

School Violence as a Form of Coexistence Within a Society

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It is a fact that in secondary schools there is violence; there has always been, but it was not observed critically and was even thought of at times as necessary as the adage says, "la letra con sangre entra" (learning is absorbed with blood). Violence, its expression and sense was something different. Today there is much talk of school violence; we consider it to be a problem but, who and how is it defined? how is it expressed? how should it be taken care of? what has been obtained?



ABSTRACT

This article analyzes violence in schools from the consideration of social inequality, impunity, structural, social and institutional violence on the national scale. The article relates the problem of school violence within the social context of students' daily lives. We argue that the structural, social and institutional violence created the basis for the control culture which prevails within the high school system. In turn, this situation narrows the possibilities for the development of solidarity and social wellbeing of students.

Keys words: Structural violence, social violence, school violence, control culture, solidarity and wellbeing of the students.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE IN CONTEXT

To talk about school violence in Mexico requires discovering the way in which to approach the problem from its complexity, taking into account the various dimensions of social reality which, in one way or another, are its components. In order to go into this topic in depth, we will make a summary of reality, without taking it as an isolated phenomenon, but rather trying to understand it from the viewpoint of some of its interrelations. Violence, in general, and specifically in secondary schools, is a historic social process, interspersed with any number of circumstances, which we cannot try to deal with in this article, but are worth at least mentioning. We will talk about school violence, mainly about violence in which students are the protagonists, but relating it to structure, institutional and family violence. We refer to inequality and impunity as two situations, which we believe, have a bearing on school violence in Mexico.

"The most long-lived, permanent and fundamental seal which marks Mexican society and gives it its texture is inequality. An inequality so deep that it is difficult to speak of a fairly well integrated society." (Woldenberg, 2011, p. 90) Inequality not only affects those who have not, but permeates all of society, "life is worse for all, rich and poor, in unequal societies." (Escalante, Fernando in Woldenberg, 2011, : 90) At any level of inequality, as a social structure, it makes us who we are, we become it, we get so used to it that we do not even realize it, as if it had nothing to

do with us. However, it is a circumstance which is prone to violence y which permeates each and every one of the inter-relational actions in which we take part. In the mirage of averages, Mexico, in international statistics, is considered a country with average income, even though sixty million Mexicans are poor and, paradoxically, we have among us one of the two wealthiest men in the world. Imposed on us, inequality is non-acknowledged violence, reproduced in our daily life and which generates relational dynamics of dominance and submission which is culturally accepted as a given. Inequality operates be way of exclusion and within it we reproduce the world in which we live. According to some studies, inequality is present in countries with the most violence, the least security. School violence is not outside of this social configuration: it is just another expression of it.

As to impunity, Mexicans believe that the rich, especially politicians, benefit from impunity in our country. Nevertheless, it is the prerogative of most offenders. This fact has its origin (and consequence) in a weak legal system, incapable of enforcing laws, and an environment of corruption which becomes the perfect culture medium for social violence which is increasing day by day in our country.

The culture of the predominant legality—in which "he who doesn't cheat gets nowhere" and where "laws are made to be broken"—leads to the solution of conflicts of taking justice into ones' own hands and which in turn leads to generalized violence. Along with impunity and recurrent



lack of application of the law with all expressions of public violence tolerated by municipal, state and federal authorities which are constant and have a bearing on the environment of violence which ends up being a normal part of national public and private life.

Impunity, like inequality, permeates all environs of the social structure, leading to social processes which reproduce exclusion and violence at the national, neighborhood, family and individual level. Thus, when we speak of school violence, we are speaking of educational institutions and school communities which present these characteristics in different social dimensions.

Social violence—carried out in the streets by teachers, demonstrators, police, young people, delinquents and drug traffickers—is part of national life, and is “tolerated”, covered up and even considered a practice deserving of respect, since “in the face of decreasing institutionalized authority, society has become more and more permissive.” (Girola, Lidia, 2005) In contrast, isolate violence committed by children and young people in schools is treated as scandalous.

The constancy of speeches telling of these situations makes us think that we live in a profound crisis in relation to the appraisal of expressions generated by societal coexistence. The speeches, in both cases, forget to mention other spaces related to the matter at hand, such as those which build and allow violent relations with and among citizens, and of the various environments in which children and adolescents grow up.

Most public secondary schools in the Federal District are located in neighborhoods where insecurity, violence and illegality are no secret, nor are they kept within private spaces. Students of secondary

schools affirm that near their homes there is vandalism, “druggies”, violence and frequent street fights. According to the mothers, “those guys are always making a scandal,” that is to say groups of young people who spend much of the day (and night) standing on the corners, playing, drinking, consuming drugs and at times committing offenses. In these environments, small scale drug dealing takes place in drug stores, houses, shops and, while the authorities claim not to know this, most young people say that getting drugs is relatively easy. Urban events, apparently unconnected, more than a backdrop for school violence constitute the problem itself. To understand this is to approach the problem from its complexity and not reduce it to isolated events, or to behavior that has been going on for years.

According to Juliana Gonzalez, violence is a force which is imposing, which is devastating. It is “indomitable, extreme, implacable, overpowering, an opposing power which reveals, as a sign of impotence, insensitivity, of the decadence of life.” (Gonzalez, 1998, p. 140) Violence is always like this. Violence is like this in any space; its expressions may change, but not the fact that it has become a way of relating to others. Violence subjugates the other who, upon being subjugated learns to be subjugated and to behave in this way relationally over and over again.

We usually classify violence in order to place it, but it is always a destructive force; it is not an isolated resource, but rather a social form of coexistence, which penetrates and rots the most diverse spheres. Many times when speaking about school violence, we dissociate it from the structural and social environment. We refer to violence between students and we forget about the environment: administrators, teachers and

the other actors who make up the school community, without taking into account "that all sectors of the institutional order make up the general framework of reference which, now, makes up a universe." (Berger and Luckmann, 2001, p. 125) We ignore the other members of the school community and focus on the students as if they, isolation, were the producers of the violence which is generated in that scenario. This even allows us to find a single culprit. Mass media constantly talks about bullying, labeling and identifying one or more students as the causes of school violence. Thus, all social responsibility disappears. Violence then shifts, in this case, towards adolescents and forgets about the problem of social decomposition.

One of the factors found by our research, and which worries us the most, is the fact that when students are asked who is responsible for school violence, the answer, "we are." This means that adults have built a violent society and, besides that, have convinced the young people that they are responsible for what happens at school. In fact, in their answers, they seldom or never mention the imposition of the formal structures, nor the behavior of the authorities or teachers.

In the face of student violence, the other members of the educational institution generally answer with the culture of control. Thus, the violence of the former, is faced with institutionalized violence. In most schools, the punishment now set down in the framework of *Convivencia escolar de la Secretaria de Educacion Publica* (Coexistence in Schools of the Ministry of Public Education) is: detention of students, for hours or days, in the offices or library,¹

¹ This official norm is meant to correct the student by means of isolation and not attending classes, which is not compatible with the idea that, in school, the student should learn to coexist and study when he or she is part of

reports, suspension and appointments with parents. Thereby, the responsibility of schooling is turned back over to the parents and they are told to "straighten up" their children's behavior. This resource is one of the favorite instruments for facing up to school violence but, unfortunately, it results in more confrontation among the actors of the community: teachers against students, students against teachers and classmates, authorities against parents, parents against teachers. Everyone accuses, judges and blames. The teacher says, "...this girl shows great inattentiveness, but I think the problem is the father who does not care for her; I wish the DIF would take her away from him and teach him a lesson." (Gutierrez, 2013) A mother says, "every week they call me in, and just to tell me that my daughter has fought with someone, has painted on the walls, or has yelled. If I keep missing work, I'm going to be fired, even though I tell them (the authorities) they don't pay any attention; I cannot keep coming in." (Gutierrez, 2013) the authorities say, "of course, he is just like his father, that's why they are the way they are...he must be suspended so they both understand." (Tello, 2012) Others go to extremes: denunciations to the authorities, on the one hand and expulsion of the students on the other. SEP does not approve of this, but the authorities of the schools do it and explain that it was the student's decision along with his or her family to leave school, since institutionally school authorities are not allowed to take these measures.

Frequently the purpose of the educational institution of forming future citizens, useful to society is forgotten and so much time and effort is spent on controlling

a group and receives guidance and orientation from his or her teacher.



students, checking uniforms, the length of the skirt or pants, the kind of haircut, hairstyle, checking to see that students are not wearing makeup, measuring the length of their nails, disciplining inside the classroom, with very few positive results, etc. There is then very little space or intention of teaching them about personal autonomy, association, collaboration or solidarity with others, respect and responsibility, dialogue. Without a doubt, obedience and submission are highly prized in contrast to discussion and questioning. The culture of control in secondary schools makes options of violence available and does little to aid the growth of the students, as subjects of knowledge and creation.

It is a fact that in secondary schools there is violence, there has always been, but it was not observed critically and was even thought of at times as necessary as the adage says, "la letra con sangre entra (learning is absorbed with blood). "If we make a personal remembrance, we will remember that at times we were the victim and at times the aggressor and that, over time--which is even more serious--we think that [violence] is a part of school culture." (Prieto, 2005, p. 105) Violence, its expression and sense was something different. Today there is much talk of school violence, we consider it to be a problem but, who and how is it defined?, how is it expressed?, how should it be taken care of?, what has been obtained?

Throughout our professional studies and interventions in public secondary schools² in Mexico City, we have found various forms of violence: one which is explicit, which is generally recognized, rejected and thought of as inevitable. Other socialized

or more subtle violence, which is not recognized, is accepted as normal and repeated routinely. Then there is bullying, not the same as any violence, but as "intentional and repeated actions of harassment over a period of time which harms, intimidates or humiliates another person." (Olweus, 1998, p. 169) Bullying takes place between a strong subject and a weak one, who establish a reciprocal emotional relationship, which should be attended to immediately. An example in universal literature is young Törles de Musil (1906). There is another kind of violence against other students which consists of simply ignoring them and excluding them from activities at school. These actions are often overlooked even in studies on violence. Jorge Ibarguengoitia in "Rigoberto entre las ranas" (Rigoberto among frogs), sets forth this problem. Violence, be it individual or collective, always affects the school community, not only the one who carries it out and the victim or victims, but also those who let it happen and those who share the social space. Besides, it is a phenomenon which is expressed differently by the sexes. It is common to only think about violence in which males participate, but it is important, once again, to not forget females, whose expressions of violence differ from the former.

Violence has diverse origins and consequences. In this paper we will focus on violence expressed in relationships, mainly of students, although we do not pretend that there is not school violence in relationships with school authorities, teachers, parents and the environment, since this is the weave in which they are all drawn. Within the school community every day structural, institutional, group and social violence is reproduced as a form of integration or disintegration of the students of secondary school in the society to which they belong.

² This does not mean that in private secondary schools there is no violence, but rather that it is not our field of study.

THE PROFILE OF STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THE FEDERAL DISTRICT

60% of secondary school students go to school in the morning and the rest in the afternoon or have a combined schedule, morning and afternoon; very few students attend school at night. (Tello, 2011a) A little over half are males between the ages of 11 and 17; 60% are 14 years old. 43% go to school by themselves and 50% are accompanied by an adult. 52% live in a nuclear family, 15% in an extended family; 20% live with their mother and her partner and siblings if there are any; 12% live with their father and his partner and siblings if there are any. 18% say that their parents hit them when they think it is necessary and 27% say that when they are scolded their parents get very angry.³

Students say that parents have the right to make the decision on how to correct them. Some say there are rules at home, but most of them are not enforced. In general parents, like professors, only enforce the rules when they get angry; otherwise "they're really cool," but 18% of them go from shouting to hitting. 60% of the mothers are housewives; 30% work outside the home and 10% are absent mothers who they only see on weekend or once in a while. 24% of the students think that the money the family has is absolutely or rather insufficient for covering their needs. 30% affirm that around their house there are young guys on the corners who don't do anything, delinquents and drug addicts; 60% say there is at least one of these. 24% have had experience with the police, (although the average age is 14); 33% have or have had some relative in prison, justifiably

or not. 40% think that it is very easy and 26% easy to get drugs. (Tello, 2011a)

This information reflects the environment of students in public secondary schools in the D.F., which are almost located in neighborhoods where drugs are sold (easy or very easy to get), where there are gangs and some students are even members of these gangs. Within their families beatings are common and there is no consistency in the application of rules. Furthermore, the kids say their parents have the right to hit them.

ACKNOWLEDGED, EXPRESSED AND NON-IDENTIFIED VIOLENCE

Violence in secondary schools is acknowledged by many of the students. This situation has changed greatly. Ten years ago, 68% of the students said that there was no violence in their school and they even affirmed that "my school is awesome." Now 19% say that there is always or almost always violence in their school; 53% say there is at times and 18% say there seldom or never is. (Tello, 2010) Then and now, when we break down the question related to violence and ask about the different actions that are presumed to exist in school, we find that many of them point it out. What happens is that they do not always recognize it since "habitual violence is produced without any purpose nor motive, like something natural." (Sofsky, 2006, p. 227) The students who worry us the most are those who say that there is no violence in their schools. Don't they see it? What's wrong with them? Are they in denial? Are they foreign to it? Don't they recognize it?

Only 27% of the students prefer to be at school; 33% in the street and 40% at home. This means that 63% of the students prefer to spend their time someplace oth-

³ All of the data on school violence used in this paper are the result of our own research carried out in public secondary schools in the D.F., located in different areas of the city.



er than at school. Why? Is this no longer an attractive place for adolescents? Is the school environment so affected by violence that the students prefer other spaces for coexisting? Could it be that relational, learning and creative stimuli are not attractive enough to counter balance the effect of violence? To the question, "have you ever thought of quitting school?" 6% of the students constantly say that they always think about it and 30% say they sometimes do. (Tello, 2011b)

The atmosphere in the classroom is one of almost continuous violence, interrupted only by brief periods of quiet and productivity when a good teacher is giving the class. The problem is due to group dynamics, the inequality and impunity which are generated there and which lead to violence in a greater or lesser degree, almost always self-regulated by the students themselves. The fact is that the less acknowledgment there is of socialized violence, the more violence the group will take. It is important to remember that the perpetrator is almost always a student who is well accepted by his classmates and the transgression is often relational in nature. That is why this is not only a problem of the students, but also of the person who works with them and leads the group.

Explicit violence has to do with power and its acknowledgment not only by students, but also by teachers. Students try to push the limits to see how far they can go; the one who dares to do this the most is the most popular. "What is important is the adrenaline," they affirm. The leader in the classroom has control over group behavior. This may become a problem for the school authorities or it may be covered up and accepted silently by them. "The teachers hate me. It's because they know that if I do something in the classroom, I can make there be no class," says Karla, and she adds "I'm

pretty, at times bad, disastrous, a hypocrite and I answer back." (Martinez, 2013) Karla has serious problems in her interpersonal relations; however, her case was brought to our attention at Social Work because of the number of classes she had failed. Violence is a behavior which is associated with success, "it has translated into an image of triumph, where defeating and winning is what is important." (Baro, 2003, p. 392)

In everyday life, the actors tend to operate based on a series of pragmatic suppositions which act as guiding elements for collective action. This does not necessarily imply that the actors accept them with no further ado. (Reguillo, 2000) In secondary schools, insults, nicknames, making fun, shouting, humiliation, threats and blackmail are part of the daily relation among students; anyone who "can't take it", "goes too far" or "allows it" will surely have problems because for the others this is the way they get along. We know that adolescents use cuss words in phrases, without any other subject. As for nicknames, they are usually seen by adults as aggression, but 53% of the students say that it is the way their classmates identify them and it does not necessarily bother them; they many even like it. (Tello, 2011b) In general professors do not intervene in these kinds of behavior; they consider them to be part of everyday life, as long as they do not disturb the established order "too much." At times, this form of relating gives them closeness, it makes them into groups with a sense of belonging, and from then on, the authority becomes the adversary who tries to breakup group unity.

Hitting is reprimanded and even punished, but it is usually just a kind of roughhousing among students; but it is important to distinguish these blows from those which take place in fights, almost always outside the schoolyard. Students know the

social functions of one type of hitting and the other, and adults should do the same. In roughhousing someone only gets hurt by accident. Outside of school, where real fights take place, real harm and even death may take place. There are also fist fights and hair pulling among girls. The mothers of the girls often intervene and go to the city authorities to report these kinds of problems. School authorities do not participate in these matters, they just close the door: the street is not their concern, and what happens there is not their responsibility. However, there is always the possibility of sanctioning what happened in the space which they at first considered outside their jurisdiction.

There is no accepting differences, even being older or younger than the average age of the group is considered to be a difference, being prettier or uglier, having a physical defect, having more or less resource than others, etc turns a student in a potential victim of aggression and violence. On a day to day basis, secondary school kids manipulate the dominating values of the society; they do not yet have a counterculture which allows them to free themselves from the establishment.

Explicit violence also appears when there are interests of couples, subgroups or

gangs present. With relation to girlfriends and boyfriends, friends with rights, free, the story is always the same, never varying but no less important. Adolescents fall in love, they like each other, are fond of each other, cheat on each other, are jealous of each other, hit each other, mistreat and abuse each others' feelings. It is hard for them to begin loving relations from the perspective of equality, above all when they are in an atmosphere of dominance and submission. They get great pleasure out of controlling the other person. Pleasure and lack of limits at times may become abuse. Thus, what started out fairly well often ends in gender violence. Adolescents have a hard time managing their insecurity, their fears and the presence of limits. They need guidance and confidence from their teachers, from whom they constantly receive only threats.

With respect to gangs, the risks are higher. Some students refuse to talk about the matter, others do not mind. It depends on the reasons for forming the gang. 25% acknowledge belonging to a gang. Some gangs are formed by pals in order to do graffiti or reggaeton, criminal activities associated with local vandalism and even associated with selling drugs, 13% say they spend their free time with their gang. (Tello, 2010)





Parents, beyond themselves.



"Social violence is part of National life," Tello.

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