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(coord. Maria Roth)

RESEARCH REPORT

Joining Forces România

School climate assessment

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SCHOOL CLIMATE ASSESSMENT – RESEARCH REPORT

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List of abbreviations

CCD	Teaching-Staff Resource Center
CE	Student Council
CJRAE	County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance
CMBRAE	Bucharest Center for Educational Resources and Assistance
Cα	Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient
DS	Standard deviation
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency
SAG	Student Advisory Group
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IES	Institute of Educational Sciences
ISJ	County School Inspectorate
IRSE	Socio-educational risk index
JF	Joining Forces
M	Media
MEN	Ministry of Education
SCP	School Climate Profile (assessment questionnaire)
SCP-P	School Climate Profile for the primary cycle
SCP-G	School Climate Profile for the gymnasium cycle
SCP-H	School Climate Profile for the high school cycle
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSS	School Success Profile
P4P	Participation for Protection
SIIIR	Integrated Information System for Education in Romania
SSP	School Success Profile
UBB	University of "Babeș-Bolyai" Cluj-Napoca
EU	European Union
WVR	World Vision România

SCHOOL CLIMATE ASSESSMENT. SYNTHESIS

In the context of the *"Joining Forces Romania"* initiative, the organizations Terre des hommes Switzerland (Romanian delegation), Save the Children Romania, SOS Children's Villages Romania, and World Vision Romania launched the School Climate Assessment initiative with the participation of educational institutions contracted as partners (middle schools and high schools in 12 counties, serving disadvantaged communities). The consortium of organizations and researchers aims to collect students' opinions about the school climate: the relationship between students, the relationship between students and teachers, school safety, and learning atmosphere, and will then propose recommendations to improve the school climate.

Taking place between October 2020 and March 2021, the research called *School Climate Profile* was conducted under special conditions in the context of the global pandemic COVID-19, as a result of face-to-face interaction with teachers and school students was very difficult. Thus, the research activities took place under the conditions created by digital technology, both for the preparation and collection of data, and for communication with school leaders, teachers, parents, and students.

The defining approach of this research is to put children at the center of concerns, to support them to express their opinion and to create opportunities for them to participate through projects, as agents of change, in improving the school climate, as well as experiences and their views to help find solutions for today's school problems. The approach is based on children's rights, placing the principles of participation and inclusion, non-discrimination and equality at the heart of concerns for improving the school climate. By strengthening the capacity of schools to encourage students to express their views on the school climate, the Joining Forces Romania consortium contributes to efforts to reform the Romanian education system.

The consortium is a platform that supports the implementation of research-based practices, making available to schools reports on the *School climate profile* of all 15 participating schools (see Annex 1), including individualized data on schools, based on which students, in collaboration with the teachers in the school they can and are encouraged to build their own projects, which will positive the school climate in the directions they want and considered a priority. Applying the principles of listening to children and participating in decisions, the data obtained from research are provided to students and teachers, becoming central starting points for their involvement in activities to improve the school climate. Following this methodology, it turned out that the theme of projects carried out by students to improve the school climate offered participants the opportunity to discuss the principle of school inclusion, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities, designed to reduce inequalities in the Romanian education system.

The key issues covered by the **School Climate Profile (SCP) questionnaire** are the following: school satisfaction, attractiveness and attachment to school, student involvement in school life and decisions, inclusive schooling and perception of equal opportunities, school educational climate and student-centered education, student support and teacher conflicts, student support from peers and student relationships, students' maladaptive behaviors and student involvement in violent behavior, bullying, perpetrators, where violence occurs and how students seek help, violence from students, adults and ways for students to seek help; school facilities and family facilities, attitude towards online education.

The national context

Starting with November 22, 2019, the education law was amended, prohibiting all forms of psychological violence/bullying, and the methodological norms (secondary legislation) necessary to allow the implementation of the law entered into force on June 11, 2020. The new regulations establish the legal framework for a flexible mechanism for intervening in bullying situations in schools, by promoting activities aimed at preventing and combating all forms of violence and by developing their own strategies and action plans to ensure and maintain an appropriate school climate, a precondition for the prevention of bullying, but also quality education. The research took into account a series of recent analyzes on school climate and student welfare, violence and bullying in schools, but also the situation of student participation in the Romanian education system (Mitulescu et al, 2015; Save the Children, 2016; MEN, 2020; European Commission, 2018; Human Catalyst, 2018; Marin et al., 2020).

The concept of school climate

The school climate refers to the quality of school life, reflecting the norms, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching-learning practices, and school management. A safe and supportive school environment, in which students have positive social relationships and in which they are respected, involved in school work, where their sense of personal value is cultivated, becomes a climate that favorably affects their mental, social, and school development.

Therefore, the concept of school climate must be understood systemically and multidimensionally, being a result of the complex interrelationships between students, teachers, school managers, and the organizational culture of the school, respectively the community. Relationships between students and teachers, relationships between classmates, school safety, inclusive culture and practices, and students' participation in school life and decisions are the basic elements that define the school climate. In the conception of the ecological systems of Bronfenbrenner (1979) at the level of these aspects can be detected risk factors and protection factors, whose ratio leads to a certain degree of satisfaction with the school climate.

In the study of the school climate, we started from previous research, which showed that the way the student perceives support, indifference or dissatisfaction from teachers, acceptance or rejection from classmates, exclusion or inclusion, acceptance or discrimination, equal opportunities or preferential, in grading, the creation or not of opportunities for student involvement are all interconnected with the motivation for learning and the students' response to school tasks and students' behavior in school (Hărăguş et al., 2014; Orzea, 2016; Angi, 2019).

Research approach

To build the research methodology, we took over some of the working tools that have proved useful in international and Romanian specialized studies so far (Bowen şi Richman, 2005; David Kacso, 2010; Hărăguş et al., 2014; Orzea, 2016; Human Catalyst, 2020, Olweus, 1996), which show that the support received from teachers, the safety of the school where they study, the learning climate in the classroom, the satisfactions offered by the school, the behavior of friends, school facilities, cooperation between students and between teachers and students are the central factors of the school climate and clearly influence the success of the educational process. Although the present research does not aim at a new verification of some hypotheses related to the role of these factors, the analyzes performed following the application of the questionnaire once again confirm the importance of the mentioned school climate factors.

As **main objectives** of the research, we pursued:

Creating an *assessment tool* for the protection and risk factors of the school climate for all three levels of the school.

Elaboration of individualized *school climate profiles* (SCP), for the group of 15 general schools and high schools proposed by Joining Forces Romania.

In the conception of the *data-based practice*, elaboration of some intervention methodologies for the improvement of the school climate, in which the students should be encouraged to develop **change projects** starting from the SCP analysis of their own school.

The analyzes regarding the results of the SCP questionnaire and the profiles of the schools elaborated based on the collected questionnaires allowed the interpretation of the results obtained during the research and led to the construction of some interesting projects of the students from the participating schools. These were the starting point of an intervention methodology, applicable in schools, to encourage students of all ages, in planning and carrying out their own projects to improve the school climate.

The tool used in assessing the school climate

The questionnaire collected the scales used in the literature to assess the main areas of the school climate. The aspects covered by the School Climate Profile (SCP) questionnaire are the following: school satisfaction, scale taken from the questionnaire School success profile, adapted and validated in Romania by Hărăguş et al. (2014), based on "School Success Profile (SSP)", developed by Bowen & Richman (2005); attractiveness and attachment to school (Cocoradă et al., 2018); involvement of students in school life and decisions (SSP); the inclusive character of the school (Booth and Ainscow, 2005) and the perception of equal opportunities (SSP, adaptation of the authors of this research); the educational climate of the school and the focus on student education (SSP); student support from teachers (SSP) and conflicts with teachers (Orzea, 2016); student support from classmates and student relationships (SSP and Cocoradă et al., 2018); maladaptive behaviors of students and student involvement in violent behaviors (SSP); bullying (Olweus, 1996), those who commit aggression, the place where violence takes place and the ways in which students use it to seek help (Olweus, 1996); adult violence and also the ways in which students turn to help (Olweus, 1996, supplemented by the authors of the research); school facilities and family facilities, as well as the attitude towards online education (Youthtruth, 2020).

After applying the questionnaire to the whole group, the psychometric data were recalculated: mean (M), standard deviation (DS), and Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient(Cα). Following the information received as a result of the application of the scales, we subsequently restructured some of the scales, regrouping some items, for greater consistency and to shorten the questionnaires at all three levels (see Annexes 3.1, 4.1, and 5.1). At each level, the last question of the questionnaire addressed the students' desire to change something in school, in the form of an open question, in which we invited students to express their needs to improve the school climate: What changes would you like in your school as to be able to learn with pleasure?

Summary of research results

Following the application of the scales, we proceeded to the realization of the individual profiles of the schools with at least 30 questionnaires per level and then to the presentation of the results of the three school cycles. In these school profiles, we identified the coordinates that may present risks and those that represent the resources of each school. These individualized profiles by schools were sent to the principals of the schools participating in the research, to be discussed by the school management, the teaching staff, and the students in the classes who participated in the research, to identify the directions that could be acted upon, improving the school climate. To exemplify the way of working for the elaboration of the profiles and the differences between the schools and the average of the group, we illustrate the presentation of the results at the items of one of the 16 scales, namely the *support from the teachers*, gymnasium level. At this scale it can be seen that the results of the school represented are significantly higher than the average of the researched group, the significance threshold being for this school p<0.01.
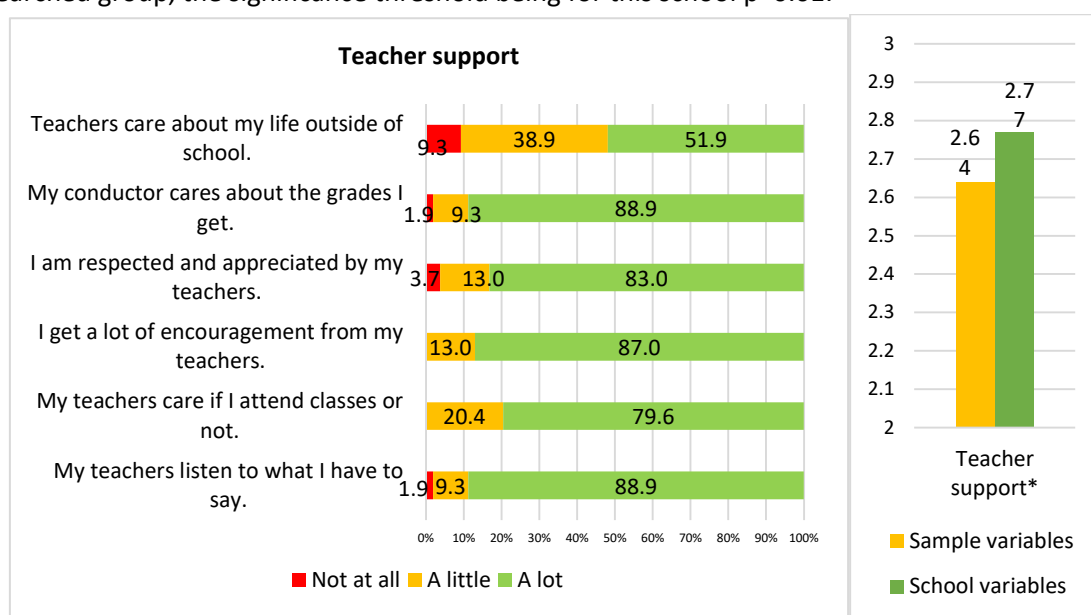

Chart 1.1 Illustration of the differences between the data of the scale "Support from teachers" at school X and the average of the schools in the research group (middle school level)

The graphs were accompanied by short interpretations of the results, drawing attention to the positive aspects, which constitute school resources, to those of risk and the more or less neutral area, named as the area of attention:

The vast majority of responding students consider themselves listened to and respected by their teachers in this school (over 88%). However, 16% of students do not feel appreciated at all or feel little appreciated by teachers. A high percentage of students (87%) say they feel encouraged by teachers. The data reflect the fact that students feel that the teacher is following their school situation (88.9%), but only half of them (51.9%) believe that teachers want to know and understand their life outside of school. Compared to the whole group of schools in this research, the support felt by the students of this school from the teachers is perceived significantly higher than the average of the sample (p<0,01).

Therefore, in the *Profile of each school and the profile of the cycle within the group,* it is described the percentage of students who declare themselves dissatisfied or who mention the high frequency of dangerous behaviors and which is a **risk category**; those who are undecided or who

choose the middle answers enter the **warning area**; those who are satisfied will be the category of students who **perceive positive aspects**, i.e. resources (advantages) for the mentioned aspects. To illustrate these distributions we used the colors red, yellow, and green. These percentage delimitations on different items are those that can be used as benchmarks for initiating changes. For example, in graph 1.1, above (showing the data of a small school with a high socio-educational risk index), to the factor of the support relationship from teachers, we also presented a graph representing the position of this school in relation to the average of the schools in the research group. It can be seen that the school has indicators above the average of the schools included in the research, the difference being significant.

The analysis of the data on the whole group indicates relevant results for the investigated schools, presented here on the basic dimensions of the questionnaire: the relations with the school, with the teachers, with the other classmates, aspects regarding the violence, and the relations between these aspects:

The relationship with the school

Regarding the involvement of students in school life, half of the primary school students (51.4%) do not feel consulted about the choice of topics, 28.1% of them "never" participate in choosing the class leader and only 12.6% of students argue that "often" classes are based on student proposals. The percentages are quite similar at the gymnasium level, where 30.8% do not feel involved (covering the categories "little" or "not at all") in discussing school and class issues and only 21.6% consider that some hours are based on student proposals. This percentage decreases to 19.3% in the case of high school students and only 54.7% of them claim that students are consulted in choosing the electives.

Although primary school students are much more attracted to school than older ones, already in the first cycle every sixth student (16.7%) considers that "usually" or "sometimes" it is not pleasant to attend school. Among middle school and high school students, the percentage of those who do not like school is even higher: 25.6% of middle school students and 26.7% of high school students say that school attendance is "not at all" or is "little" pleasant (Chart 1.2).
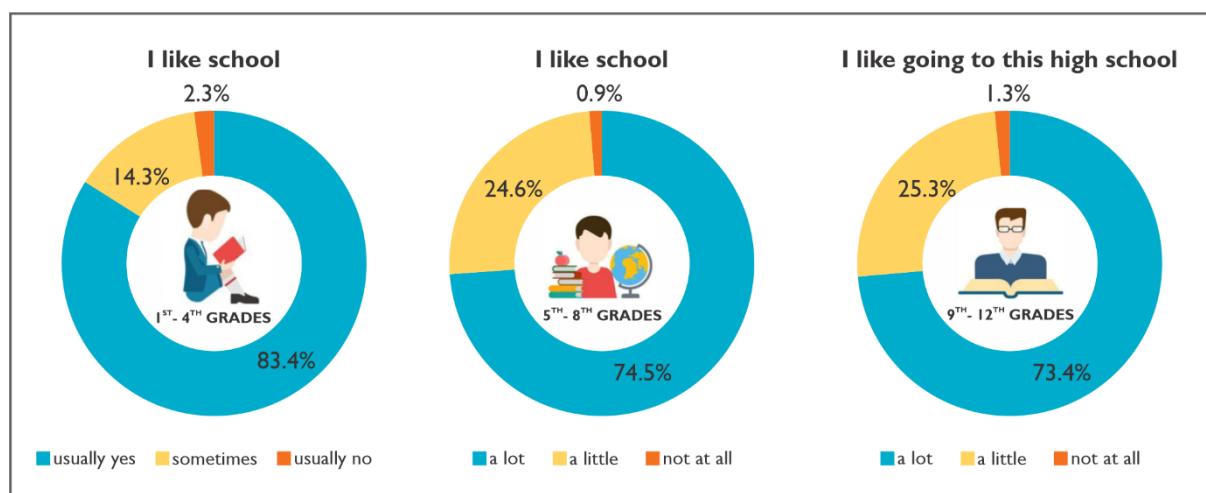

Chart 1.2. Satisfaction with school throughout school cycles

Relationship with classmates

The results regarding the relationships with classmates show that 24.4% of primary school students claim that they usually do not feel good with classmates. The percentage is similar in the gymnasium cycle, where 23% declare that they agree little or not at all with their classmates, and in high school, this percentage reaches 30.4%. Although the percentage of students who get along well with classmates is high (76.4% in middle school and 69.6% in high school), 49.4% of high school students would be reluctant to discuss personal issues with classmates, and among high school students, this percentage increases to 53.1% (Chart 1.3).

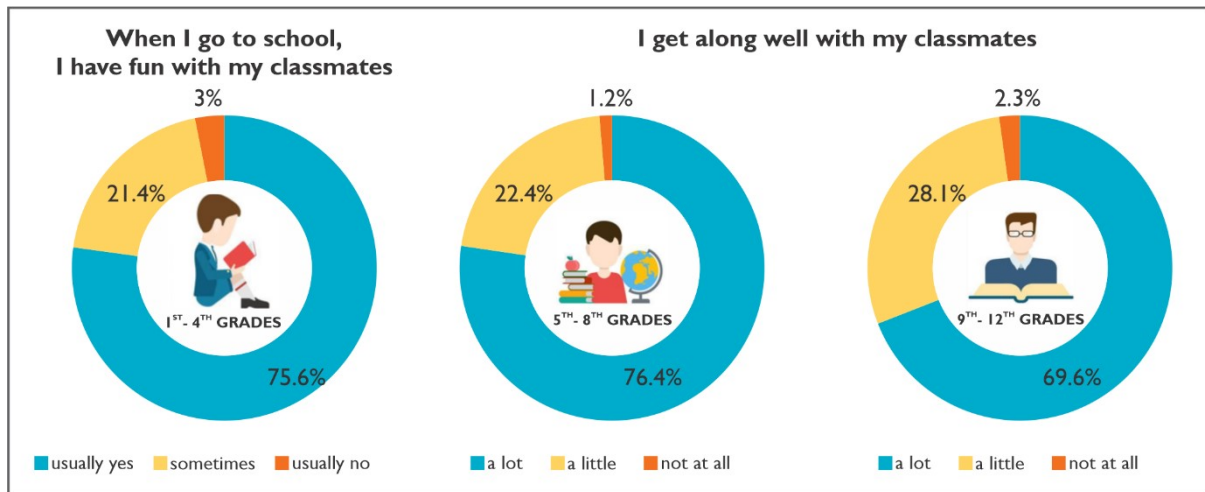*Chart 1.3. The relationship of students with classmates during school cycles*

Relationship with teachers

Fear of teachers, perception of distance between them and students' families, who are sometimes in various difficult life situations, reduce the motivation for learning and decrease students' confidence in the teacher's ability to understand and support them (Chart 1.4).
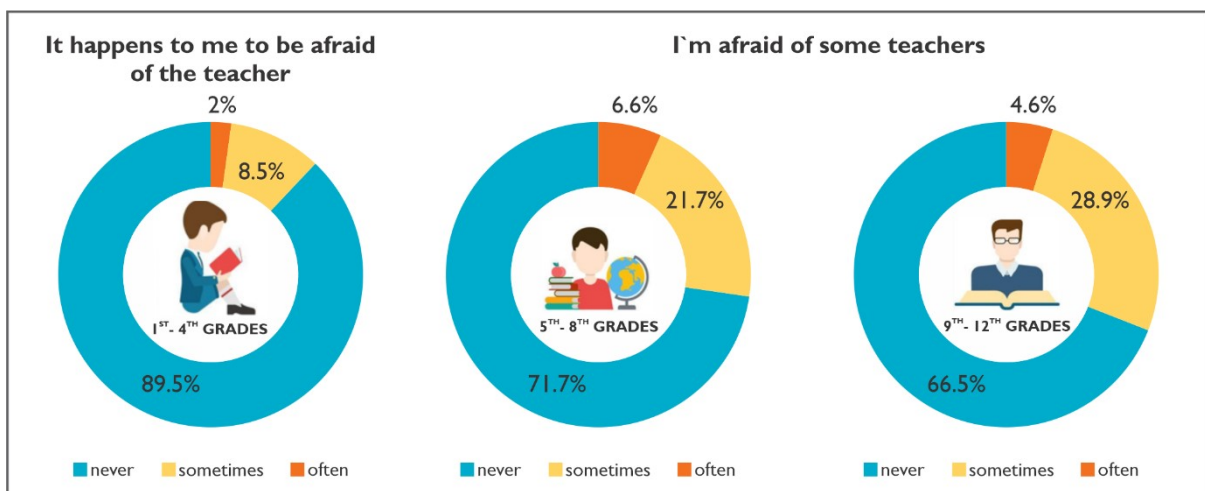

Chart 1.4. Students' fear of teachers

Regarding school violence, the most common forms of aggression between students were verbal: spreading false rumors and teasing others (both suffered in a proportion of 10% of respondents in high school and 5.8% and 6.8% respectively among high school students).

The percentages that indicate different serious forms of victimization are not high (in high school: I was abrupted, 2.6%, I was intentionally taken out of the group of friends 6.8%; my money was taken, 2.1%; in high school: I was intentionally removed from the group of friends, 4%, my money was taken 1.3%), but they can have serious consequences and therefore they are warnings that must be taken seriously (graph 1.5).

The class leader (mentioned by 32.9% of the respondents in the gymnasium and 27.4% of the high school students), as well as those in the school management(mentioned by almost a quarter of the respondents in the gymnasium, but also by those attending high school), are considered the people who intervene more frequently in the case of aggression that takes place in school, between students, the rest of the answers are more fragmented (chart 1.5).
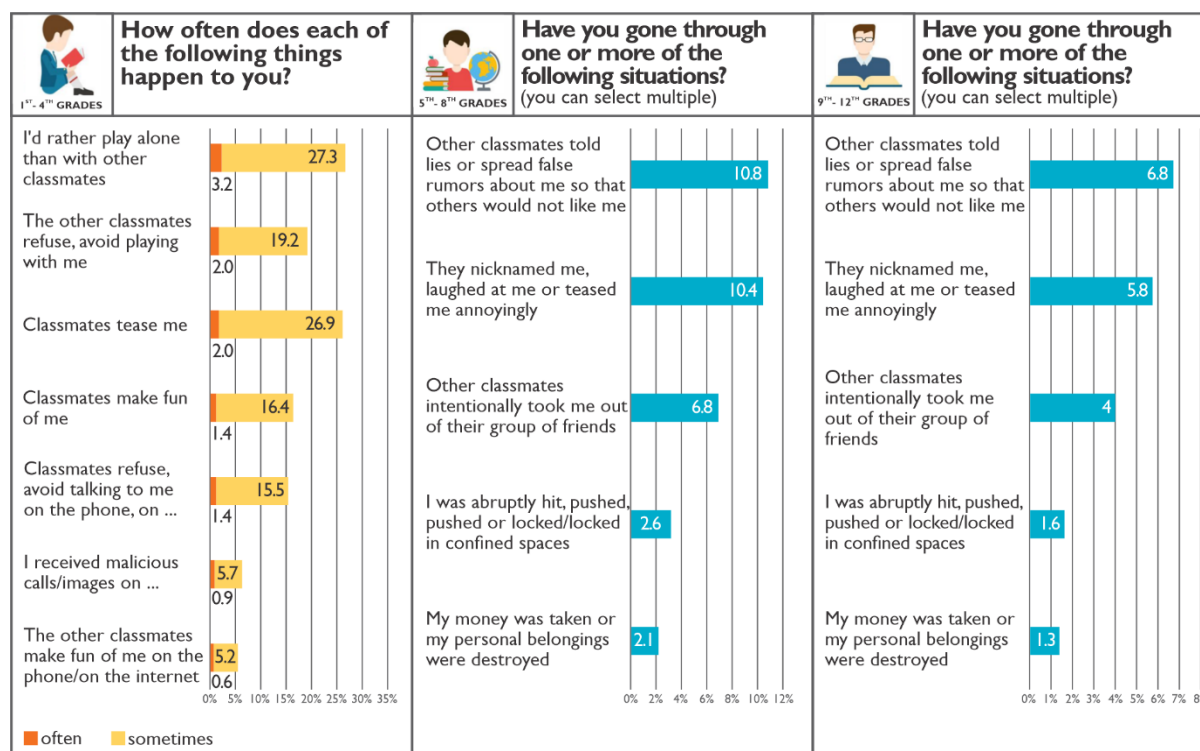

Chart 1.5. Forms of violence suffered by students during school cycles

The encouragement received from teachers shows a decreasing trend with the advancement to higher school levels: 96% of primary school students consider that they receive a lot of encouragement from the teacher, compared to 65% of middle school students and only 40.8% of high school students who feel encouraged by their teachers.

Students who feel listened to and encouraged by teachers are more satisfied with the school and have a greater school attachment compared to their peers, who do not feel at all or only to a small extent listened to and encouraged by teachers (chart 1.6).
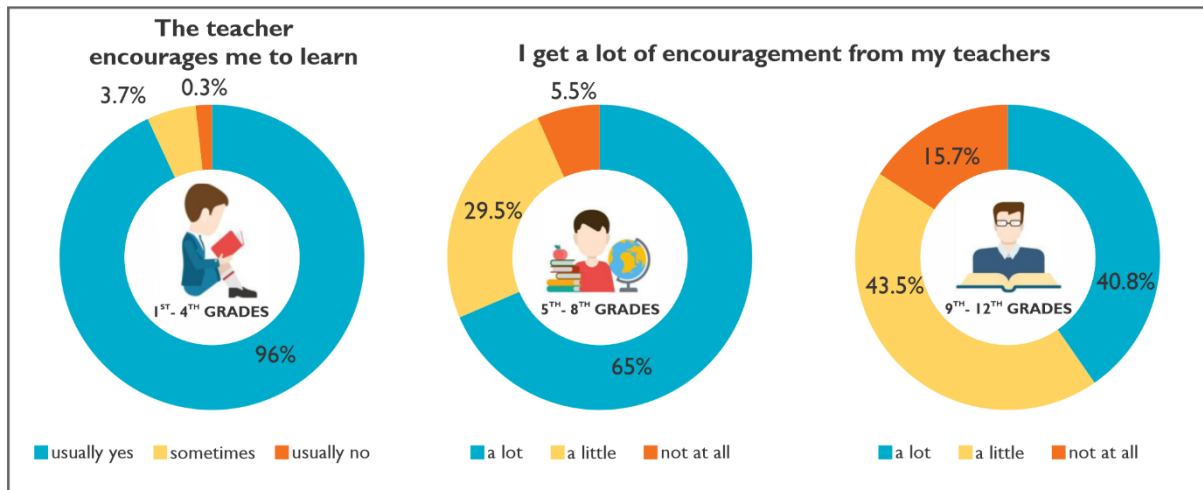

Chart 1.6. Encouraging students from teachers throughout the school year

Relationships between school climate factors

The results show strong interrelationships between school climate factors investigated by the SCP questionnaire. Satisfaction and school attachment are in interdependent relations with the attitude of the teacher, but also with the relations between the students, and with the school violence. For example, relationships with peers influence school satisfaction and attachment, in the sense that those who get along better with peers, those who feel they have a united class, those who have not had experiences of violence in school, those who they do not feel excluded and those who do not feel marginalized have greater satisfaction with school and an attachment to school. To highlight the effect of exclusionary relations between students, we graphically represented the share of violence suffered by the quartile of students in grades V-VIII and high school students who feel the most excluded compared to those who do not feel excluded and can be seen that exposure to violence of those who feel excluded is almost double, both in middle school and high school (chart 1.7).
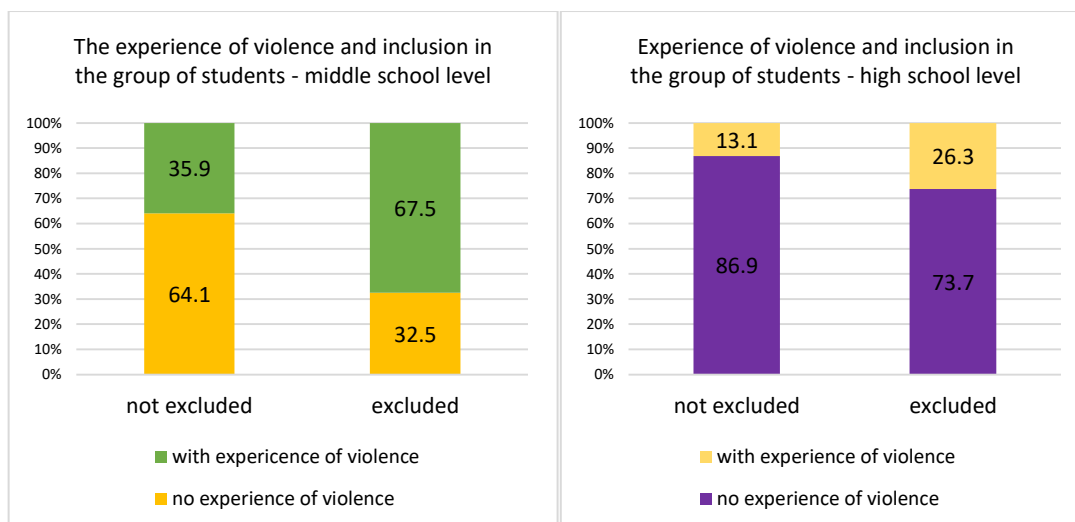
The experience of violence and inclusion in
the group of students - middle school level

	not excluded	excluded
with experience of violence	35.9	67.5
no experience of violence	64.1	32.5

Experience of violence and inclusion in
the group of students - high school level

	not excluded	excluded
with experience of violence	13.1	26.3
no experience of violence	86.9	73.7

*Chart 1.7. Differences in violent experiences for the students who feel excluded and included
(in middle schools and high schools)*

Key conclusions and recommendations

Quantifying aspects of school satisfaction, attractiveness, and attachment to school, involving students in decisions about school life, inclusive school practices, perceptions of equal opportunities, and school violence through the School Climate Profile (SCP) allows school management, teachers, and students to reflect/report to these data and opens the way for the elaboration of projects for the improvement of the relations with the students and between the students, as well as for the increase of the safety in the school.

The data from the profiles of the school climate being indicative tools for projects to improve the relations in the school, they will be able to direct the attention of the school management towards the aspects that present risks, which to reduce with the help of those that constitute resources.

If the risks are mainly at the level of relationships with teachers in the school under investigation, we recommend developing projects aimed at improving relationships between teachers and students, trust in the fair treatment of students in school, and increase support for victims of bullying.

If the risks are mainly at the level of relations between students, then the projects will aim at increasing the cohesion between students, reducing the phenomenon of bullying and other forms of violence between students, as well as students' initiatives to develop their own projects.

If the risks are mainly at the level of school violence, SCP can serve as an assessment basis for a series of interventions aimed at reducing but also preventing violence, which can focus on improving cohesion between students and reducing conflicts between them and teachers, respectively on strengthening the support given to victims of violence by teachers and other adults in the school.

If the risks are primarily related to academic activities, then changes in teaching methods, student focus, organizing classes according to students' preferences, could increase the motivation for learning, but also the attractiveness of the school.

From the data on the positive effect of supportive relationships on the part of teachers on school inclusion, satisfaction, and attachment to school, but also the reduction of violence, it is

important to encourage and praise students, to clearly express the expectations of each student, interest from teachers for the lives of their students outside the school, but also for supporting students who are victims of bullying.

Developing students' prosocial and emotional skills through the application of consistent and coherent programs that develop their communication and relationship skills so that they can empathize with their less popular peers, marginalized in certain contexts or victims of various forms of violence and to empower them in the non-violent management of their own relationships and conflicts. The recommended ways to improve the relations between the students are the activities in teams focused on collaboration, as well as the encouragement of the students in the realization of some projects springing from their own needs, from their initiative.

The data on school climate research in the 15 schools in the Joining Forces group showed the importance of a positive school climate in promoting students' emotional health and maintaining the school's attractiveness for them. As a result, it is advisable to establish the **evaluation of the school climate as a systematic practice in all types of schools**, as part of **educational policies** that promote inclusive school practices, applied in a positive and intolerant relational school climate.