School violence
A blurry emerging problem in the public policy of the federal district

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The family, school, community and symbolic centers of reference no longer assure habits and models of social conduct which were once acceptable.

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses how school violence has positioned itself as an emerging social problem. Based on this, the expression of this violence will be reflected as an extreme and reiterated phenomenon, showing the ways in which we have come to know it better. We will identify the subjects which are part of a triad which allows for harassment and bullying in schools. We will also expound on the part the school plays as a space which is favorable for situations of school harassment both inside the school and in the surrounding area. Later we refer to a new form of harassment which goes beyond

physical interaction and transcends the sphere of digital means and social networks, that is cyberbullying.

Once the general comments on this emerging problem are presented, a brief look will be taken at the incipient social and institutional answers to bullying, specifically in Mexico City. In contrast, reference will be made to experiences which have been effective and therefore encouraging in other parts of the world and which may serve as references for the development of new strategies in Mexico and the Federal District. Finally, in concluding, we present some general guidelines which allow social work to build strategies for intervention from the social field in the face of this calamity which is being established as an expression of the violence which affects coexistence in everyday life in our contemporary society

Keywords: Federal District, intervention, public safety, *bullying*, *cyberbullying*.

Introduction

Nowadays contemporary societies confront a multiplicity of multidimensional complex problems. What in days gone by was unimaginable today is reality, or maybe it was always there and it emerges now with renewed impact on the lives of its subjects. This is the case of school violence. An emerging problem which, while it may be true throughout history was latent but known, comes afloat like an iceberg whose real dimensions are unknown to us.

School violence transcends the classroom, the school walls and is now reflected in its environs, in the communities, families and city. Now school violence and its most extreme expressions such as harassment and bullying seem to be problems which are felt, perceived and beginning to be acknowledged, but not necessarily understood or taken care of integrally. This is a matter which not only involves students, but also their families, teachers, school authorities, communities and the government. Attention to the problem fades if these actors are disjointed and even worse, if their coexistence is fragmented and wracked by relations of suspicion. All of this worsens if school violence and harassment are out of focus within the agenda and public policies of a megalopolis like Mexico City where the largest number of schools in the country are located.[1]

It is no accident that bullying is becoming, more than a problem confronted by the government's policies and programs, a fashionable

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1 Mexico City has the largest number of public and private schools of any city in the country, which does not mean that it is the federative entity with the largest concentration of schools at the national level.

School violence reaches beyond the classroom, cyber-bullying.

subject from which public authorities and legislatures cannot detach themselves, to such a degree that it has given impetus to laws which tend to regulate any school conduct that puts peaceful coexistence in schools in danger, bordering on actions of criminalization and stigmatism. The paradox is however that Mexico City now has over regulation of behaviors which put social coexistence in danger.[2] However the subjects who should obey these regulations do not vest them any value in their daily lives, do not obey them and have learned that absolutely nothing happens as a result. Impunity has been established as a perverse incentive to "coexist" with others, through relations of dominion-submission, which, we cannot restrain very easily in the schools now.

School violence as an emerging problem

In order to better understand the emerging phenomenon of school violence, it is necessary to contextualize it. Various studies on the violent behavior of children and adolescents were carried out in the past century, understanding it to be antisocial behavior.

But towards the end of the 70s the matter of school violence and harassment was looked at closer, especially in Norway and Sweden. This is when the term "bullying" was coined to identify intentional, repeated, threatening and aggressive behavior in the school environ. During the 80s and 90s these kinds of

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2 Laws of civic culture, prevention of family and gender violence, laws to prevent and eradicate discrimination, care for the environment, to sanction the incorrect handling of solid waste, to protect animals, among others, whose basis is to regulate democratic and peaceful coexistence in the city.

studies were extended to Europe and North America and more recently to Latin America. (Fante, 2012) Unfortunately, in many cases research has begun as a consequence of acts of extreme violence, such as fatal aggressions, suicides and homicides within the school context which have caught the eye of public opinion. Studies have been carried out from various perspectives; most notable are those which focus on interpersonal relations determined by the immediate context in schools of victims, aggressors and spectators. (Traines, 2000; Latorre and Muñoz, 2001; Calvo and Ballester, 2007; Fante, 2012) There are other studies which have broadened the perspective to include other factors in the school itself, such as the micro and macro social context, going beyond the dichotomy between the generator and receiver of violence in the school environ. (Kaplan, 2009; Ortega, 2010)

While school violence is found in the rural as well as urban environment, it is in the cities that its expression has been the strongest. This is due to the social homogeneity of the space, reinforced and accentuated by spatial segregation reduces the capacity of inhabitants of cities to tolerate differences and multiplies the cases of mixophobic reactions which makes urban life seem more "inclined to risk" and thus, more distressing, instead of safer, calmer and pleasant. (Bauman, 2007) There is no doubt whatsoever that school aged children and adolescents cannot detach themselves from this reality, in which their daily lives, their families and local environs are enshrouded. The gigantic changes of the past century made what were in the past considered solid structures, institutions and social forms step aside for a liquid modernity as Bauman calls it. The family, school, community and symbolic centers of reference no longer guarantee habits and models of social behavior which were once acceptable. School and family were considered protecting factors which eased the development of children and young people for their future development as part of society. These liquid times prove that we live in a time of incertitude, fear and distrust. This is lived out, shown, exemplified in the family and community context, and thus extending into the school sphere. The blurring of the sense of the rules as a way of guaranteeing peaceful coexistence with one another is a guideline which is also learned. If illegality and impunity are established as the way of life in the city, children and young people assume that any act which threatens coexistence will not have any immediate repercussion that may limit his or her conduct with his or her peers. To this is added the informative overexposure and access to technological media that permit broadcasting data on the lives of others.

It is within this social context in which relations of control–submission among peers or equals in the heart of the school take place, typified as acts of daily violence and harassment characterized by the following elements: a) persistent and continuousness of aggressions against the same victim; b) the absence of justifications for these attacks; c) the intention of the perpetrator to cause the victim harm; d) disequilibrium of power between the parties; and e) wounds, physical and psychological, caused to the victims. (Fante, 2012; Calvo and Ballester, 2007) When these conditions are met in exercising reiterated violence which borders on abuse and harassment, we are looking at what we call bullying.

It is important to differentiate bullying from other isolated or spontaneous expressions of violence or aggression which may take place within or outside the school, in which students become involved due to dif-

Can bullying be considered a social epidemic?

ferences or conflicts derived from dynamics of the group which they belong to. There are authors who even show that it is positive for the development of an individual to confront or overcome a conflict derived for differences and disagreements in ways of thinking and acting in the very heart of the group of students. However, when talking about school harassment or bullying, we are facing a problem which affects the victim in all areas of his or her life and in consequence in his integral development. Aggression may be verbal, physical, moral, psychological, sexual, material, social and virtual. (Trianes, 2000, La Torre and Muñoz, 2001; Fante, 2012) Expressions of school harassment or bullying have become infinite and limited only by the creativity of the aggressors. Suffice it to mention some examples: intimidating, threatening, making fun of others, causing material damage, hiding objects, hitting, hurting, making unpleasant jokes, insulting, unnerving, ridiculing, slandering, making racist, sexist or discriminatory comments, spreading rumors, virtually manipulating an image, information or privacy of the other, among many other acts.

For an act of harassment with the characteristics described to be made, the subjects who are party to these actions must be considered. On one hand we have the aggressor, harasser of dominant subject and on the other, the victim receptor of the reiterated acts of school violence. Some authors mention that a third actor is inherent to bullying, the spectators or observers, who act as silent accomplices in the reproduction of this expression of school violence. It is important to point out that these acts of harassment as extreme expressions of school violence are not necessarily present in a relation of an individual aggressor and an individual victim, but may take on more complex forms of aggression:

Individual aggressor- Individual victim
Group aggressor-Individual victim
Individual aggressor-Group victim
Group aggressor-Group victim

Similarly, many studies talk about these acts of control-submission having different expressions for males and females. The former predominantly tend to physical aggres-

sion, while the latter to subtle and psychological violence. However, females are more vulnerable to being the target of sexual and gender violence by their male peers.

These acts of violence invariably take place in a space they hold in common: school, understood as the school and its surroundings. Most acts of bullying tend to take place in the classroom and the playground or school yard, in the presence of teachers school workers and authorities or not. Here there is added a perverse situation with other forms of institutional dominance by the school, since when these latter authorities do decide to intervene, they do so with the power, although debilitated, that they still hold, using such mechanisms as coercion, segregation and exclusion. This results in the double victimization in the case of the student who has been attacked and/or victimization or empowerment of the aggressor more than recovering the balance of power lost and taking advantage of a negative situation as an opportunity of redefinition and reconstruction of peaceful coexistence in the school sphere. The role of the school as socializer has been undermined by the predominance of the individual over the institution, as well as by distorted perceptions in acknowledging the rights and responsibilities of the subjects who attend the school. Social participation in the school sphere is now interpreted as interference in its educational role, more than in the involvement of parents and community in bettering the school conditions of the students. On top of this, teachers, technical teams and school authorities have limited training in identifying and solving risk situations and school violence, and this leads to underestimating or overestimating the cases seen in the school community, with the corresponding imprudent intervention.

Outside the physical space of the school, harassment or bullying is now transcending a less controllable and more viral space, which exponentially increasing aggression using technological media such as the Internet and social networks. Thus, from apparent anonymity it is easier to show, slander, begin rumors which are immediately disseminated and of which the aggressor and the victim both lose control automatically. A post, an image, a video may cause more damage than a physical act inside the school. This derivation of violence is called cyberbullying. Its perverse effects hurt the dignity, self esteem, but above all the right to individuality and privacy of the students.

Something similar takes place with school violence as with other expressions of violence, such as family or gender violence whose presence is not new. To the contrary it may be found embedded in guidelines for behavior which are carried down from one generation to the next. The difference lies in that it has become socially recognized that family and gender violence is not natural and thus, it may be prevented and even eradicated. This has come about thanks to the fight and effect of civic society which has placed the matter on the public agenda and which has been conveyed in new regulatory frameworks, public policies, programs, protocols, institutions and public services. However, this is not unique to the Mexican case, but also depends on exogenous factors, such as the international agreement which Mexico has signed and is obligated to. But they went through a similar process: the urgent need to acknowledge the problem and understand it in order to attend to it integrally.

Unfortunately in the case of school violence we have a long way to go, given that even in the case of Mexico City there has been minimum progress made in un-

derstanding the phenomenon, which would allow it to be prioritized on the public agenda, turning it into the subject of local public policy and social co-responsibility. To talk about bullying is more a fashionable matter than objective sensitivity and worry over an emerging social problem.

For example, the Program of Human Rights of the Federal District is the only programmatic instrument as a law which establishes that all powers and public entities, civic society and the academic world join forces to move forward in the full exercising of the rights and freedom of the inhabitants and citizens of the capital, acknowledged in its diagnosis, lines and strategies the urgent need to move forward in eradicating gender violence, discrimination and inequality. However, it is not clear in its acknowledgement of school violence as a priority. Line 1598 of the program establishes that programs should be designed, implemented and evaluated from the point of view of human rights, which prevent and attend to the levels and types of violence carried out against children in the family, school, community, workplace, cyberspace and public areas. Line 1602 indicates the need to design, implement and evaluate campaigns to raise public interest or information for the prevention of mistreatment and violence in general, and specifically of sexual violence, against children, among students, parents, professors and heads of middle schools and high school in the Federal District.

Despite the fact that both lines have the obligation of the law for entities of the Government of the Federal District, there has not been much progress. Only a few months ago the Ministry of Education of the Federal District started a program "Por una cultura no violent y buen trato en la comunidad educativa" (In favor of a non-violent culture and good treatment in the educa-

tive community) which follows the model of intervention against mistreatment and intimidation among school children called: Escuelas Aprendiendo a Convivir (Schools, Learning to Coexist). This model aspires to have a bearing on the improvement of the quality of education and a decrease in the high levels of school desertion, addictions, manifestations of depression and attempts of suicide, through new ways of coexistence and good treatment in the school environment. To this effect, what this program proposes it to make the school a protective environment, offering social, emotional and cognitive experiences. The way to do this is by educating for peace, fostering peaceful coexistence within the school and promoting the rights of children and young people. The design of this model includes carrying out workshops, conferences, debates on movies, seminars, teacher training and a call center, among other actions. In addition, the campaign "Escuelas sin violence" (Schools without Violence) was begun to raise awareness and prevent bullying using spaces in the mass media. The first step forward was attention to 900 public and private schools, that is, less than one fifth of all those located in Mexico City.[3] 103,600 students, 5,920 professors, 29,600 parents, 980 government workers and 900 citizens were served. The call center took 6,320 calls, of which 69% were made by a mother, 17% by a professor and only 4% directly by students. (Ministry of Education of the Federal District, 2011) While the effort is significant, it is limited if one considers that in the year 2010 when the program began 147,281 students finished primary school

3 According to information of the Sistema Nacional de Información de Escuelas de la SEP (National System of Information on School of the Ministry of Public Education), in Mexico City there are 3286 primary schools and 1411 secondary schools, which add up to 4697 public and private schools.

The extremes of school violence in the United States, Columbine.

and 132,658 secondary school. Moreover only about 10% of primary and secondary school teachers were trained.[4] These are the actions of public policy of the Government of the Federal District which are directly related to the problem of school violence and harassment, whose target population in a first instance is the students and in a second the parents, professors and community in general. However these are not the only attempts being made. There are some others:

Talks and socio drams to raise awareness and prevention in the Unit of School Safety of the Ministry of Public Education of the Federal District (SSP-DF), consisting of police trained in the prevention and intervention with children and youth in danger.

Protescolar Mechanism of the SSP-DF consisting of sending police to schools at the beginning and end of the school day to carry out traffic control and surveillance in order to discourage fights, acts of vandalism, the sale of drugs and violence in the area around the schools.

The Program of Social Co-investment of the Ministry of Social Development of the Federal District which gives money to Organizations of Civic Societies (OSC) for developing social initiatives of awareness, organization, training and formation. Some OSCs

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4 According to data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (National Institute of Statistics and Geography), in 2010 there were 69,113 teachers at primary and secondary level in public and private schools in the Federal District.

have presented projects for contributing to the awareness and prevention of bullying.

The creation of a network for boys and girls in the Federal District in favor of equality and against mistreatment, such as spaces for expression and participation of children, on the problems they see, suffer from and need attention with. An interesting initiative, but vague at the government level.

The National Women's Institute is working on the programmatic harmonization, budget and legislation in matters of gender equality and equity, as well as on the eradication of violence towards girls, women, young women and elderly women. It also offers services of orientation and psychological and legal assistance and talks and workshops on awareness of the forms and types of violence.

Locatel a specialized psychological hotline which offers attention on various problems, among theses child violence and mistreatment, and it is also part of the network of reference and contra-reference of the Federal District, so that if there is an application which requires special attention, it may be channeled directly.

The DIF (System for the Integral Development of the Family), DF operates the Programa Niñ@s Talento (Program for Talented Boys and Girls) whose purpose is for outstanding boys and girls between 6 and 15 years of age who study in public schools in the Federal District to have access to integral formation, through the development and perfection of artistic, cultural, intellectual and sports abilities. They are also given economic incentives. This sector of the population is relevant since children who excel in the classroom are often victims of school harassment.

Delegaciones Políticas u Órganos Político Administrativos (Political Boroughs of the City or Political Administrative Or-gans). This being the authority closest to the citizens, they try through their areas of social development, culture and prevention of crime, to offer advisory services and preventive talks on various forms of violence and promote safe coexistence, focused on the captive audiences in the schools.

In turn all of the previous institutions participate in the Programa de Prevención de la Violencia y las Adicciones (Program for the Prevention of Violence and Addictions) (PREVIA) in 66 priority neighborhoods in Mexico City, in which they aspire to carry out the territorial concurrence of their services and programs.

As can be seen, there are various governmental actions aimed at raising awareness, preventing and attending to diverse forms of violence, as well as to preventing other behavior which may affect democratic coexistence. Many of these are put forward in laws, but their implementation is limited and short term. If only the examples mentioned were organized territorially and operationally in a strategic manner for the prevention of violence and their contents interconnected, in order to better understand and attend the way in which they interact and are expressed in various walks of daily life, the results would certainly be diametrically different.[5]

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5 We must not fail to mention that for the purpose of this article, we have only focused on the actions which are identifiable in the public policy of the Government of the Federal District, arbitrarily excluding the Federal Ministry of Public Education and other government agencies for two reasons: 1) in order to not mix different levels of government which are not comparable due to their dissimilar nature, structure and resources; and 2) because education decentralization has not yet come into being in the Federal District, due to which the educational role is found for now in the Federal Administration of Educational Services of the Federal District and this agency has its own policies and programs for the prevention of and attention to school harassment, apart from the relation with the Union of Workers at the Service of Education. Any model of intervention which one would like to experiment with, having it play an important role for teachers and school authorities, is out of the hands and outside the resources of the city government.

In this respect, successful programs and bills related to the prevention of and attention to school violence and harassment in other countries have been characterized by looking at the problem from a different standpoint. An example of this is the program, "Educar para la paz" (Educating for Peace) in Sao Paulo, Brazil, aimed at preventing and intervening in situations of bullying through the preparation of students to resist school harassment. Inspired in a program of Olweus, a pioneer in the field, it takes into account the stages of diagnosis; making the whole school community aware of the problem, continuous teacher training; intervention, prevention, evaluation and sustainability. (Fante, 2012)

The model, "Construir la convivencia" (Building Coexistence) is aimed at preventing violence with an ecological, systemic and communitarian focus, taking into consideration the characteristics of the context and building strategies in function of the prevention of violence and the needs which have been detected. It consists of six stages: a) analysis of the context and prior evaluation of the needs; b) understanding the situation and prioritizing intervention; c) planning and designing the actions which are to be developed (plans for coexistence); d) developing activities and following through on them; e) establishing the procedures for evaluating the model, both critically and thoughtfully; f) drawing up a report and publishing experiences. (Ortega, Del Rey and Córdova in Ortega, 2010)

The key to these strategies of intervention for the prevention of and attention to school violence and harassment, is to not lose sight of three inseparable elements: a) the subjects (real and potential aggressors and victims, as well as spectators); b) the problem or imminent risk of school violence, harassment and bullying; and c) the

school and community context in which the problem develops.

The process for intervention will invariably stem from four moments: 1) initial information of the problem of school violence; 2) designing and planning the strategy for intervention based on already existing theoretical frameworks, as well as the methods, techniques, tools and instruments which will allow us to affect the reality, taking advantage of the breaking point that the strategy offers us or that we have to provide; 3) methodically and thoughtfully carrying out the methodological puzzle, using for this processes and tools of planning, management and following up the actions carried out; 4) evaluating the changes obtained, the undesired effects, the situations in which very little or no impact was obtained. This will all help us to reassess, reconstruct, redirect and recover the experiences and systematize the knowledge obtained in the intervention itself, which will help us in new interventions on similar situations of bullying, taking into account once again the subjects and their particular contexts.

Bullying is an emerging problem of which we are only seeing part of its expression as a social problem. We have benchmarks of its characteristics, its manifestations and incipiently of the objective and subjective consequences it has on the lives of the aggressors, victims and spectators and on the school community on the whole. We have a long way to go from the perspective of social work, but there are conditions of opportunity and relevance which will have a bearing on this phenomenon.

I will finish with the words of Bauman. Since strangers are bound to carry on their lives in each other's company for a long time to come, whatever the future twists and turns of urban history, the art of living peacefully and happily with difference and

As can be seen, there are various government actions aimed at raising public awareness, preventing and taking care of different kinds of violence, as well as preventing other behavior which affects democratic coexistence.

benefiting from the variety of stimuli and opportunities acquires paramount importance among the skills a city resident needs to (and would be better to) learn and deploy.

Rethinking coexistence, reconstructing the social sphere is a challenge, an ethical duty, our nature as social workers. To do so from the context of the school is the perfect setting since that is where those who will create the relationships of safe, democratic and peaceful dominance or coexistence in the near future will be forged, something we will be a part of.

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The right of protection against violence is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child