

Describing the psychosocial well-being of schoolchildren in Finnish Lapland 2004

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Abstract

This study was part of the Arctic Children-project, of which one aim is to recognize and evaluate the developmental needs of psychosocial well-being in participating school communities. 408 pupils, 13-15 years old, from four different schools in Finnish Lapland answered the WHO health and behavior of school aged children (HBSC) questionnaire. One school was from a rural area and three schools from an urban environment. The data has been analyzed by quantitative methods and presented on a descriptive level. Loneliness, tiredness, psychosomatic symptoms and low self esteem were some of the main findings that came out in this study. Some significant differences between genders were also found, for example the girls' appearance of the psychosomatic symptoms seemed to be higher than boys'.

Keywords: psychosocial, well-being, children, school, social pedagogy

1.1 Introduction

Arctic Children project has the aim to recognize the developmental needs of the participating school communities. Research was needed in order to recognize these needs. The WHO survey and questionnaire for school-aged children was chosen to be the main research tool to recognize and evaluate the state of psychosocial well being in the Barents region. The survey was carried out in the project schools of Finnish Lapland. The study of (Bardy, Salmi, & Heino, 2001) showed that the problems in schools have been developed more into psychosocial field of health, at the same time when the physical health has improved. This study will identify certain indicators of the psychosocial well being, mainly the most important indicators, as well as point out some differences between genders and age groups.

1.2 The background of the study

The issue of psycho-social well-being in a school environment

The process of developing the well-being of pupils in schools (Nicholson, 1997) divides the school community into three different environments: school environment, education and health services.

The school environment includes:

- (1) the physical environment
- (2) the policy and administrative environment
- (3) the psychosocial environment¹
- (4) health promotion of staff²

This study concentrated on the psychosocial part of the well-being in school communities. It is necessary to map the field that the psychosocial element of the study is working, within the psychosocial environment is similar to the learning atmosphere, the feeling of belonging and support in school.

¹ including a supportive and nurturing atmosphere, a cooperative academic setting, respect for individual differences, and involvement of families

² in order that staff members can become positive role models and increase their commitment to student health.

Why studying the psychosocial well-being?

It has been widely known and reported that the state of psychosocial health and well-being has deteriorated over the last few years (Luopa, Räsänen, Jokela, & Rimpelä, 2005). In Finland this has been a major topic of discussion since the beginning of this century. According to Rimpelä, 2001 (Bardy et al., 2001) historically the new generation of children has always had better welfare than the one before. In the mid 1990's there was a change, the psychosocial well-being and general welfare didn't increase anymore, it started to decrease.

The appearance of children's problems in schools has also changed, according to the professionals who work with children every day. There are more and more pupils, who do not receive enough care. There is a lack in basic needs: care, nutrition, hygiene. The pupils, who suffer from basic needs, have not the strength for school work. There are pupils in grades 7-9 who can't even write a sequence of sentences. According to Järventie's study (Järventie, 1999) 29 % of 7-12 year old children from Helsinki region, lack of basic needs provision.

In studying psychosocial well-being, it is also possible to ascertain certain reasons behind the possible mental sicknesses, caused by the lack of psychosocial well-being. There is not one, but a difficult tangle of possible reasons. Basic information is an important and necessary starting point for the preventative psychosocial work in schools. This study located in the Arctic region, also offers many additional points of interest. According to the authors of the Arctic Human Development Report, health has to be seen here in the context of special conditions. Also guarding health is a key to improving well being (Hild & Stordahl, 2004).

Social pedagogy

Within modern social pedagogical discussions the main topics have been: What is a good life and how to help people take responsibility of their own life? How to control one's own life and that way build better communities and society? Every day life means more reflections of new experiences, more self consciousness and critical thinking (Kurki, 2000).

Social pedagogy and social pedagogical thinking has its own history, especially within the German linguistic area. There is no common understanding of the term of *social pedagogy* (Hämäläinen, 1996).

According to Hämäläinen (1995) Social pedagogy has at least the following meanings:

- intellectual principle of spreading humanistic values and communal thinking by pedagogy
- movement to emphasize pedagogy as an instrument of raising up the reforms in society
- independent field of science or principle of science
- pedagogical instrument of working with social problems and training for that

There are at least three main elements in the literature of social pedagogy. One is emphasized by Paul Natorp (1854 – 1924), and is based on communal educational thinking. The other is based on Kalus Mollenhauer's (1928 -1999) thought of emancipatorical education. Third is the hermeneutical approach, which has many theoretical paths. One of the leaders of that approach has been Herman Nohl (1879-1970), with his thoughts on subjective pedagogical relation, understanding and representation of the pedagogical need. See (Huttunen, ; Hämäläinen, 1995.; Hämäläinen, 1996.; Hämäläinen, 2001; Kurki, 2001.; Siljander, 2002).

Herman Nohl's views about the orientation of education as being the human being itself, relating to the autonomy of education, make an interesting tension between the education and social perspective of the whole culture of society (Siljander, 1988). From this viewpoint education has got the responsibility for the whole culture. This leads to the interesting question of social pedagogy. How to build up a better society by educating the individuals? One answer is to take care of the psychosocial well-being on the school children.

2 Research methods

WHO Health and Behaviour of School Aged Children (HBSC) survey and questionnaire

The Health Behavior of School-Aged Children, a WHO Cross-National Study (HBSC) is a unique research study of the health behaviors and health of adolescents across a large number of countries. It is a European and North American research study, conducted in collaboration with European Region of the World Health Organization (WHO) (Currie et. al. 2001).

The HBSC questionnaire was chosen for Arctic Children project to give reliable and comparable information about the psychosocial health and well being of school-aged children in the Barents region. This questionnaire also gave a lot of relevant information of self reported health and living conditions from the examined communities. It was also possible to pay attention to the effect of school and peer relations on personal psychosocial well-being.

According to the authors of the HBSC Research Protocol (Currie et. al. 2001) the HBSC study has its disciplinary origins in the behavioral and social sciences. At its inception, the study was firmly rooted in a lifestyle approach and as such aimed to analyze the relationship between person and environment from a socio-psychological and ecological perspective, taking into account the macro social context.

Case sample

For the project were chosen schools from an urban/city environment and schools from a rural environment. These schools worked in collaboration with the Arctic children project. In Finland the choice was made to pick up all three comprehensive schools from Rovaniemi's biggest suburb, altogether there were about 1200 pupils in comprehensive schools in the region. Sevettijärvi school was chosen to represent the rural area, it is very small (28 pupils for the year 2004) school in the Northern part of the municipality of Inari.

The schools were:

- Korkalovaara lower secondary school, grades 7-9
- Korkalovaara primary school and, grades 1-6
- Vaaranlampi primary school, grades 1-6 from city of Rovaniemi and
- Sevettijärvi school grades 1-9 which is located in rural Sámi area.

Pupils from grades 6, 7, and 8 from each school were asked to answer the questionnaire. The total number of pupils were 408, of which 54,7 % (N=220) were boys (see table 1).

		Gender		Total	
		Boy	Girl		
School	Vaaranlammen koulu	Count	36	38	74
		% within School	48,6%	51,4%	100,0%
	Korkalovaaran koulu	Count	24	18	42
		% within School	57,1%	42,9%	100,0%
	Korkalovaaran yläaste	Count	150	118	268
		% within School	56,0%	44,0%	100,0%
	Sevettijärven koulu	Count	10	8	18
		% within School	55,6%	44,4%	100,0%
Total		Count	220	182	402
		% within School	54,7%	45,3%	100,0%

Table 1 Count and gender of pupils.

Analyzing methods and reliability

The pupils answered the questionnaire in schools during their school time. They could answer anonymously. The data was collected during May 2004, the questionnaires were sent or taken to the schools and collection was organized by the teachers. The data was coded into a SPSS program and the reliability tested by the programs reliability analysis. Altogether the questionnaire includes 174 variables, so the reliability was tested in sections. Only the sections that had Cronbach's Alpha > 0,5 were taken for analysis. The statistical significance of the mean differences was tested by the variance analysis of One Way ANOVA. The values are displayed by the p- value or by the *-symbol. The representation of the symbols is following: *** p< 0,001, ** p<0,01, * p<0,05 or non significant n.s.

3 Results

Preliminary findings

Loneliness

When asked about how they spend their free time, it appeared that some of the pupils were often lonely. Sometimes were lonely 45 % (N=180) and often 9 % (N=34) of the pupils (see table 1). The girls more often felt lonely than the boys. The pupils were also asked about their e-communication with friends. There were 7 % (N=13) of pupils who were never in contact either by phone, e-mail or in personal with their peers during their free time. There were also more of those girls (7,8 %, N= 14) who did not spend any evening with their friends. There was no difference on the amount of male or female friends the pupils got, among both girls and boys there were 5% of those who had no friends. Also about 50% of pupils had more than three close female or male friends.

Feeling lonely*

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	3,47	217	,687
Girl	3,20	178	,767
Total	3,35	395	,736

Table 2 Mean differences of feeling lonely

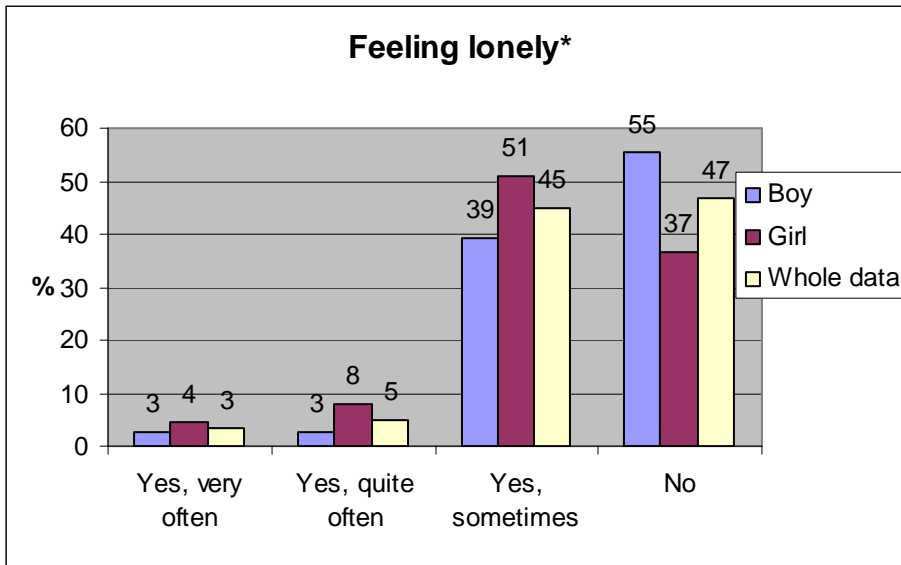


Figure 1 Feeling lonely

Significant ($p < 0,01$) correlation (Pearson Correlation 0,191) was found between the amount of male friends and loneliness. Between the female friends and loneliness there was no significant correlation. So it can be interpreted that boys' loneliness is connected more directly to the amount of friends, the girls' loneliness may be based on other reasons. The girls were more often in e-communication with their friends than the boys, but both spent on an average 4,1 evenings a week with their friends.

Gender		Evenings with friends n.s.	E-communication with friends*
Boy	Mean	4,10	3,43
	N	216	217
	Std. Deviation	2,246	1,423
Girl	Mean	4,09	3,75
	N	180	180
	Std. Deviation	2,369	1,268
Total	Mean	4,09	3,58
	N	396	397
	Std. Deviation	2,300	1,362

Table 3 Mean differences in communication with friends

Negative attitude towards school

Many pupils had a negative attitude towards school. Almost half (45 %) of the pupils didn't like school. 10 % (N=40) of the pupils didn't like school at all (Figure 2). The girls liked school more than boys. 64 % of girls liked school, where as only 49 % of boys did like school. Although 56 % (N=221) of pupils still said they liked school, it seems to be clear, that disliking school has an effect on the psychosocial well being of pupils.

Liking school**

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	2,64	216	,834
Girl	2,43	180	,762
Total	2,55	396	,808

Table 4 Mean differences in liking school

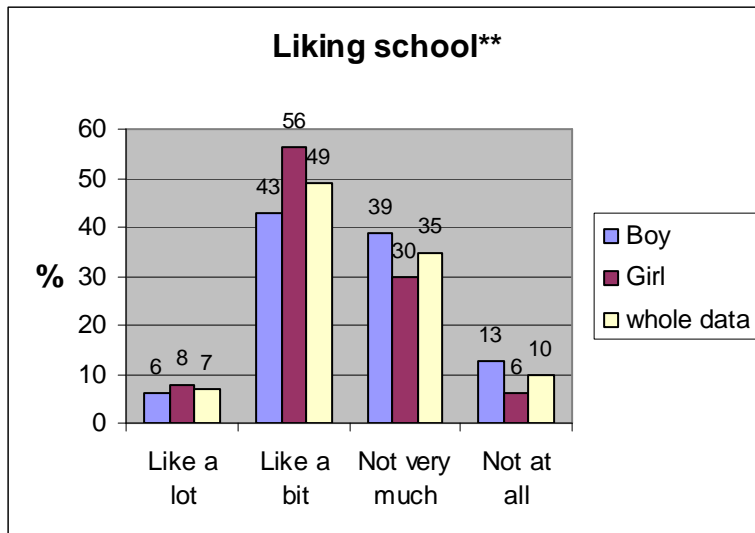


Figure 2 Liking school

There were many significant correlations between the teachers' actions in school and students liking of school. The variables came from the pupils' answers about how they felt their teachers related to them at school. All four questions represented (Figure 3) had significant correlations with the pupils' attitudes towards school. The more the students felt their teachers were interested in them (Pearson's correlation 0,238), the fairer the teachers treated them (0,347), the more extra help they got (0,303) and the more the teachers encouraged the students to express their views (0,191) the more they liked school. In general it can be said that pupils had rather positive conception about their teachers, even though the biggest group of pupils chose the "Neither Nor" value. Figure 3

presents the amassed variable of the four questions. There was no significant difference between genders.

teachers n.s.

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	2,8465	215	,81440
Girl	2,8652	178	,81221
Total	2,8550	393	,81242

Table 5 Mean differences of teachers

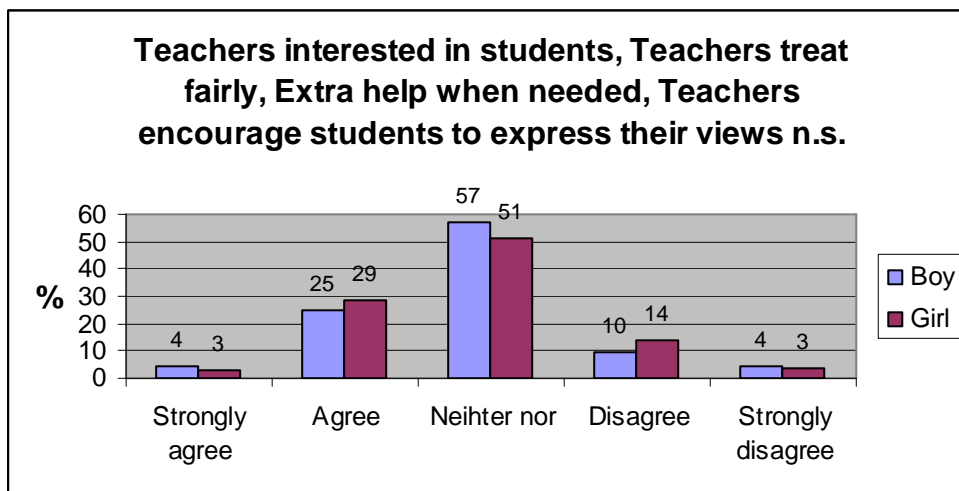
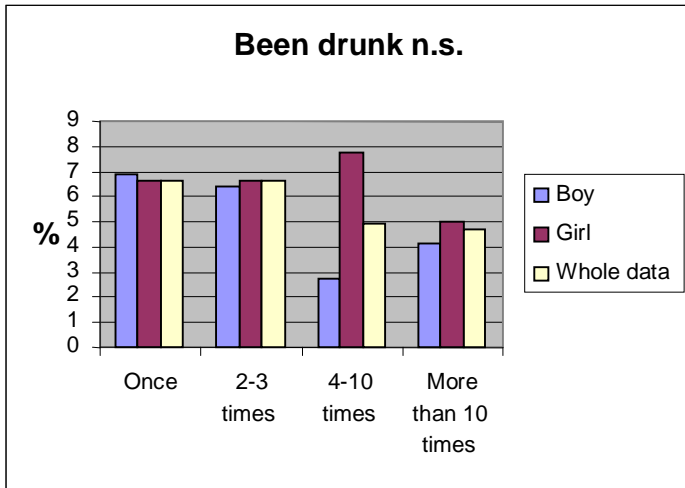


Figure 3 Pupils views about teachers

Substance abuse

In substance abuse the most important notions were about the similarities between genders, only in the question of smoking were significant differences between genders. The data showed that 35 % (N=140) of pupils had tried tobacco at least once. Girls and boys have tried smoking in almost equal numbers, but of those who smoked regularly, there were more girls than boys. 23 % (N=94) of pupils had been drunk at least once. (See Figures 4 and 5) The first use of alcohol had happened in quite young age (7 years N=2), and at age of 13 most of the alcohol users had already been drunk. It was also noticeable that when comparing the data between the pupils grades, the amount of drunk experiences increased strongly as pupils got older; 8 % of 6th graders but 36 % of 8th graders had been drunk at least once (see Figure 5).



Been drunk n.s.

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	1,45	217	1,022
Girl	1,63	181	1,198
Total	1,53	398	1,108

Table 6 Mean differences of having been drunk, gender

Figure 4 Have been drunk, gender

Been drunk***

Grade	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
6	1,11	122	,382
7	1,52	148	1,059
8	1,98	125	1,445
Total	1,54	403	1,118

Table 7 Mean differences of having been drunk, grade

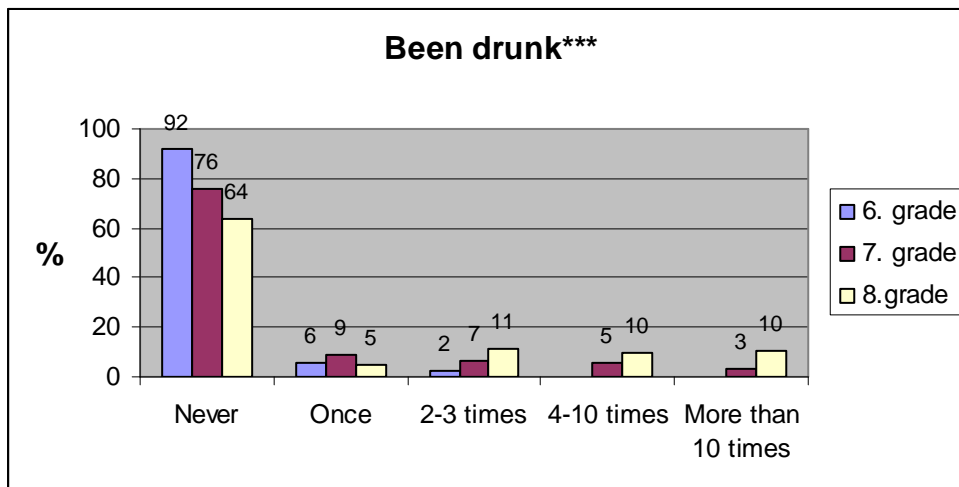


Figure 5 Have been drunk, grade

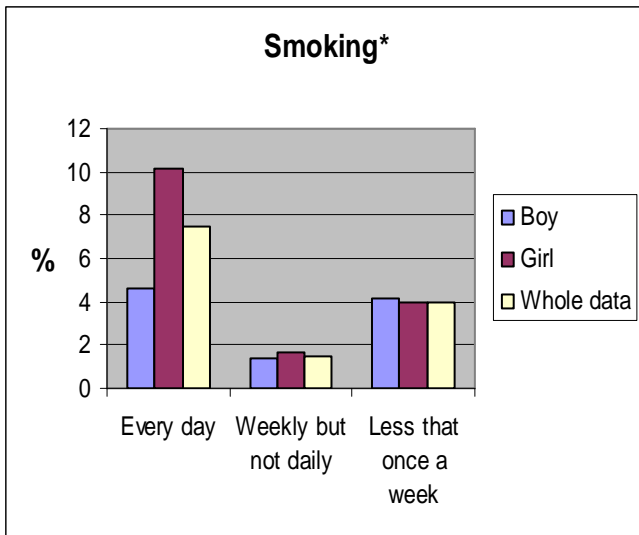


Figure 6 Smoking

smoking*

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	3,79	218	,685
Girl	3,62	177	,940
Total	3,72	395	,813

Table 8 Mean differences of smoking

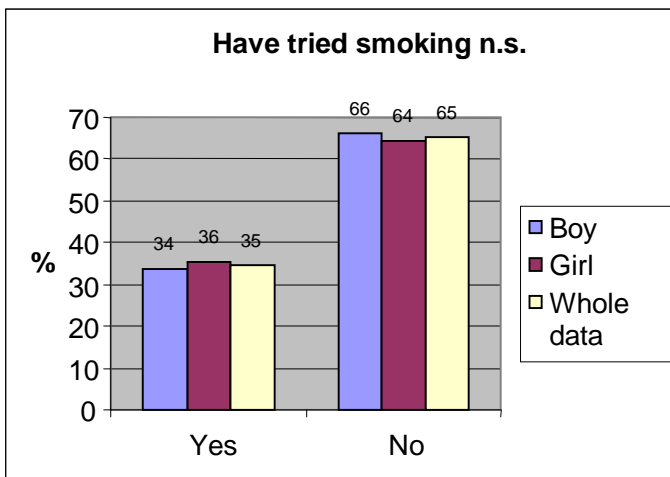


Figure 7 Have tried smoking

Tried smoking*

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	1,66	219	,474
Girl	1,64	180	,480
Total	1,65	399	,476

Table 9 Mean differences of tried smoking

Tiredness and exhaustion

A large amount of pupils were often tired. It is alarming that almost one third of the pupils 27% (N=106) felt tired four or more school mornings a week. 23 % (N=92) of the pupils felt tired and exhausted more than once a week. Girls suffered tiredness and exhaustion a lot more often than boys, even though there was no significant difference between genders in the “normal” tiredness during school mornings. One reason for the tiredness can be found from the lateness of going to bed (the Pearson’s correlate was 0,163*). 24 % (N=90) of the pupils in grades 7 and 8 went to bed at 11 o’clock or later.

Feeling tired during school mornings n.s.

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	2,61	214	1,009
Girl	2,81	179	,982
Total	2,70	393	1,000

Table 10 Mean differences of Feeling tired during school mornings

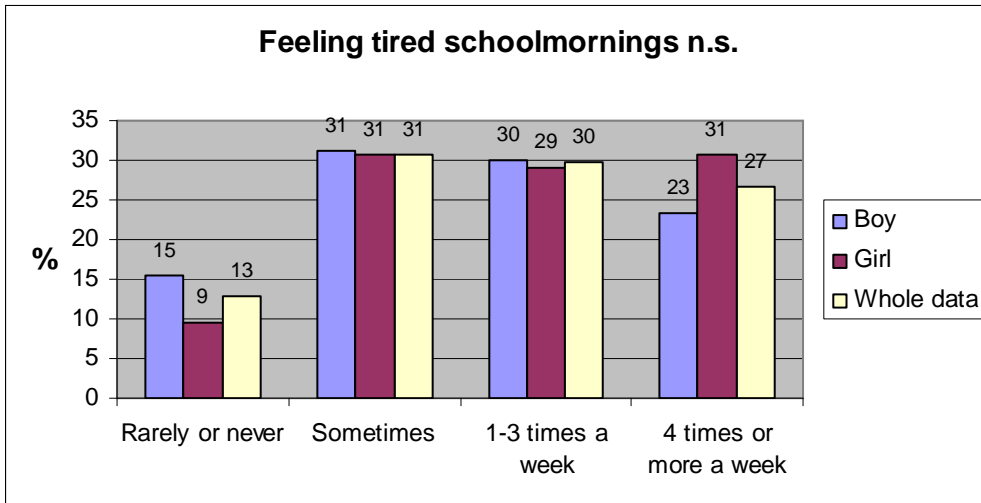


Figure 8 Tired during school mornings

Tired and exhausted**

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	3,57	215	1,125
Girl	3,25	179	1,199
Total	3,43	394	1,168

Table 11 Mean differences of tired and exhausted

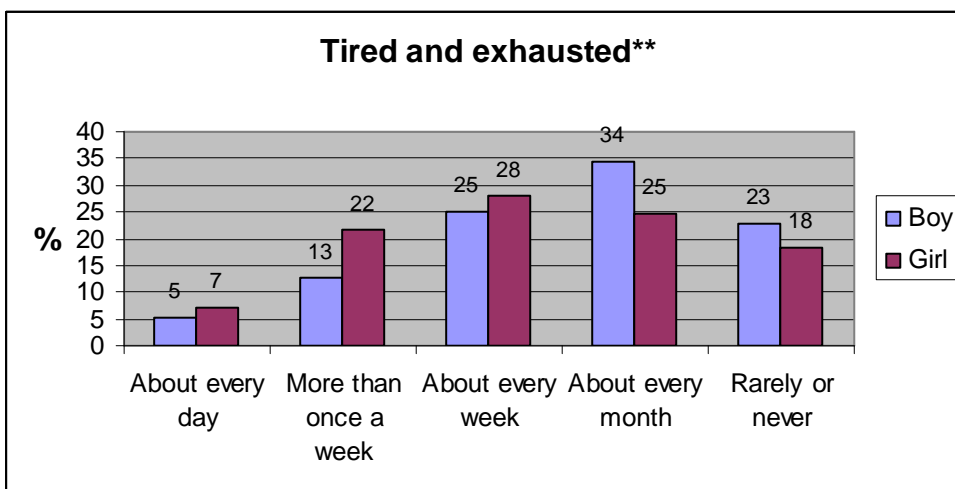


Figure 9 Tired and exhausted

Self esteem

Pupils asked to answer questions, where they evaluated their abilities and their satisfaction with themselves. There were a set of eight questions, which were meant to measure the state of self esteem. The variables were: (“Have good qualities, Feel as capable as others, Often feel failure, Can manage things as well as others, Feel all right, Satisfied with myself, Sometimes feel totally useless, Sometimes feel no good at all.”) The self-esteem of the pupils seemed to be considerably low. There was also a significant difference between the self esteem of boys and girls. Tables 10, 11 and 12 present a few of the differences. The girls seemed to have a lot lower self esteem than boys. Almost one-third 31 % (N=144) of the pupils felt often failure. 28,0 % (N=110) of the pupils felt themselves sometimes even totally useless. Girls were a lot less satisfied to themselves than boys, 24,3 % (N=43) of girls but only 10,2 % (N=22) of boys didn’t agree that they were satisfied to themselves.

Gender		Often feel failure n.s.	Sometimes feel totally useless***
Boy	Mean	2,89	3,16
	N	214	213
	Std. Deviation	,859	,925
Girl	Mean	2,78	2,88
	N	178	177
	Std. Deviation	,755	,837
Total	Mean	2,84	3,03
	N	392	390
	Std. Deviation	,815	,896

Table 12 Mean differences of failure and uselessness

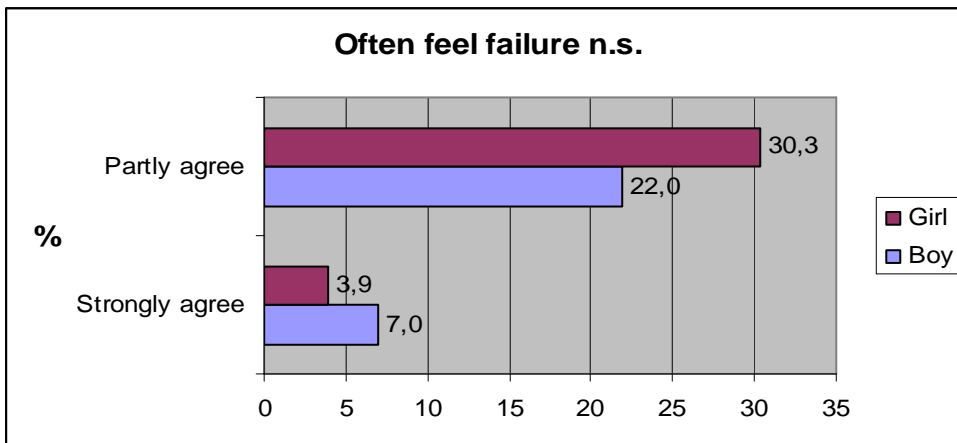


Figure 10 Failure

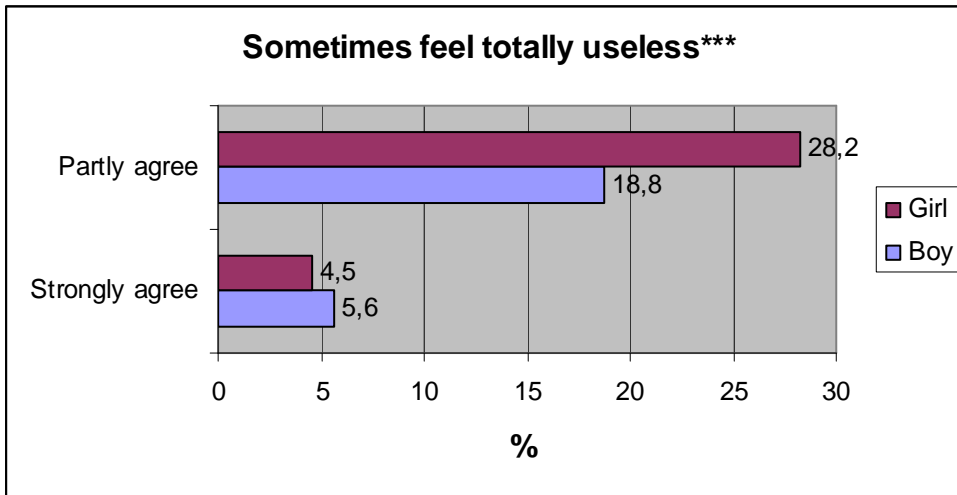


Figure 11 Feeling useless

Satisfied with myself***

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	1,67	215	,696
Girl	2,05	177	,775
Total	1,84	392	,755

Table 13 Mean differences in satisfaction

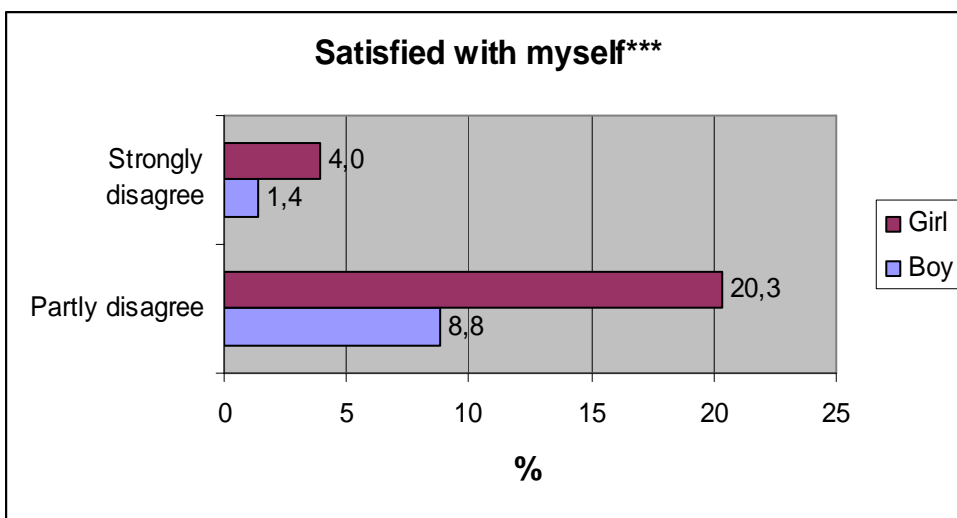


Figure 12 Satisfied with myself

Bullying and fighting

79,5 % (N=321) of the pupils had not been involved in physical fights over the last 12 months. 8,6 % (N=35) of the students had fought only once, still it seemed that those who fought did it quite often. 5,6 % (N=23) of pupils had been involved in fights more than 4 times.

4% (N=16) of the pupils had been bullied weekly. Boys had been bullied more than girls, also within those who bullied others more were boys than girls. 40% of boys and 27 % of girls had bullied others at least once in the last few months. See figure 13 and table 14.

Gender		Bullied***	Bullied others**
Boy	Mean	1,64	1,62
	N	218	216
	Std. Deviation	1,074	,971
Girl	Mean	1,32	1,37
	N	181	182
	Std. Deviation	,664	,714
Total	Mean	1,50	1,51
	N	399	398
	Std. Deviation	,924	,871

Table 14 Mean differences of bullying

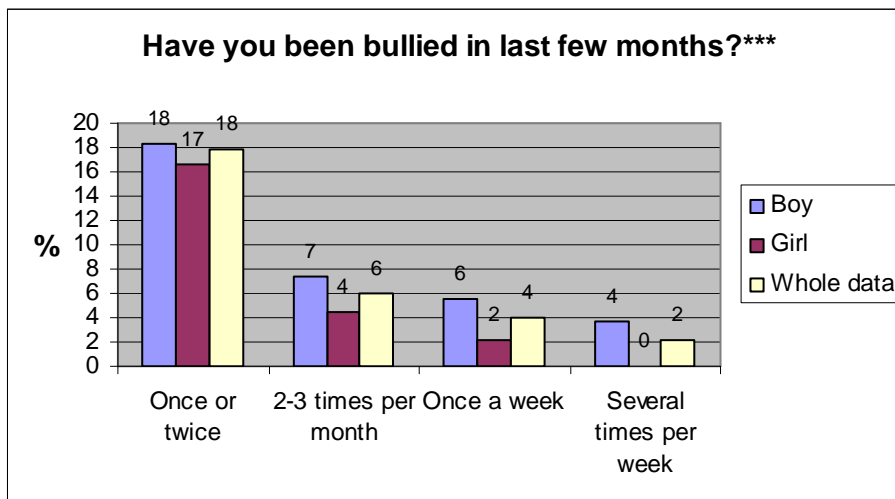


Figure 13 Bullied

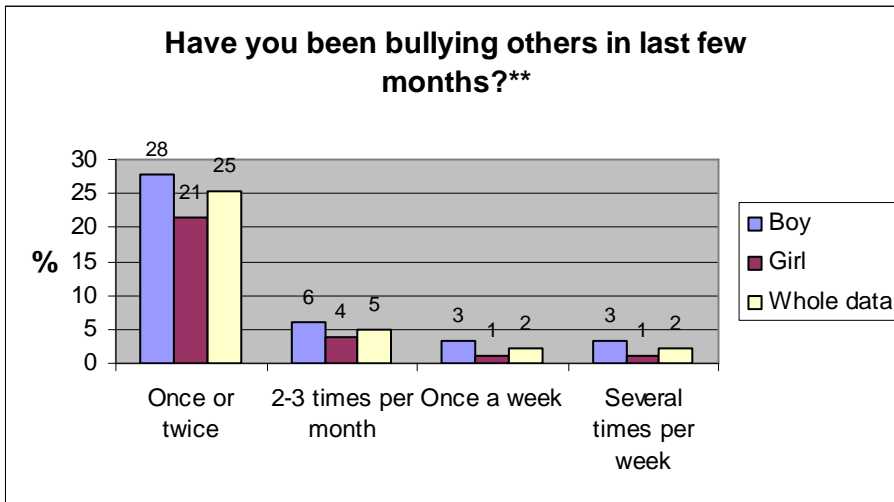


Figure 14 Bullied others

Psychosomatic symptoms

The psychosomatic symptoms were addressed over 15 different questions. The results merely came out as tiredness and exhaustion, 23 % (N=92) of pupils had it more than once a week; irritability and bad temper (21,3 %); difficulties in sleeping (16,8 %) and headache (16,7 %). These 15 questions are intended to measure the state of depression. The girls seemed to be having these symptoms more often than the boys (see table and figure 15).

symptoms***

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Boy	4,1400	200	,68023
Girl	3,8521	169	,75317
Total	4,0081	369	,72789

Table 15 Mean differences of psychosomatic symptoms

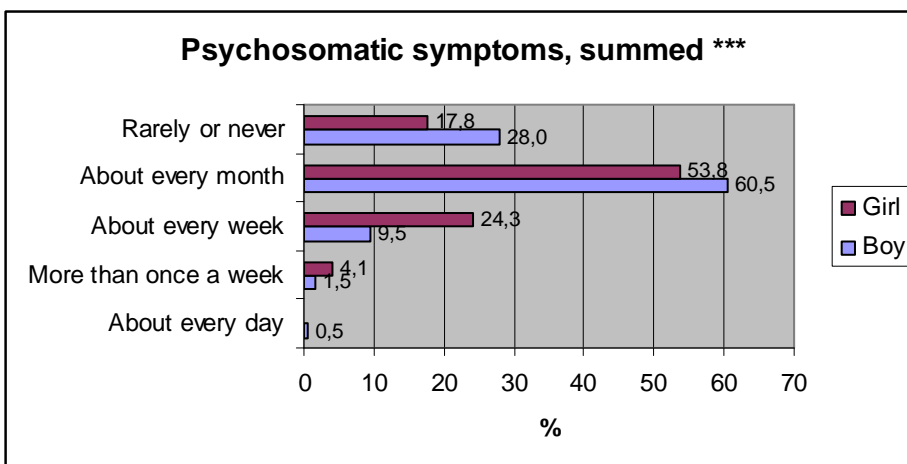


Figure 15 Summed psychosomatic symptoms

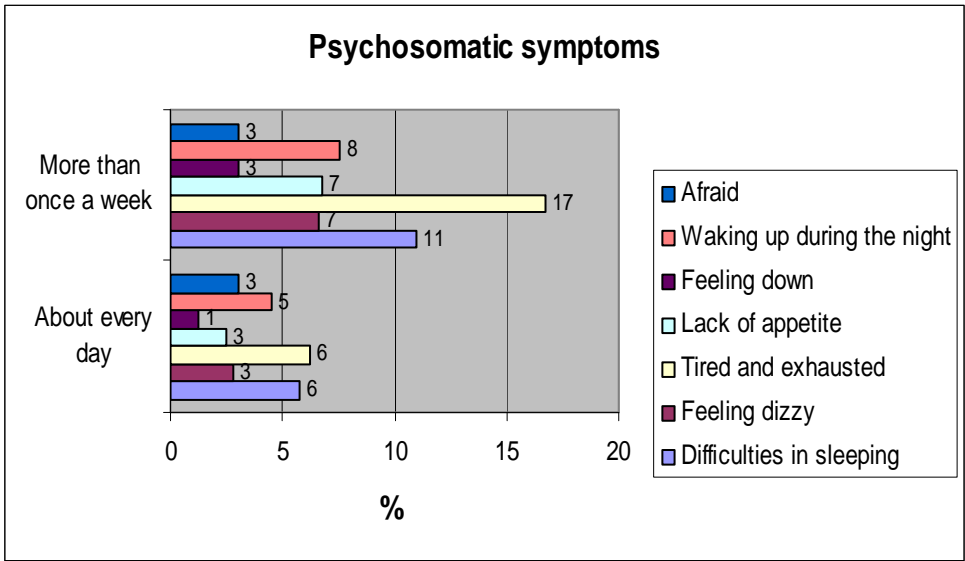


Figure 16 Psychosomatic symptoms 1

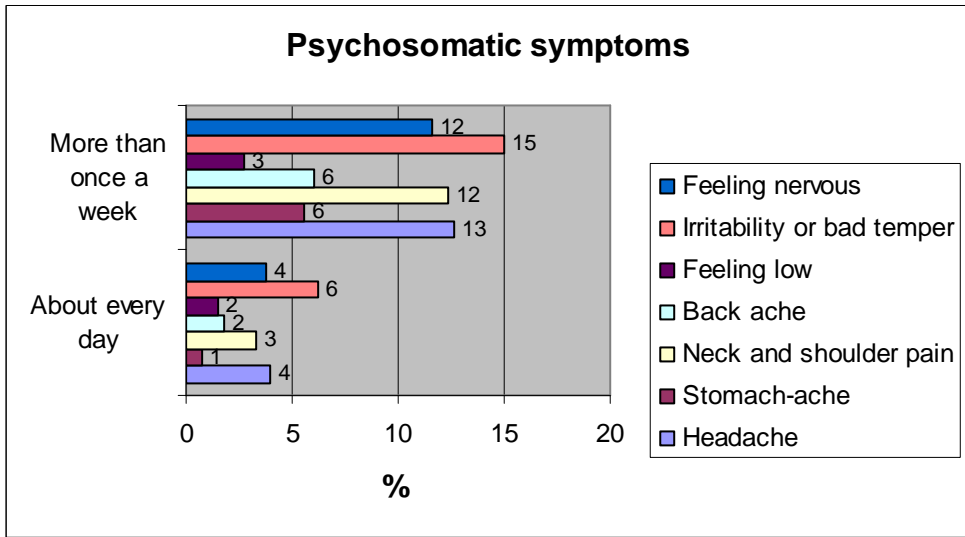


Figure 17 Psychosomatic symptoms 2

Discussion

Good results in unhealthy schools

According to former study of Karvonen, Vikat, & Rimpela (2005) among Finnish adolescents during years 1996 and 2000, many school level factors related to pupils' health complaints. The study showed a steady rise in the most common health complaints. The study was based on a careful school-level follow-up covering a large number of 14 to 16 year old Finnish adolescents, and identical measures and data collection were used for each measurement. Most of the complaints could not be explained, but the study suggested that schools play an important role in youth's well-being.

Within this study several differences in the self reported well-being were pointed out. The attitude towards school was really negative among the Finnish pupils of this study, even though it is known they succeed well in the PISA-tests (Kupari et al., 2004). Half of the pupils didn't like school, which is a high number, so there is a serious need to discuss the reasons behind this. One explanation can be in the Finnish school culture. The pupils relate to school as an adult to work, they go to school and do their duty, which is to study. Thus the amount of pupils who don't like school is considered too large.

The teachers' actions in school correlated positively with the pupils' attitude towards school. As a result it can be noticed, that the more caring and supportive the pupils felt their teachers to be, the more they liked school. On this field there is something that can be done. According to (Karvonen et al., 2005) the health complaints were most typical for adolescents studying in schools where relationships with teachers were generally poor and where pupils on average received high marks.

It was not visible that schoolwork caused a lot of pressure for the pupils. The disliking of school comes from various other reasons. It is also known that the situation in schools is deteriorating rapidly, especially in the bigger cities of Finland, which have reported increasing differences between pupils and also between schools (Väljörvi, 2002). The logic of larger differences is importing to Finland, not backwards, even though there has been several committees visiting in Finland {{27 Väljörvi, Jouni 2002; }}. Over the last few years the class sizes in Rovaniemi have risen and the resources in schools have decreased. This may have effect on the teachers' opportunities to give one to one attention to the pupils.

Lonely, insecure and tired pupils

The pupils in the Northern parts of Finland seemed to be often lonely. There were also a group of pupils (7%, N=28) who had no contact with friends, or had no close friends at all. Children understand the emotion of loneliness to be unpleasant (Qualter, 2003). The loneliness in this study was related to peer-relations, there can be several other interpretations of the loneliness {{29 Woodward,John C. 1988; }}. The girls were more often lonely than boys. Although the girls were a bit more active in e-communication with their friends, it was clear that girls needed more company than boys. The same percentage of girls and boys had a similar amount of close friends, but the girls more often felt lonely. Most of the pupils that took part in this study live in urban areas, it can be suggested that those who are never in contact with their friends also suffer from other serious difficulties.

This study found that quite a large percentage of pupils on the 8th grade had already used a lot of alcohol and tobacco. Substance abuse has increased among Finnish adolescents, also 20 % of the health complaints were explained by increased smoking and alcohol use among the pupils (Karvonen et al., 2005). Among daily smokers there were more girls than boys.

Tiredness was also a fairly big topic in this study. It was alarming that almost one third of the pupils felt tired during four or more school mornings in a week.. Tiredness and exhaustion is defined as one of the psychosomatic symptoms, it was also surprisingly common among these pupils. Almost one third (29 %) of the girls felt tired and exhausted more than once a week.

The self esteem of the pupils seemed to be low. The variables of the questionnaire measured the state of the self esteem through eight questions. Almost one third of the pupils often felt failure or even totally useless. The strongest significant difference between boys and girls were found in the pupils' satisfaction with themselves, which was that the girls were a lot less satisfied with themselves than the boys.

Bullying among other problems

About 30 % of the pupils had been bullied at least once in the last few months. Bullying was more common among boys than girls. Bullying is a serious problem, consequences for the victims of bullying can be a severe increase in depression, suicide ideation and loneliness, lower self esteem and grades (The Olweus bullying prevention program: A proven school-based program to reduce bullying.2005).This is where something that can, and should be done, as there are effective programs and successful interventions against bullying. One is implemented by Olweus bullying preventing program (Olweus, 1993).

The girls seemed to have more psychosomatic symptoms than the boys. Psychosomatic symptoms indicate the possible state of depression and other mental problems. This difference arises from the differences in variables concerning tiredness and self esteem. The girls seemed to have more difficulties in their psychosocial well-being than the boys.

There have been more and more voices discussing the complicated problems in schools in Finland. More often the problems are concerned with the social aspect and behavior of the pupils, the living conditions and home situations of the pupils also often causes more problems. This is more evident in the Northern part of Finland where the decreasing number of pupils in schools causes the closure of many small schools in the rural areas. In bigger towns the schools are also being re-organized. Parents and teachers are worried about the pupils and their well-being. Teachers feel that their work is more stressful and demanding nowadays. The prize for the new education policy is the decrease in the well-being of pupils.

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