

School violence in the classroom: reflections on its causes, consequences and social links

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Despite the importance of these samples, they are only the tip of the iceberg. The study and analysis of school violence, within the broadest scope of the concept, has focused on searching for the causes, determining the consequences and describing the process of violence itself.



SUMMARY

School violence is a global phenomenon which causes great social unrest. A broad theoretical debate has been going on for the last few decades along with extensive research in various fields: education, social work, social psychology and sociology, etc., which gives us reasons to believe that we are facing a multidimensional, transversal social problem, whose significance goes beyond its basic context: school and education.

This article makes a theoretical review of various contributions, mentioning its causes and consequences, stressing the ties estab-

lished between family and the socio-cultural environment. In this regard, it must not be forgotten that school violence falls within different levels; from school itself to society. This concern, obviously, increases the variety of approaches, results and ways of dealing with it.

School violence is a complex and dynamic social phenomenon, which is gradually changing and it does so at different rates depending on the society in which it is framed. But they all have in common the negative results of this process for individuals, education and society as a whole.

In this article we will essentially focus on peer violence. There are plenty of other types of school violence, although attacks among students are one of the most shocking for society. At the same time, this kind of violence is also one of the least visible, the most silenced and even the most accepted and justified.

ABSTRACT

School violence is a global phenomenon which causes great social unrest. A broad theoretical debate has been going on for the last few decades along with extensive research in various fields: education, social work, social psychology and sociology, etc., which gives us reasons to believe that we are facing a multidimensional, transversal social problem, whose significance goes beyond its basic context: school and education.

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Key words: School violence, Education, School, Peer relationships.



Mass media are constantly alerting us to episodes of violence in the classroom and school, taking on different forms. Some of these, those resulting in mortal victims, serious aggressions or suicides of the students who were the victims of school violence are the most extreme.¹ There are many studies throughout the world which refer to the distinct manifestations of school violence. To cite only a few: the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE) of the UNESCO, with a sample of 91,233 Elementary students in sixteen countries of Latin America, carried out between 2005 and 2009, which showed that 51.12% of those polled in the region had been the object of some type of peer violence in school in the previous months, without specifying the type of violence. Another study related to the matter among students of Obligatory Secondary Education (ESO) made by the Defensor del Pueblo de España (Spanish Defense of the People), published in 2007, showed that 3.9% of those polled had been victims of direct physical violence and 6.4% of threats and blackmail. Another 27.1% suffered verbal violence in the form of insults, offensive nicknames, etc. In 2012, a broad investigation by the Instituto Vasco de Evaluación e Investigación Educativa de la Comunidad Autónoma Vasca (Basque Institute on Educational Evaluation and Investigation of the Autonomous Basque Community) established that 21% of students in the third year of primary school and 14.6% of those in middle school in this community had suffered from some type of mistreatment by their peers within the school.

There are other kinds of violence which, while less frequent or novel, also cause social

1 In the case of Spain, a turning point in public opinion was the suicide of the student Jokin C.L., from Hondarribia (Guipúzcoa), on September 21, 2004 following relentless harassment from some classmates.

alarm, such as the humiliation or aggression of teachers, which, thanks to modern technology, is broadcast on social networks.

Despite the importance of these samples, they are only the tip of the iceberg. The study and analysis of school violence, within the broadest scope of the concept, has focused on searching for the causes, determining the consequences and describing the process of violence itself.

We must take into account that school violence cannot be observed without considering the broader environment of which it is a part: society itself, in which education is one of the main agents for socialization and a central institution in any community. This is where not only future professionals and workers are formed, but more specifically, the future citizens who will continue creating and reproducing said society, giving us one of the fundamental reasons for paying special attention to school violence. Fundamental to contributing to the eradication or decrease of this phenomenon is education on the values of peaceful coexistence, respect, etc., as well as on interpersonal relations based on dialogue and empathy.

However, this is not so easy. First of all, we cannot deny the existence of the conflict and potential elements which may cause it. Secondly, the interaction between school violence and other areas such as the socio-cultural environment, family, informal networks... is dynamic since there is continuous interconnection, in which the causes and consequences of school violence are transversal. And finally, and due in a large extent to the previous aspect, school violence is heterogeneous, despite the fact of its being a matter of global concern, as shown by the efforts being carried out by international organizations, non-governmental organizations and many

different institutions, especially in the field of education and childhood.

INTRODUCTION

UNICEF's World Report on Violence against Children of 2007 stated that "all boys and girls have the right to education in environments free of violence, and that one of the functions of education is to produce adults who have well versed values and practices of non-violence. (Pinheiro, 2011, 137) In a special report on the matter, the Defensor del Pueblo Vasco (Defense of the Basque People) pointed out that "the emotional wellbeing of the students and an education in values are essential for preparing young people to establish satisfactory interpersonal relations. In order to live together with others in a positive atmosphere, it is necessary to feel good about one's self." (2006, 40)

However, this is not always so: "today we know that coexistence in schools is affected by social problems ranging from conflicts which cannot be talked out to real interpersonal harassment and violence with the worst possible overtones." (Ortega, 2010, 16) The phenomenon of school violence is present in our classrooms and schools and over the last decades there has been growing interest in its causes. It has been incorporated into the agendas of the most urgent matters of various national and international organizations due to the important consequences it may have, not only in the educational sphere, but also as a two-way process of continuous interrelations between school and society.

We read an endless number of reports and studies on school violence. Numbers resulting from these studies as well as the methodologies used vary. Besides this, it is clear that the same evaluation of certain conducts does not exist in all societies and

that depending on the socio-cultural environment some situations are tolerated or even encouraged (physical punishment, discrimination against women or minors, etc), giving rise to a culture of violence.

It is no less true that various typologies of violence and conflict exist in educational institutions. There may be violent behavior of teachers towards students and of the latter towards the professors, etc. One of the most important phenomena is violence among peers, that is, among students, calling for serious thought on its causes.

Over the last few years violent situations of almost all sorts in schools have reached new dimensions due to the globalization of information and communication technologies and the misuse these are given: Internet, cellular telephones, social networks, etc., have been used as new means for carrying out harassment as well as for disseminating it. Thus in some aspects school violence has deepened, for example silence in the face of these practices, creating others such as the potential anonymity of the perpetrators.

The roots of school violence and its ties with the social environment also mark the analysis of the causes and effects. While we must not forget to take into account the nature of the educational institution itself, which may have elements which promote or even generate conflict, school violence may not start in the classrooms, but it is a fact that it does not end there for the victim nor for the perpetrator. School violence is one of the factors responsible for students dropping out and failing at school. (Álvarez-García et al., 2010; Prieto and Cerrillo, 2009)

Finally, school violence has an individual dimension, perpetrator-victim, but it also has a social dimension, which usually prevails over the former. School violence takes



on many shapes which may be in groups; other classmates cheer on the aggressions, insults, nicknames, etc., most of them being only silent witnesses, afraid they might become the next victim. Definitely, this problem must be approached from a group and social perspective, taking into account what is put into movement by school violence in this dimension. It is necessary to intercede in order to stop this serious phenomenon, prevent its appearance and educate people in the values of peaceful coexistence and respect, but always remembering that its causes may be outside the classroom.

THE CONCEPT OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

School violence is a very broad and complex term covering many aspects. In fact we cannot include in the same category an insult or other rather minor form of mistreatment and physical aggression with threats using guns. However, there is a tendency to use generic language to talk about mistreatment and violence and to call by the same name what in reality are different manifestations in the form and intensity of a single violent substratum which can be found in today's society. [Insituto Vasco de Investigación y Evaluación Educativa (Basque Institute of Educational Research and Evaluation), 2012, 6]

Its conceptualization has led to many theoretical contributions which have tried to agree on a definition, but to date there is still debate on this matter. There is a consensus which attributes the inflection point of research on school harassment or bullying to the Norwegian sociologist Dan Olweus. From the decade of the 70s to the present, in the theoretical as well as empirical field, his contributions have been taken into account throughout the world. Nevertheless, this aspect of school violence and violence among peers is analyzed much more in the

Western World. It is important to remember, however, the indicators reflected in various programs and reports of UNICEF, UNESCO, etc. In other spheres, school violence also has other sources. For example in many countries physical punishment is allowed in schools and there are places where there is discrimination against women or minorities, etc. These attitudes are greatest in societies in which violence is institutionalized and is a part of daily life:

When boys and girls who grow up within a violent culture (especially in the poorest areas) start school, they bring with them schoolbags filled with insults, threats, aggression, thievery and intimidations and they are so heavy that if they are not offered non-violent alternative for solving their problems, it is inevitable that many of these children will turn into simple reproducers of what they see, feel and suffer. (Del Rey et al, 2010, 260)

Olweus defines school harassment (bullying) in the following way: a student is harassed or victimized when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students." (2004, 2) Most definitions of violence among students at school are along this same line, complemented by specifying the environment in which it takes place. "Bullying is defined as aggressive intentional conduct sustained over time, perpetrated by an individual or group of individuals against another, whom they consider their habitual victim." (Cerezo-Ramírez, 2012, 24)

The visibility of bullying and school harassment among peers, which is often used as a synonym for school violence (erroneously since the latter takes on many forms), does not mean it is a new phenomenon. Quite the contrary, it has always existed. Some of its most relevant features make reference to its invisibility which continues

to exist today and which unfortunately will continue to exist in the future if legal and educational mechanisms to put an end to it are not set. "Silence is a common, natural category not only for the victim of mistreatment, but also for those who witness these terrible conflicts and many times for the educational institution which is not aware of the magnitude of the problem." (Prieto and Carrillo, 2009, 2) Ignorance of the problem and no denunciation are inherent to bullying and school harassment among peers. There are two mechanisms which are to blame for this: fear and tolerance, the acceptance and institutionalization of this behavior. Often these situations are considered "natural" among children and young people and are even thought to be part of "learning for life," etc.

There is a second point which also makes us take into consideration the various forms school violence among peers may assume. There are cases which are taken up by the mass media due to their dramatic consequences: murder, suicide,² etc. However school violence takes on many different forms, from insults to indirect aggression (for example meddling to some degree with a victim's possessions) which can be considered more or less serious.

Physical aggression, insults and humiliating nicknames, exclusion from the group, damaging someone's possessions, etc., are just some of the forms of school violence among peers. Not infrequently the impact of these demonstrations of violence on the victims has not been taken into account, although this has begun to

2 There are cases in which there is controversy as to the causes of suicide and whether this was due to school violence. The testimony of the victims (for example through diaries or suicide notes), of classmates, parents and relatives, and reports on the psychological state of the person who has suffered from harassment are used as arguments in establishing the cause-effect relationship.

change in recent times. Thus, psychological mistreatment has been gaining ground as one of the most important dimensions of school harassment, especially when it can be correlated to serious results for the victim, the most extreme being suicide, but which also is manifested at other levels such as depression, isolation and dropping out of school... and these may even reinforce the process of victimization.

Any school harassment gives the victim the idea that school is a hostile place and this may lead them to not want to attend school as a result of the real risk of being assaulted, humiliated, insulted, set apart. They are invisible victims who are stigmatized and do not find all the support they may need in the educational community, in their classmates and even in their closest circle, although this aspect has improved markedly due to the reporting of the mass media.

School violence is dynamic, ever-changing, and even incorporates new tools and devices. One of the most notable innovations in recent times has been the arrival on the scene of Information and Communication Technology bringing with it the violent use of Internet, cellular telephones, social networks, etc., giving rise to a new form of school harassment, cyberbullying. For the majority of theoreticians of school violence we do not consider this to be a derivative of bullying, but rather a new form of school harassment.

Cyberbullying certainly does have some novel features related to this new technology. Thus, the situations of harassment faced by the victims are amplified with the use of these media. Retaining the anonymity of the stalker becomes easier as he or she can hide behind pseudonyms, aliases and false identities and attack the victim on social networks, chats or via e-mail, etc.



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The discreetness of school violence.

Secondly, displaying harassment takes on a new and greater dimension since it may be viewed by many more people, and not limited to the schoolyard or the classroom. "There is no specific place where aggressions are carried out, and therefore, no place is safe for the victim." (Cerezo-Ramírez, 2012, 26) The victim feels more vulnerable and unsafe, and his stigma will increase, with the determining factor that, in many cases, he will not even know who his aggressor is, which makes it impossible to bring action against him or her. Not only does the group of spectators increase, but also the number of potential aggressors. Some studies on cyberbullying (Smith et al., 2008) have found that the young people who use it see it as something fun and attractive, taking cover behind their anonymity.

Bullying as well as cyberbullying are problems of school violence which affect

the school environment and conviviality in the classroom. Its reiteration is not a single event, and within their intentionality the aggressors know what they are producing, turning into the determining aspect of the whole process. Furthermore, in most cases, there has been no provocation by the victim.

Some situations of school violence and harassment remain invisible although this situation has become less and less common in recent years due to control mechanisms put in place in some Western countries, but the problem remains unbeknownst to many families and even to some teachers. In fact, some studies show that professors have no idea of the total number of aggressors nor especially the number of victims. (Benítez et al, 2005, 80)

Internal factors of the educational institution itself must be taken into account when analyzing school violence in general.

While there is a close interrelation between the school and family environment, some authors, such as Ross and Watkinson, point out that the educational model may also be the generator of school violence, incorporating such terms as "systemic violence." Schools are institutions with very marked rules and authoritarian roles. Participation within a school by different agents is not equalitarian. This is a factor which should also be taken into account, since it may in part favor processes of school violence, especially if those in authoritarian roles act out modes or behavior patterns which may reproduce said violence.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Analysis of the causes and consequences of school violence among peers has established a series of profiles, even stereotypes, of harassers and victims. While the former appear to be strong, aggressive, dominating and impulsive, the latter are solitary, depressed, shy and unsure of themselves. Other factors must be taken into account such as individual factors (including the fact that the aggressor gains satisfaction from his actions), the social environment and factors related to the school community.

In regards to the causes, it seems to have been proved that one of the main causes is related to dominance relationships. Thus, the use of violence and school harassment would serve to affix this conduct, although the dimension of violence goes further "because the authors and witnesses of violence, boys and girls, learn that violence is an acceptable means for the strong and aggressive to get what they want from the weak, passive or peaceful." (Pineiro, 2011, 111)

It also appears evident that harassment happens fundamentally to those in-

dividuals who are different from the rest. "Any element which means being different from the rest either physically or psychologically will be used to justify choosing a victim." (Del Moral et al, 2012, 116) This is very relative because the one who determines what is different is usually the aggressor. The value of difference, to a great extent, is a social construction.

One of the spheres in which school harassment is most common is in the sphere of sexual identity. Campaigns and operations are carried out in order to prevent discrimination. This situation is even more complex in non-Western societies.

The harassment of the girl or boy who is different may reproduce stigmatization and isolation of the victim. This becomes a vicious circle from which it is very difficult for the victim to escape. For example the lone introvert will never be accepted by the group and this will turn his or her situation chronic, even to the point of being discriminated against by the class as a whole. What can be observed in the aggressors and passive witnesses is a complete lack of empathy for the victim.

The roles of authority within the school also play a part in the causes since "the teacher is a role model for the child, and it is in his or her hands to either put up with these kinds of expressions (insults, nicknames, threats...) or not in his or her class or center." (Álvarez-García et al, 2010, 149) If the teacher not only does not prevent these situations but even encourages, promotes or carries them out, the rest of the group will see this as legitimization for reproducing them.

With respect to the consequences, these may be dramatic as well as numerous at all levels. "Regardless of the abuses the victims suffer, the effects, short range as well as long range, may be uncontrollable



and of varying degrees: depression, anxiety, insomnia, inability to concentrate, lack of self-esteem, absenteeism from school, poor school performance, suicidal thoughts, suicide, etc." (Benítez et al, 2005, 72)

School harassment may also affect the health, social aspects and school performance within the school, where the most relevant effect is that violence breeds violence. These role models, if successful, will be imitated within and outside the classroom, taking into account that some of these models come from outside the school. In the same way, the victim may reproduce stigmatization and pathologies derived from the processes of harassment and violence within the school, outside of this sphere, giving rise to people with difficulties in facing up to life circumstances and recognizing himself, at an individual as well as group level.

Consequences within the educational centers and environments are also very negative. In the first place because the school is considered a failure for not being able to create the proper safe environment for its students. Secondly because the situation entails a conflict which cannot be solved non-violently. Thirdly because the risk of failure and dropping out of school increases for victims as well as harassers and classmates since the atmosphere at school will turn negative and the learning processes more complicated, without forgetting everyday coexistence, which is influenced by situations of school harassment and may also affect the other members of the school community.

Finally, school harassment and violence affect society as a whole, keeping in mind that this is a two-way phenomenon, from school to society and vice versa, with all agents being involved, which brings about situations which cannot be confined exclusively to the educational environment.

Therefore, school violence will cause some of the students to not be taught principles of coexistence and respect and how to resolve conflicts non-violently. Unfortunately, these social models reproduce negative social feedback.

THE SOCIAL TIES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

When we talk about the social ties of school violence we fundamentally center on two aspects: its relationship with the social and family environment, and taking into account a social dimension of school violence, especially when it is produced in a group. For example, if one of the mechanisms of school harassment is to socially exclude, this is an intentional action to draw the victim away from the group. In our opinion it is not so much that this phenomenon was unknown before, but rather that it was accepted and even sometimes "institutionalized." It was considered to be a normal part of conviviality, of social relationships, of the process of growing up, etc., that is to say that it was "kid's stuff," even being thought of as "rites of passage" necessary for growing up and maturing.

This point of view has had very negative effects, and is still run into when facing school violence, especially in the matter of relationships among peers. Along with this we have the social and cultural presence of violence in society. Solving conflicts using violent methods, which are humiliating to others, is the opposite of learning values and the proper way to relate and interact with others based on respectful coexistence, through confidence and dialogue. However, in many societies violent practices are still institutionalized for solving conflicts and most societies tolerate "low level violence," which is the way the phenomena of school violence and harassment is described many times.

Fortunately, in some societies changes have been made in values, and the measures necessary for confronting the phenomenon have been taken, promoting and facilitating conviviality, dialogue, etc. These measures can be seen in legislative frameworks and have also been taken up in various international declarations. The need to create positive environments in schools has been taken up, since this would contribute to the students' remaining in school, and it would especially prevent the reproduction of models which favor violence and school harassment.

The social sphere may also either favor or put an end to the predisposition, depending on how it faces up to solving these crucial problems. In this regard the model of the family of the aggressor as well as the victim is especially important. Numerous studies, beginning with those carried out by Olweus himself and followed by those of Ostrov and Bishop among others, have shown the relationship between these two aspects. It is common that the aggressors come from hostile environments.

Ultimately the family is the main socialization agent for a child, the place in which he has contact with his first role models. The fact that the aggressor comes from a family characterized by negative relationships which have repercussions on the process of communication, will contribute to the development of violent conduct at school. (Varela et al, 2013) Thus, the role models, the types of interpersonal relationships and the way conflicts are solved which the student sees in his or her family will most probably become his own, and he will reproduce them in other spheres and other relationships.

An important part of aggression also has a group element; aggressors and victims are part of different groups, at school

(inside and outside the classroom), as well as in the environment, because these processes are often carried beyond the bounds of the school. It is common for these processes to continue on the way to and from school, as well as at other times in the daily life of the students, for example during free time, at places of recreation, etc., where aggressors and victims may share the same space and time.

The victim often fulfills the profile of "different" as well as "weak". Victims tend to be "strange", "loners", etc., and since they are alone more, they have less social support. This aspect is reproduced with stigmatization caused by school harassment: the victims are seen as such, others are not going to help or support them, or only a few may.

The harasser plays the role of the authority figure, of dominance, within the group and he is able to do this thanks to a large extent to the use of violence, illegitimately. However, he would not be able to hold on to this position if it were not for the support of the majority, or at least the silence of the rest of the group, based on fear of becoming the next victim and being stigmatized. Here we see the process reproduced and acquiring a social dimension.

It is also necessary to examine the sphere where school harassment occurs. Many times these are public spaces. "The fun, curiosity or emotion of seeing two classmates fighting mobilizes the majority of boys and girls to the scene where the violence is taking place, especially when these are open spaces: the school yard or the entrance to the school." (Del Moral et al, 2012, 122) In this way the dominant position of the aggressor and the victim as the dominated one is reinforced, leaving still fewer options for the group, or at least part of it, to come to the defense of the victim.



CONCLUSIONS

This analysis may seem to paint a very pessimistic picture of the situation of school violence, and more precisely violence among students, however, it is no less true that over the past decades great breakthroughs have been made, managing to achieve the visibilization of the problem, a new profile of the victim far from the "determinist" concept, and the agents involved accepting their responsibility.

However, we have not reached the end of the road. To the contrary, in many societies violence is an everyday occurrence which is institutionalized and is reflected in the educational sphere. In others, it is also legitimated in school in its many forms. Finally, cyberbullying shows us that in the spheres where great achievements had been made, inappropriate use is made of Communication and Information Technologies and others by the aggressors, thus reproducing school violence and harassment.

One of the keys to intervening in school violence is to prevent stigmatization of the victim. Societies and groups are varied and diverse and we must start from the point of

respect and consideration for anyone who has suffered from this problem. It is equally important to prevent school violence from having the "tribal" applause or acquiescence, something that is essential in the students' feeling empathy which would generate the illegitimacy of violence.

The aggressor is also a victim and this is something which should not be forgotten when intervening in this phenomenon. The aggressors are usually children or young people who have received models of negative conduct because they had nowhere else to turn. Their future in the educational institution is closer to dropping out or failing than to success.

Finally, school and education along with the family are the most important spheres for transmitting values of conduct and respect. If in a society there are negative models, what better place than the school to begin to make changes? Therefore, education and school must be a referent in this regard since they have many means to work with, while it should be remembered that there are other rival agents of socialization.

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