

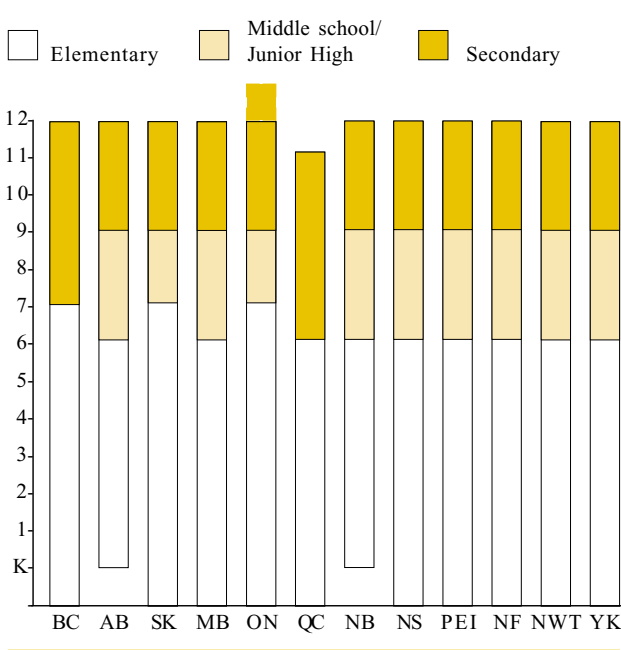
# The School Experience

Adolescents spend much of their daily life in school settings. An increasing body of research reinforces the contention that experiences at school have a profound influence on the social and emotional development of young people. In particular, their health behaviours and their view of themselves have been shown to be related to their life in school (Rudd and Walsh, 1993; Resnick et al., 1993). For many young people school is a richly satisfying experience. Their positive attitude toward school is constantly reinforced by teachers' recognition of their achievement and by their involvement in the social life that centres around the school. Others see school as a threatening place where unreasonably high expectations create an environment of criticism and exclusion. Some gradually disengage from school life. Recent research has demonstrated that a process of disengagement from school typically leads to involvement with other youth who share similar feelings and values and ultimately share health-risk behaviours (Connop and King, 1999).

Canada does not have a single education system; each province and territory is entitled to establish its own formal curriculum and school organization (see Figure 2.1). It is useful to note that Grade 6 and Grade 10 each tend to be similar in structure across the country, and students in these grades are exposed to similar content from province to province. Students in Grade 6 classes remain together most of the time with the same teacher. Grade 10 students select their courses and have individual timetables; teachers and class composition vary according to subjects taken. Usually there are two or three types of courses offered, one type which leads to post-secondary education and the other directly to work. Across the country, school organization varies most at the Grade 8 level. Many provinces have a junior high system covering Grades 7 to 9. Junior high schools are often in the same facility, with senior

**Figure 2.1**

The organizational structure of Canadian schools, by province/territory



highs covering Grades 10 to 12. Provincial/territorial systems extend to Grade 12 except in Quebec where there is a Grade 1 to 6 elementary panel and a 7 to 11 secondary panel. In Ontario, where secondary school may be 4 or 5 years, there are middle schools and junior schools and mixtures in between. In summary then, Canadian Grades 6s and 10s are very similar in organizational structure, but the organization for instruction of Grade 8 across the country differs.

In the last few years, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) has taken a pro-active role in developing common curricula across the country. CMEC has also introduced a Student Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) which incorporates national testing of students in English, Math and Science at Grades 3, 6 and 9. Canada has also participated in international testing programs in

Math and Science. The emphasis on standardized testing and common curricula in a comparative context both across countries and provinces has been the impetus for curriculum development initiatives that emphasize measurable outcomes. Destination-based courses (work, college, university) are also a natural outgrowth of this movement.

There are not only fundamental differences in structure across countries but also differences in the nature of student and teacher interaction and the use of failing grades (King et al., 1996). In countries such as France, Belgium and Hungary substantial numbers of students are held back a year if their work is judged to be below grade level. In countries such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark virtually every student moves forward from grade to grade with his/her peers until at least the end of Grade 10. Very few differences in student satisfaction and adjustment to school corresponding to these structural and teaching/learning differences were found, but there were differences worth noting. For example, in systems using more authoritarian, teacher-directed instruction methods, students were more likely to be dissatisfied with school.

In this chapter, changes since 1990 in student perceptions of their achievement, their school aspirations, their satisfaction with school including relationships with teachers and other students, the extent to which their parents are involved with their school, the amount of pressure to achieve the students feel, and bullying behaviour are examined. Findings from the 1998 survey related to skipping classes, patterns of bullying behaviour and safety at school are also included.

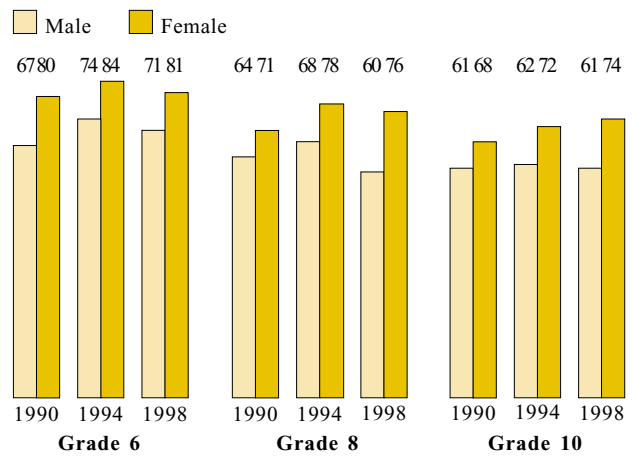
## Achievement

When students' perceptions of their school achievement across countries on the 1994 survey were compared, dramatic differences from country to country were found (King et al., 1996). The students were given four response choices to the question "In your opinion what do your teachers think about your work in school compared to your classmates' work?" The alternatives were "very good", "good", "average" and "below average". It was assumed that students would respond in approximately equal proportions in each of the four categories, but this happened in very few countries. Canadian students were conspicuous in the high proportions of respondents who placed themselves in the "good" and "very good" categories (85% of girls and 74% of boys in Grade 6). Countries such as Germany and Austria where streaming of students begins early and leads to specialized programs in secondary schools tend to have much smaller proportions of students who categorize their achievement as "good" and "very good" than countries, such as Canada and Denmark, that delay streaming.

Figure 2.2 illustrates that very little change has occurred over the last ten years in students' responses to this question. Gender differences are quite pronounced with substantially more girls than boys at each grade level placing themselves in the "good" and "very good" categories. Do these findings correspond with actual gender differences in achievement as evidenced by school marks and performance on standardized tests? The answer to this question is a qualified yes. Certainly, on school marks girls score consistently higher than boys in almost all subjects (King and Peart, 1994). Gender differences on standardized tests are far less than those on actual school marks and are somewhat inconsistent with student perceptions of their achievement. On the Third International Mathematics and Science Study Grade 8 Mathematics Test, girls

**Figure 2.2**

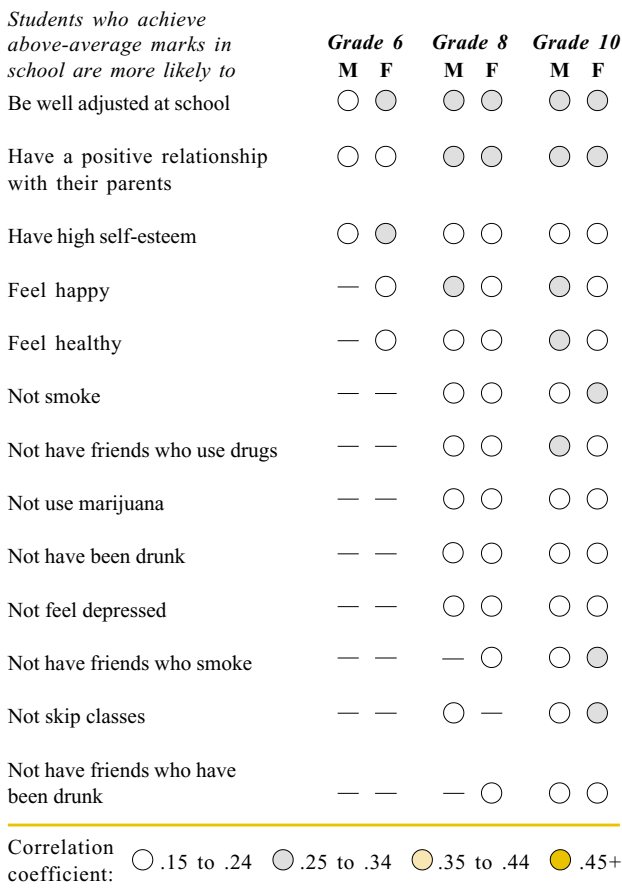
Students who indicated their teachers thought their school work compared to that of others was "good" or "very good" (%)



scored higher on average than boys on three of the six subtests and the same on one of them (Robitaille et al., 1996). On the Grade 8 Science Test boys scored higher than girls on 5 of the 7 subtests (Robitaille et al., 1996). On the CMEC School Achievement Indicators Writing and Reading Test Program in 1998 both 13- and 16-year-old girls demonstrated considerably better achievement than did boys (Council of Ministers of Education, 1998).

**Figure 2.3**

Factors associated with students' perceptions of their school achievement



Unfortunately, schools do not reward students equally. Marks are used to differentiate among them and ultimately determine who will be eligible to attend post-secondary education and reap the status and economic rewards that typically result. The loss of opportunity that success in school can provide is reflected in a distancing from both school and home. Figure 2.3 shows the relationship between school achievement as perceived by the students and other factors drawn from the survey. There were very few variables that correlated over 0.15 with perceptions of their achievement for Grade 6 students, but the correlations were more numerous and stronger for students proceeding from Grade 8 to Grade 10. At all grade levels there was a substantial correlation between perceived achievement and satisfaction with school. This was also the case for students' relationship with their parents; that is to say, the higher students' perceived their achievement the better the relationship with their parents and satisfaction with school. Health-risk behaviour was also moderately correlated with perceived achievement in Grades 8 and 10; that is, marijuana use, smoking and having been drunk as well as associating with friends who did these things tended to be linked to low achievement. Living with both parents seemed to relate positively to perceived school achievement but only for respondents in Grade 8. Students with lower self-esteem were more likely to perceive their school achievement as being low.

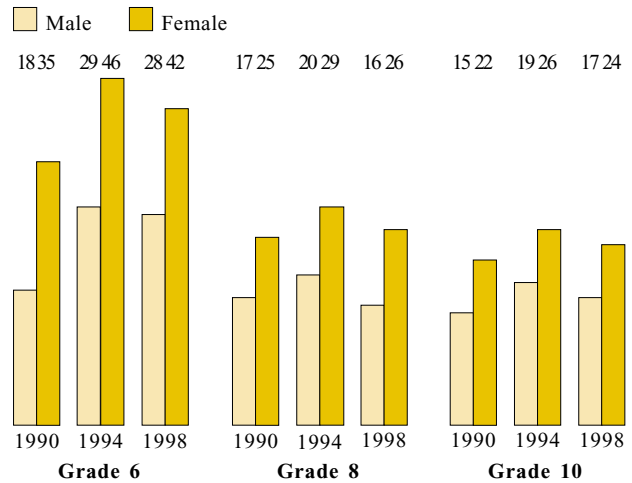
## Satisfaction with School

Adjustment to school and school life became a priority for the HBSC research team for the 1994 and 1998 surveys. The 1990 survey did not treat the relationship between school and health in any depth.

Figure 2.4 shows that at each grade level far more girls than boys indicated that they liked school a lot. Inexplicably more students were satisfied with school in 1994 than in the other two surveys. The proportion of students who indicated they liked school a lot was greatest in Grade 6 and leveled off through Grades 8, 9 and 10. This is consistent with the shift from a more student-oriented (one teacher, one class) focus in Grade 6 to a more subject-oriented focus in junior high and high school, where students have different teachers for each subject.

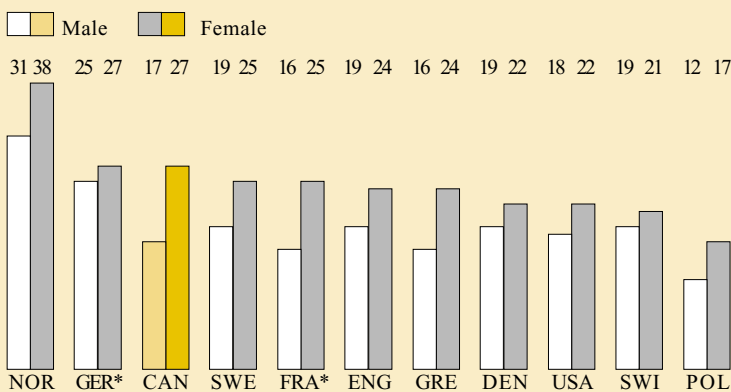
**Figure 2.4**

Students who liked school “a lot” (%)



**Figure 2.5**

Thirteen year olds who liked school “a lot” by country, 1998 (%)

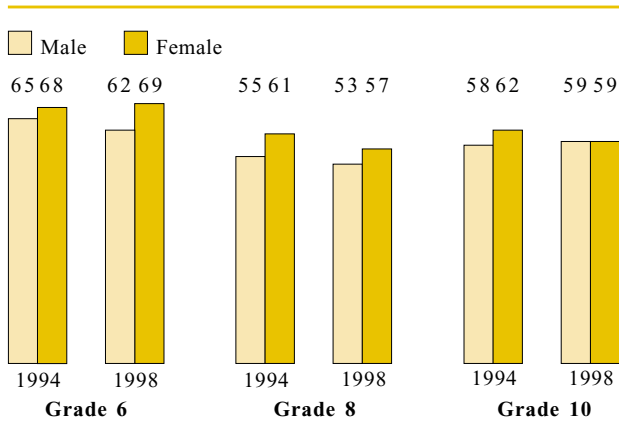


\*France and Germany are represented by regions: see Chapter 1 for details.

In all these countries girls were more likely to enjoy school. Most of the countries had similar proportions of students who liked school a lot, although Norwegian students were more likely to feel this way and Polish students less so. There appears to be little difference in this measure across countries that is related to school organization or teaching/learning approaches (King et al., 1996).

**Figure 2.6**

Students who agreed with the statement “I feel I belong in this school” (%)

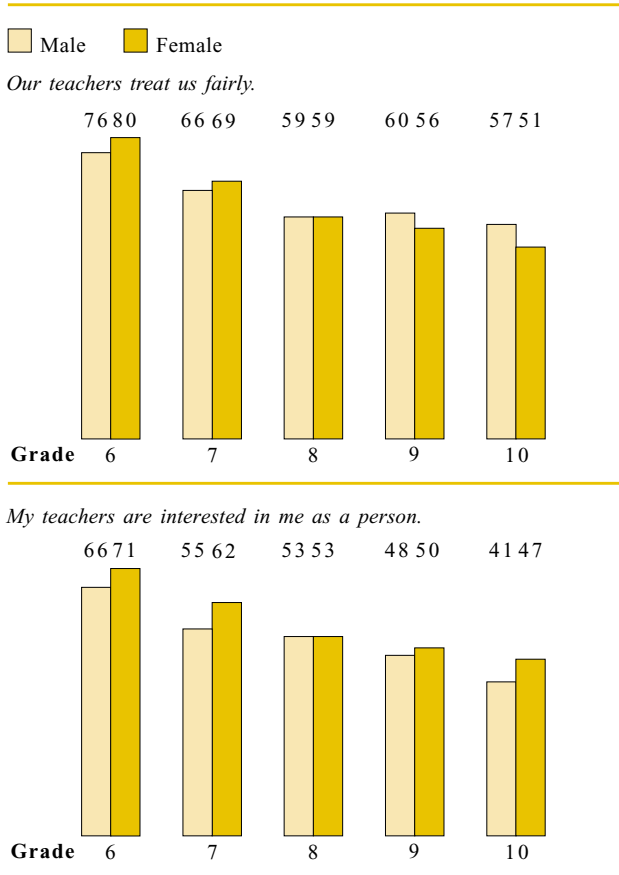


For the 1994 and 1998 surveys additional items were included about general satisfaction with school, including “Our school is a nice place to be”, “The rules in this school are fair”, and the one that is summarized in Figure 2.6, “I feel I belong in this school”. These items deal with different aspects of school life but tend to be highly correlated with each other. Well over half the students agreed with the statement “I feel I belong in this school”, with slightly more girls than boys taking this point of view, except for Grade 10 students on the 1998 survey. There was little change over the two surveys in student responses to this item.

### Relationship with Teachers

**Figure 2.7**

Students who agreed with statements about their teachers, 1998 (%)



It is a difficult challenge for teachers to contribute to differentiating among students for university entrance and still make all students feel accepted and valued as individuals. Nevertheless, the degree to which teachers are able to create a supportive classroom atmosphere is fundamental to student satisfaction with school (Samdal et al., 1998). Four questions were asked of students regarding their relationship with their teachers. The wording differs slightly between the 1994 and the 1998 survey items; therefore we have presented only the 1998 findings for two of the questions (Figure 2.7).

The vast majority of students said that when they needed extra help they could get it from their teachers. There is little difference in gender response and across grades. This set of responses is somewhat surprising because for the two teacher-related statements, “My teachers treat me fairly” and “My teacher is interested in me as a person”, the proportion of positive responses declined as the students advanced through the grades.

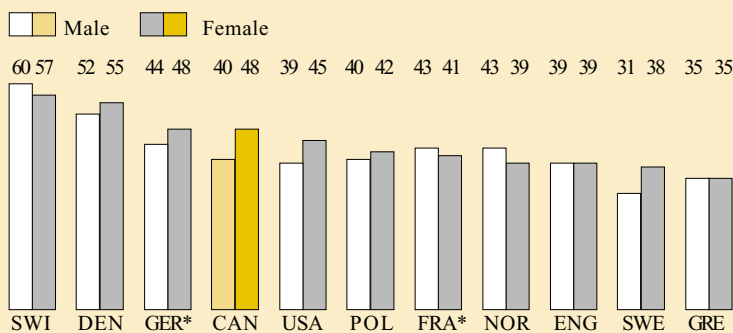
Clearly students feel that their elementary school teachers demonstrate a greater interest in them as individuals than their secondary school teachers. As teachers become more concerned with particular subjects and their students' achievement in them, and, of course, teach more students per day, they seem to be less able to provide the time and attention students need to feel that their particular needs are being met. Girls are slightly more likely than boys to feel their teachers are interested in them as a person.

## Relationships with Other Students

In the previous report presenting HBSC findings we noted that there were substantial differences across countries in the degree of rapport students had with their class peers (King et al., 1996). In some countries the process of socialization was encouraged by providing regular opportunities for dialogue on current issues as well as keeping students together in the same class as they proceed through the grades. Canada, with its emphasis on subject promotion and classes organized by student course selection producing classes that change from class period to class period, did not seem to produce the optimum climate for social development.

**Figure 2.8**

Fifteen year olds who agreed with the statement, "My teachers are interested in me as a person" by country, 1998 (%)

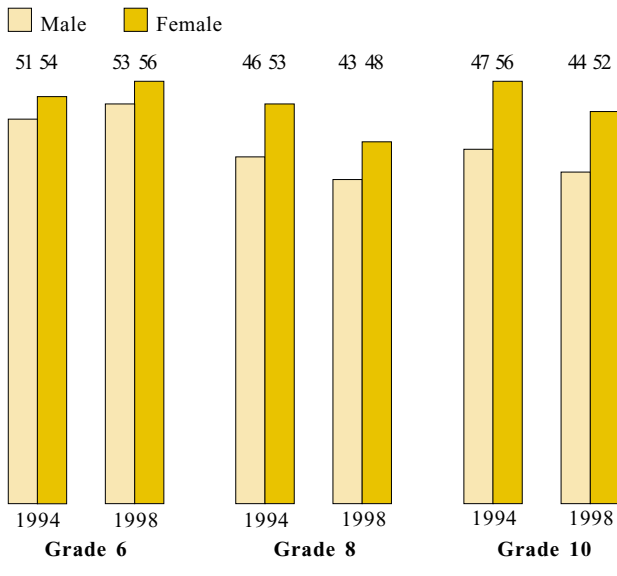


\*France and Germany are represented by regions: see Chapter 1 for details.

It is difficult for teachers to provide students with a sense of caring when they see them only in the competitive subject-focused Grade 10 classrooms. Even in Denmark where classes remain together for the school day, many students do not feel that teachers are interested in them as a person. Teachers in Switzerland have been particularly successful in making their students feel they care about them as individuals.

**Figure 2.9**

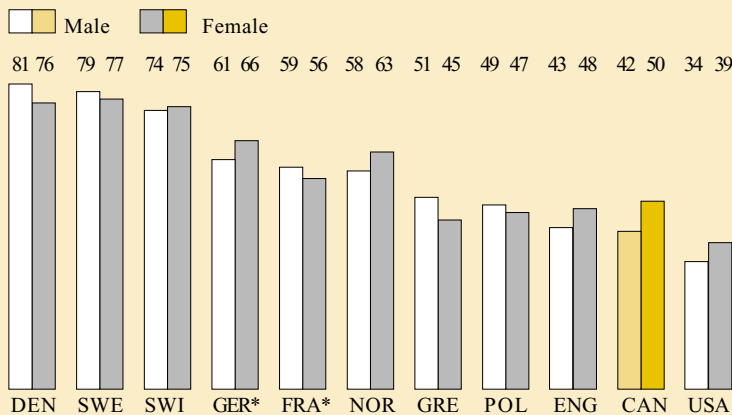
Students who felt the other students in their classes are “often” or “always” kind and helpful (%)



Compared to other countries, significant numbers of students saw themselves as loners and distanced from their colleagues (King et al., 1996). Figure 2.9 illustrates both the changes that occurred between the 1994 and 1998 surveys and the shifts that occur from Grade 6 to Grade 10 on this measure. Girls are more likely than boys to indicate that other students are “often” or “always” kind and helpful. Differences were relatively small across the two surveys. It was interesting to note that from a high in Grade 6 on this item, the proportion who stated “often” or “always” was lowest in Grade 8 and then began to rise again in Grade 10. This suggests that a gradual shift from one teacher to a teacher for each subject weakens the class support system, but then it is rebuilt through secondary school as more common paths of course selection contribute to greater continuity in the makeup of subject classes.

**Figure 2.10**

Thirteen year olds who felt the other students in their classes were “often” or “always” kind and helpful by country, 1998 (%)



\*France and Germany are represented by regions: see Chapter 1 for details.

There were pronounced differences across countries on this measure. The English-speaking countries were comparatively low on students’ perception of the kindness and helpfulness of their peers. Denmark’s high scores and, to a lesser extent, those of Sweden and Switzerland are consistent with their emphasis on social development.



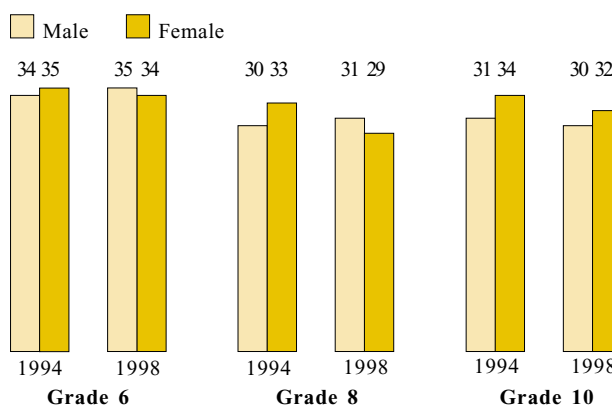
One of the fundamental needs of young people is for acceptance and support from parents, teachers and peers. The adolescent years are a particularly difficult period and the relatively small number of students who indicate that their classmates always accept them as they are is a disturbing finding (Figure 2.11). The figures differ little from survey to survey.

### Skipping Classes

An item designed to obtain a picture of the extent students in Canadian schools skip classes was added in the 1998 survey. The assumption was that skipping behaviour is potentially unhealthy because it provides opportunities during the school day for students to meet with other skippers in settings that facilitate cigarette, drug and alcohol use. A surprisingly high proportion of students of both genders had skipped classes (Figure 2.12). Gender differences were relatively small and there was a steady increase in the proportion of skippers from Grade 6 to Grade 10. Twenty percent of Grade 10 female respondents and 22 percent of the males had skipped three or more days of the current term.

**Figure 2.11**

Students who felt other students in their classes “always” accept them as they are (%)



**Figure 2.12**

Proportions of students who skipped classes this school term by grade and gender, 1998 (%)

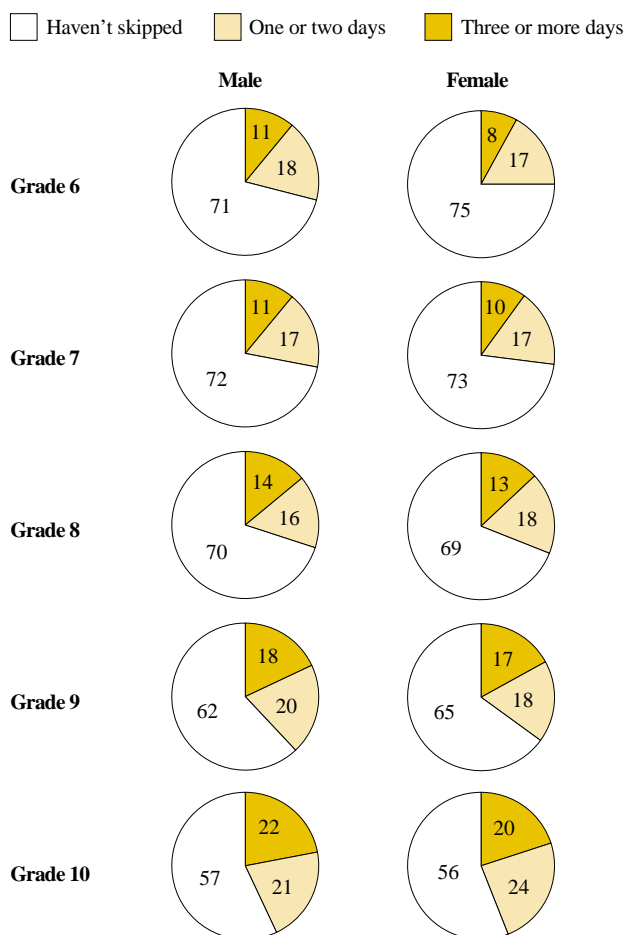
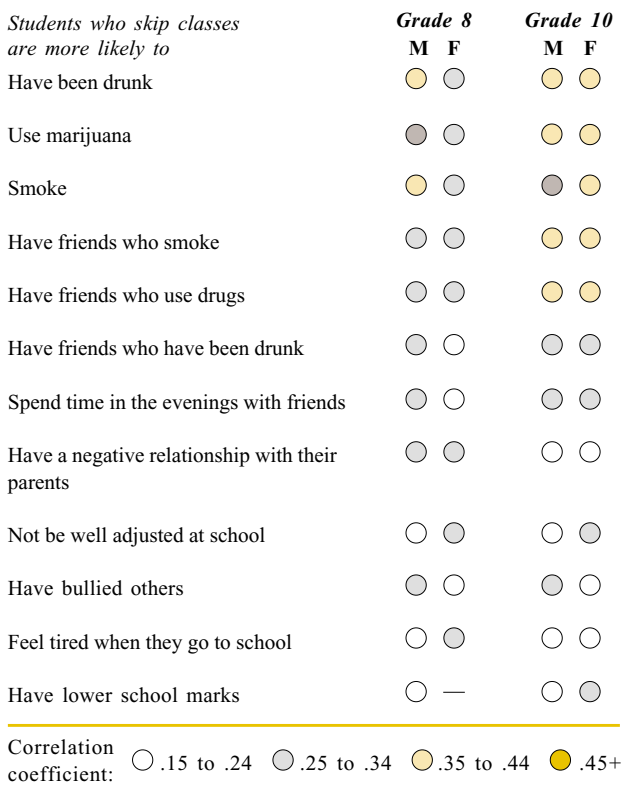


Figure 2.13 presents correlations between skipping and other measures. None of the Grade 6 correlations was 0.15 or greater, but a substantial number fit into this category for Grades 8 and 10

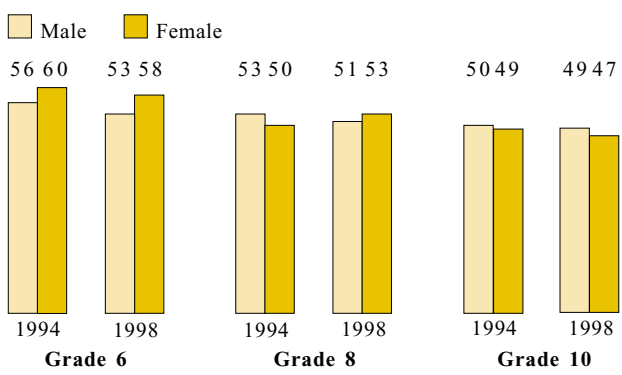
**Figure 2.13**

Factors associated with skipping classes



**Figure 2.14**

Students who felt their parents are “always” willing to come to school to talk to their teachers (%)



respondents. It is quite clear that the more students skip, the greater the likelihood that they will be involved with students who were smokers and/or alcohol and drug users, and of course the greater the likelihood that they themselves smoked, and/or used drugs and alcohol. Skippers were also more likely to spend time in the evening with their friends, in many instances engaging in these health risk behaviours. They were more likely to be experiencing strains in their relationship with their parents and at school, and by Grade 10 they were achieving at a lower than average level at school. Skipping appears to be just one manifestation of youth alienation and disengagement from school and home.

## Parents and Schools

Students’ adjustment to and achievement in school is strongly related to the support provided to them by their parents (Steinberg et al., 1992). However, it is especially important that parents develop effective communication with their children’s school so that they feel comfortable talking to teachers and vice versa. In some countries parents are strongly encouraged to be part of the decision-making process at schools while in other countries they are discouraged from becoming involved with teachers and schools. There are clear advantages to the former approach in terms of student satisfaction with their school experience (King et al., 1996; Resnick et al., 1998). In Canada, parents are encouraged to come to talk to their children’s teachers at regular points during the school year. Figure 2.14 indicates the proportion of students who felt their parents were always willing to come to school to talk to their teachers. There was a slight decline from grade to grade in the proportions but overall about one-half of the students indicated that their parents were always willing to come to talk to teachers. There were small gender differences on this measure except for Grade 6. Since there are clear advantages for students if their parents regularly talk to their teachers, this is an area where improvement is required from both schools and parents.

## Pressure to Achieve at School

It is difficult for parents and teachers to strike a balance when they set expectations for their children and students. Too much pressure and unrealistic expectations create stress that can contribute to headaches, sleeplessness and even withdrawal. Not unexpectedly, students who say they are experiencing too much pressure related to school are typically achieving at a below-average level or at a level lower than teachers and parents expect. Figures 2.15 and 2.16 present the proportions of students who were experiencing considerable pressure. It can be clearly seen from Figure 2.15 that the number of students feeling pressure because of school work steadily increased from Grade 6 to Grade 10. Interestingly, boys were more likely to say they felt pressure in Grades 6 and 8, but by Grade 10 there were more girls in this category. There was a slight increase between the 1994 to 1998 surveys in the proportions of students who said they felt pressure because of school work.

Although gender differences regarding parent expectations were not significant (see Figure 3.11), there were notable gender differences in the proportions of students who felt their teachers expected too much of them (Figure 2.16). More boys than girls agreed with this statement at all grade levels.

Figure 2.15

Students who felt a lot of pressure because of their school work (%)

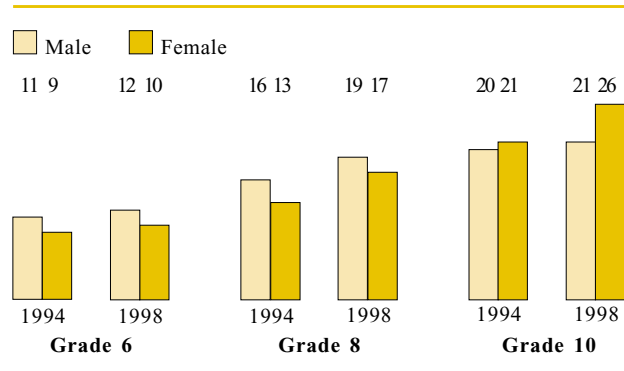


Figure 2.16

Students who agreed with the statement “My teachers expect too much of me at school” (%)

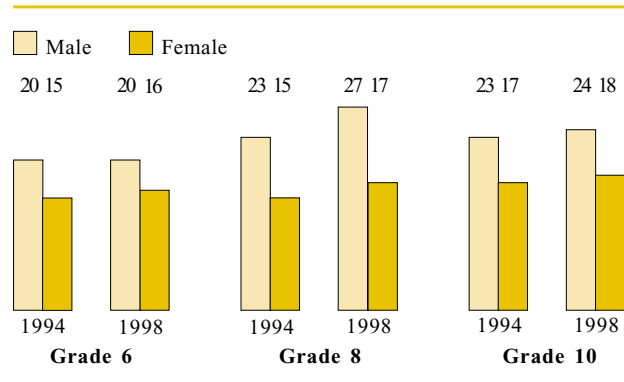
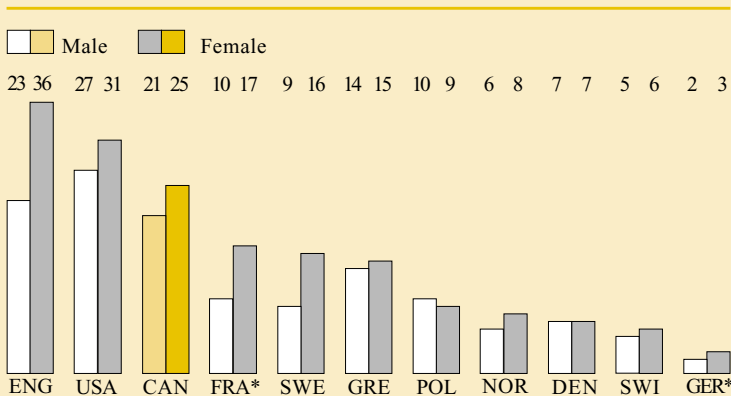


Figure 2.17

Fifteen year olds who felt a lot of pressure because of their school work by country, 1998 (%)

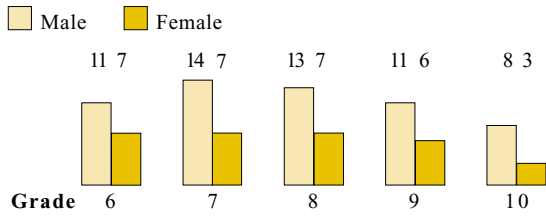


\*France and Germany are represented by regions: see Chapter 1 for details.

Students from the English-speaking countries, England, the United States and Canada, appeared to experience greater pressure from school-work expectations. Students from the Scandinavian countries and Germany were notably lower on this indicator. There is little evidence that the amount of school-related pressure felt by students contributes to higher achievement on international tests of science and mathematics.

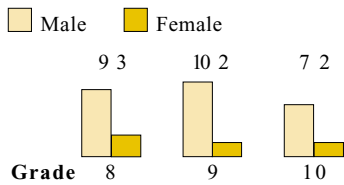
**Figure 2.18**

Students who “rarely” or “never” felt safe at school, 1998 (%)



**Figure 2.19**

Students who indicated most or all of their friends carry weapons, 1998 (%)



**Figure 2.20**

Factors associated with being bullied

Students who have been bullied are more likely to	Grade 6		Grade 8		Grade 10	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Feel left out	○	●	●	○	○	○
Feel helpless	○	○	○	○	○	○
Feel lonely	○	○	○	○	○	○
Feel depressed	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not be well adjusted at school	○	○	○	○	○	○
Have bullied others	○	○	○	○	○	○
Have low self-esteem	○	○	○	○	○	—
Feel irritable	—	○	○	○	○	○
Feel unhappy	—	○	○	○	—	○
Feel pressured by school work	○	○	○	○	—	—
Have a negative relationship with their parents	○	○	○	○	—	—
Not be well integrated socially	○	○	○	—	○	—

Correlation coefficient: ○ .15 to .24   ○ .25 to .34   ● .35 to .44   ● .45+

## Safety at School

In the last few years increasing attention has been given to school violence and bullying behaviour (Pepler, Craig and Roberts, 1998). Under the leadership of a Norwegian researcher, Dan Olweus, programs have been developed and implemented designed to reduce bullying behaviour in schools (Olweus, 1994). There is also concern that many young people are bringing weapons to school. To what extent have these trends affected student perceptions of their safety at school? Figure 2.18 presents the proportions of students who stated that they rarely or never felt safe at school based on a question only asked on the 1998 survey. Boys were more likely than girls to feel unsafe with the peak point for them being in Grade 7. Girls were less likely to feel this way and by Grade 10 only 3 percent were concerned about their safety at school. Nevertheless, such a substantial number of young people feeling at risk suggests a real urgency for remediation.

Students were asked, not the sensitive question of whether they carry weapons, but if their friends do. Figure 2.19 indirectly indicates that a small but

significant number of students, mainly boys, carry weapons. Most argue that this is done for protection from others.

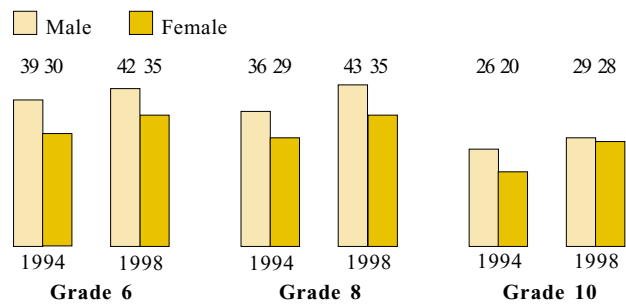
Bullying behaviour became a major thrust of the HBSC research team for the 1994 survey. Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of bullying, there is generally agreement that bullying includes the following elements: physical, verbal or psychological intimidation that is intended to cause fear, distress or harm; an imbalance of power; and no provocation by the victim (Farrington, 1993). Bullying victims are more likely to feel alone at school, and unaccepted (Figure 2.20). They are also more likely to be lonely, unhappy, and have lower self-esteem. Ironically, they are also more likely to be bullies themselves.

Boys were more likely to be bullied at all grade levels except Grade 10. Interestingly, in spite of inconsistent efforts across schools to reduce bullying behaviour, greater proportions of respondents in the 1998 survey than in the 1994 survey reported having been bullied (Figure 2.21). Bullies tend to be a little older than their peers and to have had trouble with school; they are also more likely to engage in health-risk behaviours; but, perhaps more important, they tend to have been bullied themselves. Substantially more boys than girls at all grade levels indicated that they

had bullied others (Figure 2.22). There were increases in the number of students in Grades 8 and 10 across the two surveys who said they had bullied others but a decrease in the number of Grade 6 boys who agreed with this statement.

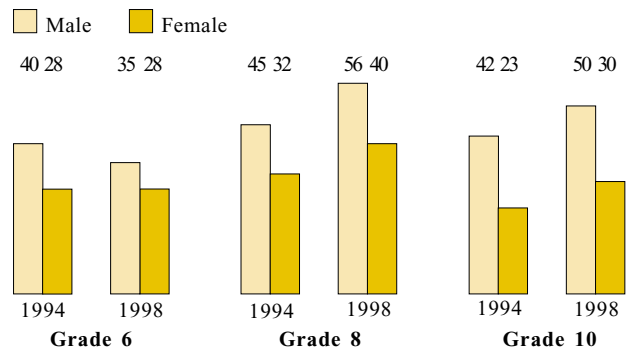
**Figure 2.21**

Students who were bullied in school this school term (%)



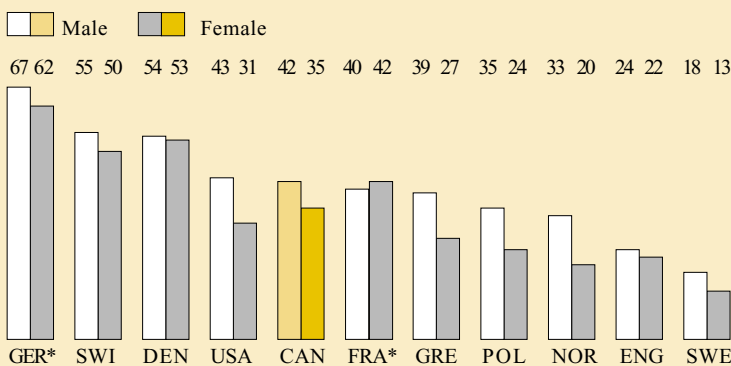
**Figure 2.22**

Students who bullied others in school this school term (%)



**Figure 2.23**

Thirteen year olds who were bullied in school this school term by country, 1998 (%)



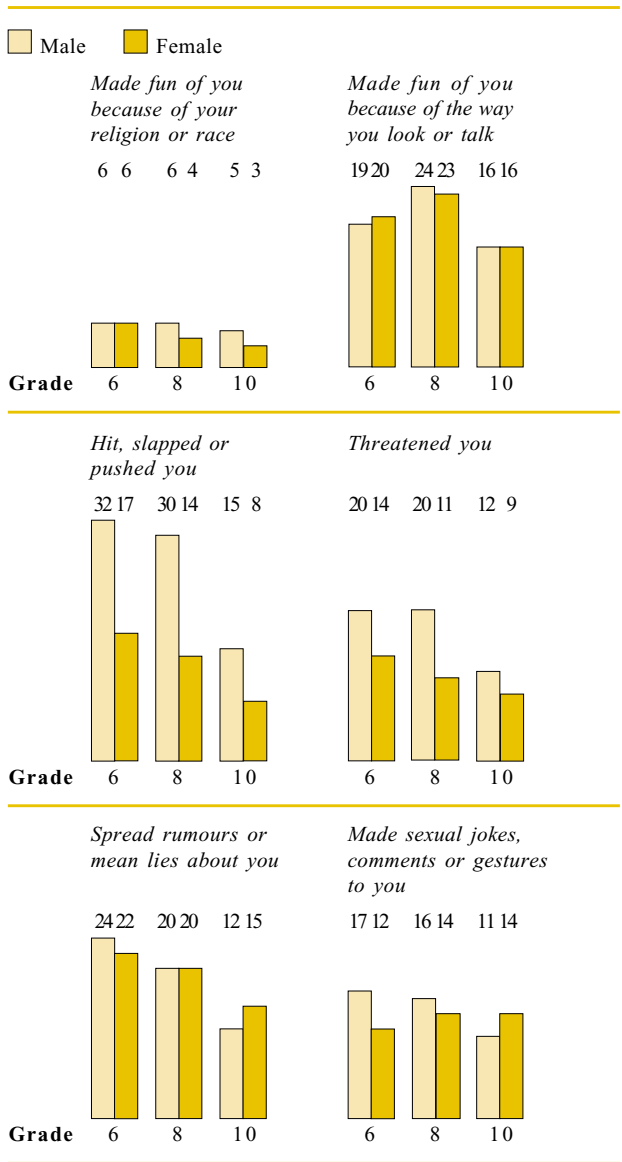
\*France and Germany are represented by regions: see Chapter 1 for details.

Bullying is not a universal concept and so comparisons across countries must be cautiously undertaken. Ironically, countries where more students are viewed as kind and helpful also seem to have more problems with bullying, for example, Germany, Switzerland and Denmark. Although Canada ranks in the middle on this indicator, the proportion of students who have been bullied is still high enough to view this behaviour as a social problem.

The 1998 survey included two items designed to determine the forms bullying takes. Figure 2.24 presents findings, for Grades 6, 8 and 10, for the question, “How often has someone bullied you in school this term in the ways listed below”? There were some gender differences; for example, boys were more likely to use physical violence—but on most of the categories differences were small. The number of bullying references to religion or race was relatively small. Higher proportions reported that others made fun of their appearance and/or spread

**Figure 2.24**

How students were bullied, 1998 (%)

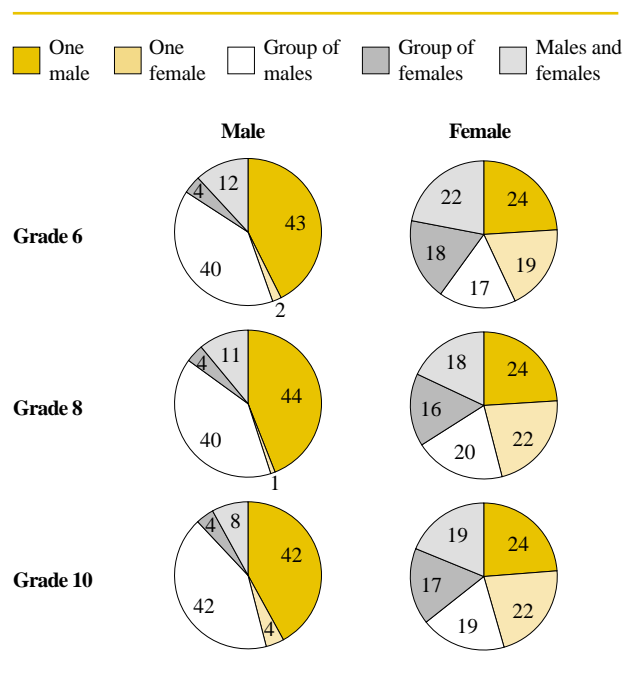


rumours and lies about them. Sexual jokes and comments appeared to be as common at the Grade 6 level as at the Grade 10 level.

The second new question asked who did the bullying. Figure 2.25 indicates that almost half the boys at all grade levels who said they had been bullied were bullied by one boy and over a third were bullied by a group of boys. About 10 percent were bullied by a group of boys and girls. By Grade 10, interestingly, 6 percent of the bullies of boys were girls. The pattern was quite different for girls although a single boy was the most common tormenter. One girl or a group of boys both represented about 20 percent of those who bullied girls, closely followed by a group of boys and girls. About 15 percent of the girls said they were bullied by a group of girls. The gender makeup of individuals or groups who did the bullying did not differ substantially from grade to grade.

**Figure 2.25**

Students who bullied others, 1998 (%)



## Summary

In general, Canadian students were relatively satisfied with their school experience, although the proportion who said they like school a lot declined as the students moved through the grades. Positive attitudes towards school were found to be linked to good relationships with parents, general health and happiness and the avoidance of health-risk behaviours. As the students progressed through the grades, they found that the teachers seem to be less interested in them as a person. This appears to correspond to increasing emphasis on academic achievement and subject specialization in the senior grades of school. Girls were more likely than boys to find their classmates kind and helpful, but this was an area where there was clear room for improvement. Students in many European countries were more supportive of their classmates.

Surprisingly large numbers of students skip classes, even in the lower grades. Girls were as likely as boys to skip classes. Skipping was found to be related to health-risk behaviours, such as drug use, cigarette smoking and having been drunk, as well as association with friends who also took risks with their health.

Just over half the students felt their parents were always willing to come to the school to talk to their teachers. Since this is an important reinforcement for student achievement and motivation, this proportion should be higher. Students increasingly felt pressure associated with school work as they advanced through the grades with one-quarter of the Grade 10 girls expressing this concern. Parent expectations were found to be higher than those of teachers for our respondents. It is probably safe to say that parents play a bigger role in creating unrealistic expectations for students than does the school.

Although a relatively small number of respondents indicated they felt unsafe at school, safety at school is becoming a real concern. More males than females felt unsafe. As students moved through the grades, the proportion of both boys and girls who felt unsafe declined.

The surveys show bullying behaviour to be very common with boys more likely to have been bullied than girls and slight increases in the number who were bullied from the 1994 to the 1998 survey. Bullying is a particularly harmful behaviour because it has negative implications both for those being bullied and for the bullies. There is little evidence that efforts to reduce bullying in Canadian schools have been effective.