to 15:10, we determined the main axes of observations which guided us to elaborate a grid which categorizes the types of violence, the acts and the actors of these types of behavior. The grid is made up of two main parts: physical violence and verbal violence with their various indicators, as well as the different categories of student actors (girl/boy - grade 1/degree 2/degree 3).

When reviewing the footage filmed during recess, each time a violent action is detected, a cross is placed in the box corresponding to the act (type and form) and the child actor of this act (gender and degree).

*The questionnaire is a measurement tool*

For further investigation, we also tried to find out the opinions of the teachers in the school studied regarding recess and violence during recess.

### III. RESULTS

Table 1:  
Overall distribution of different forms and sub-forms of violence of all students by day.

	J1	J2	J3	J4	J5	J6	J7	Totals
Physical violence								
Hustle	7	6	5	8	3	5	4	38
Hit	3	2	2	2	1	1	0	11
Fights	0	0	2	0	2	2	0	6
Pinch	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	6
Bite	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Tearing an object out of your hand	3	2	1	2	1	4	2	15
Self-violence	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	4
Physical violence	15	12	11	13	10	13	8	82
Verbal abuse								
Insults	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	4
Mockery	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	11
Nasty nicknames	2	0	0	1	1	0	1	5
Threats	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Vulgar language	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	4
Roughness	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
Yelling at someone	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	17
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Totals
Total forms of violence	24	19	16	20	16	20	12	127

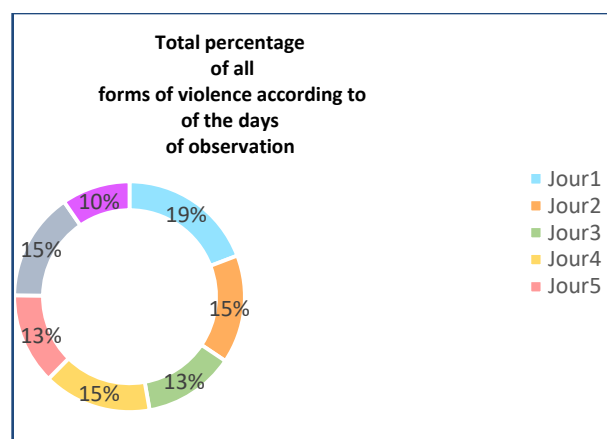
Table 2:  
Distribution of totals for different forms of violence among all students by observation days

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	total s
Physical violence	15	12	11	13	10	13	8	82
Verbal abuse	9	7	5	7	6	7	4	45
Total forms of violence	24	19	16	20	16	20	12	127

Table 3:  
Distribution of violent acts by gender of students

	Girls	Boys	Total
Physical violence	22	60	82
Verbal abuse	24	21	45
Total	46	79	127

Chart 1: Representation of the total percentage of all forms of violence according to the days of observation.



During the seven days of observation, there were a total of 127 acts of violence. Physical violence and verbal violence were respectively 82 and 45 (Table 2). Thus, physical violence represents 66.13% of violent acts and verbal violence represents 33.87% of violent acts. If we look at the violent acts day by day during the whole week of observation, we see that these acts represent respectively for the seven days: 19%, 15%, 13%, 15%, 13%, 15%, 10% of the total acts of violence. It can be seen that the first day of observation was particularly marked by acts of violence (19%) while the last day had the lowest rate of violent acts (10%). During this day, the students in the highest grade do not have class. For the rest of the week, the percentages are almost equal.

Thanks to precedent table, we notice that from the 127 acts of violence, the girls realised acts of violence against 79 acts for the boys (Table 3). Hence, on the period of the observation ( 7 Days), 37% of the acts were generated by the girls and 63% by the boys. These difference between the genders can be explained by the socialisation who stands for a masculinist traditional ideology.

Following the questions reserved for the identification of the interviewed teachers, the teachers were asked about the presence of activity clubs in this school, the majority of the answers affirm that there are no clubs within the school, these answers contain 88% of the total of the answers of the interviewed teachers whereas 12% of the answers show that there are clubs in this school, among which a sports club and a theater club. This question is followed by another one that is specifically related to the existence of different clubs during recess, most of the responses show that there are no clubs (96%) while 4% of the responses reveal the presence of a music club that takes place during recess. In this question, teachers were asked if they noticed aggressive behavior during recess. In response to this question, 88% of the teachers said that there is violence between students during recess. While 12% of the teachers said that there is no violent behavior between students during recess. Following the previous question about violence during recess specifically,

we wanted to know if violence during this break time between learning sessions is higher or lower than violence during the other times of the school day (the time of arrival and departure from school). For this, 85% of the teachers answered "yes", i.e. they noticed that school violence increases during recess. While 15% of the teachers in this school do not see that violence is higher during recess.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Recess in schools cannot be called a happy recess. This is because there are no clubs in the schoolyard during recess. In other words, recreation does not correspond to the nature of the child who likes to play with his friends and to experience activities in which the student positively releases his energy. Since the child always needs to release this cumulative energy, he or she automatically resorts to violent acts.

We also point out that students who do not participate in recess and do not come to an enthusiastic, active, organized, and safe recess may have more difficulty focusing on specific classroom tasks, are more tired, and may be more easily distracted. Thus, ironically, depriving students of recess to punish them for bad behavior or to get them to finish their schoolwork can become pedagogically counterproductive since recess not only promotes children's physical health and social development, but also plays an important role in their cognitive performance.

Managing time and schedules in a school can quickly become a complex task. Taking into account the particularities of the environment (number of students attending the school, size of the schoolyard, specific problems), it is up to each school to put in place measures that will create a harmonious climate that respects the needs of all (students and school personnel). For example, if too many students are in the schoolyard at the same time, it may be appropriate to schedule several recess periods to allow them more space to move around and release their excess energy.

Other more subtle forms, such as denigration, contempt and rejection, go unnoticed. Moreover, little is known about the profile of students who are perpetrators of this violence and the profile of students who are victims of it. According to the data from this study, contrary to what is sometimes believed, there are no perpetrators on one side and victims on the other.

Rather, the data indicate that some students live in a context of violence while others stay away from this type of behavior. These results highlight the importance of making students aware of the different forms of violence, the one they express and the one they are victims of, and their harmful consequences. We must also act on students' beliefs and opinions so that they realize that they are victims of violence and that it can cause significant harm.

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

We propose the introduction of co-education mechanisms favorable to the development of the child. The introduction of rules allows for the regulation of the playground and the management of harassment. On the other hand, when the rules are unclear or concern notions that are not very precise and likely to be discussed. The teaching team constantly reminds the students of rules such as "no pushing", "no teasing", "respect each other", etc.

Every school should have a prevention system. In an operative way, such as the regulation of the playground space based on a set of rules aimed at controlling visible violence on the playground. The establishment of formal mediation spaces aimed at resolving conflict situations experienced during recess in order to reduce the psychosocial suffering associated with it.

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