

Professional Experience

Weaving Relationships in Secondary Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Every day we are faced with the challenge of intervening in a complex changing reality, and while at times we reduce this to specific problems, it is undeniable that one problematic situation leads us to intervening in a unit which includes interrelated subjects, contexts and problems. From our experience in Estudios de Opinión y Participación Social A.C. (Opinion Studies and Social Participation) EOPSAC we have been witnesses to this fact. Work which had begun with citizen safety in a community had led us to work on the culture of legality with young people in schools, and the route of our work has taken us to center our intervention now on school violence.





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OUR PROPOSAL

We have worked for Opinion Studies and Social Participation for the past five years. This has allowed us to carry out various projects with joint investment from the federal government. These strategies form part of the strategies of intervention in school communities which are working at unraveling processes of citizen construction in order to recover and include adolescents who live generic violence, structural, social and personal, when they are studying at secondary school.

These strategies are based on Nelia Tello's model in which we integrate various interwoven actions which are undertaken jointly. All of these start from the premise and the relationships of secondary students with respect to the violence which they reproduce in their daily lives, having as our objective to reconceptualize and resignify school, family and community relations of the students in relation to violence in order for them to recreate safer spaces in society.

We work on school violence with three actors: students, parents and school authorities. Together with them we deal with violence from its common expressions to violent individual acts, which calls for individual and collective analysis, discussion, reflection and construction. The work is carried out in workshops where, using experiential techniques, the actors see and reflect on the reproduction

of daily violence which leads them to resignify their social relationships.

The intervention is divided into two levels, the first is attention to violence in the school environment; the second is individual attention by way of case studies for those who are found to be victims or victimizers of violence.

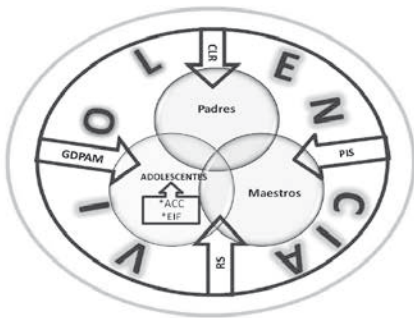
We also set up work groups with parents and school authorities who we hope will become key elements in the problem, participating in the reality of the schools and who will form follow-up and support committees for the strategy of intervention. Social networks (Facebook pages) are created jointly with the idea of forming alternate spaces based on non-violent coexistence, thus reconceptualizing the idea of the networks as a means for preventing sexting, harassment and violence.

Finally we make ludic-recreational spaces available where the students are offered activities in which they can express, accept and realize how violence affects their coexistence.

Following the daily activities we carry out with the actors, we hold meetings with the facilitators and chroniclers in which we gather the experiences, systematize them and modify our methodology continuously in light of experience, history and knowledge.

Since violence is not a problem of lack of information or concepts, in our interven-

tions we do not start off from the conceptual ideal of violence; even in our workshops we do not define violence as a concept; in our work and proposal we share experiences, listen, look at ourselves, understand that only together with another are we "we" and therefore only with everyone's help can we make changes. We do not ignore the fact that theoretical referents are indispensable in strengthening our experience because they let us create academic contributions from and for Social Work.



Fuente: elaboración propia.

CHANGES, ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITS

Throughout our experience we have modified our strategies since although we always start from the model which promotes reconceptualization and resignification of relations, it becomes necessary to modernize in order to answer the needs of an ever-changing reality.

Similarly it is essential to have permanent coordination which assures proximity to the field in order that all of the actions of the strategy are articulated along the same lines.

In the first place, the team tries to include social workers, but we do not neglect trans-discipline and also work with psychologists, pedagogues and other professionals. In our everyday work we share points of view and opinions on the events

which enriches and improves the quality and impact of our interventions.

Regardless of the profession these professionals have, it is important that they have certain capabilities and abilities to work with groups: empathy with students, a common language they share with them, and above all that they see the young people as subjects capable of changing their environment and not as subjects of their guardianship. This is the way in which there are relations of equality and honesty between the team and the students.

Our intervention like many other processes has limits: the rules of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) (Ministry of Public Education) restricts the work which may be done by civil associations; the professors often limit the dynamics of the group sessions because they feel their work space has been invaded.

In contrast we must admit that there are advantages: we have used already existing spaces where the students become involved or work together, such as Facebook. Another advantage is that feedback circles are formed between the intervention and academia; the researcher Nelia Tello is constantly making reflections and analysis from the theoretical point of view and this strengthens our interventions.

After our interventions we have noticed that the students have new intentions of changing their situation, and they often acknowledge "the others" as part of the community. Reconceptualizing violence is the first achievement, but above all to give a new meaning to coexistence with classmates and professors is what has the potential of bringing about the changes we hope can be made. These changes are long term and that is why we need time which will allow us to see how the processes have been modified and what the impact that has been obtained is.



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Within the conceptual framework of the model of intervention, violence may be classified using various criteria. We always refer to violence as a single entity "original, categorical, not acceptable in any of its expressions, especially when it is not seen, when it is made invisible or when we cover it up." (Tello Peón, Cuevas Durán, and Félix, 2013) We know that this violence is ever-changing and historical; it is expressed in concrete acts but it requires and entails contexts and situations and values. The end point is not the act but rather this creates new processes and consequences. In this regard we open up to new ways of understanding it and of intervening in it, without omitting that the fact that we make it invisible and ignore it, like in the conforming of public school communities where the organization and handling of situations which originate there are carried out with authoritarianism, with political interests in mind, under the auspices of the teachers' union, the school administration and not by the school community as a space built for the formation of the students. Of course we must mention that there are officials and teachers who wish to carry out their work from another perspective.

Intervening in this problem has broadened our perspective. We see that the situation has changed; before when one talked about violence in the schools it seemed scandalous, however, the great distance climbed on the structural ladder has had a determining influence on everyday happenings in schools, so that what happened before may seem insignificant compared to some of the situations of violence which we live within schools today.

We can also see progress in the discourse used by young people to talk about violence and the values which are necessary for coexistence. We refer to the fact



that when adolescents continuously take up warnings on the violence of an action or how violent it seems and call this "bullying" in a playful or mocking tone, which while pointing out the violence, disqualifies it, making it possible to socially ignore it and let it be.

From our point of view, recognizing the problem means understanding it and accepting it as a dominant part of the relationships among all of those actors who intervene in the community without fragmenting and individualizing the social and collective aspects. That is why in our sessions we do not reduce violence to cases of bullying. We try to make the young people reflect on the action itself, why it is carried out and what consequences it may have for them and for the group. In that way we acknowledge the possibility of change beginning with social relations.

EXPERIENCE OBTAINED:

WHAT HAS BEEN SEEN, WHAT HAS BEEN LIVED, WHAT HAS BEEN TOLD

We have detected a wide range of expressions of violence: rough games, not allowing someone to participate in activities, harassment, constant mockery, pointing out mistakes to humiliate someone, cursing, nicknames, blackmail, stealing, threats made by older people against the younger ones or others, constant practices in which most of the students join in, either openly and on their own accord or because they have no choice and they do what is established.

Other expressions of violence that we have found are cutting and sexting which are becoming more and more common among young people making them something which needs to be paid more attention to in future interventions. There are three elements in these practices which cut

across them transversally: gender, control and transcoding. With regard to the first, it is obvious that gender differences in our society mean codes of conduct which are accepted differently and both sexes may act violently, but differently. Control takes place in any structure where force, arbitrariness and the will power are imposed on relationships. In turn transcoding (Reguillo Cruz, 2008) is the transformation and adaptation of values, behavior and relations which depend on the demands of the context.

School violence is also tied to family violence: in our research it turns out that 20% of the students affirmed that in their homes there is often shouting, blows or humiliation. (EOPSAC, 2009)

Through our work with parents we have observed that there are few, and these are mostly mothers, who attend and participate in events at the school, although over the years we have seen changes in their participation: they have accepted being part of the problem and are open to participating, though unfortunately the number of mothers participating is minimum compared to the number of students.

With regard to the teachers, they rarely admit to participating as actors in reproducing school violence and try to keep the group under control by means of constant threats which become routine in everyday coexistence in the classroom, used for every action; having everyone remain quiet, having everyone sit down, having everyone respect everyone else, having everyone finish their activities, etc. A facilitator commented that "her advisor had them under the constant threat of no recess if they did not behave." (EOPSAC, "Weaving Relationships" Program, 2012) Many of these threats are never carried out and therefore the student knows that he can break the established rules and regulations over and over again.

In contrast are the extreme threats carried out and imposed under the criterion of the teacher without taking into account what is established by the normative framework of the school, to the extent that at times the student is not even allowed to give his version of events and he is shamed in front of his parents and other teachers. Some teachers assert that students need more drastic sanctions since the measures they use are not effective. It is undeniable that there are some teachers who are interested in improving their day-to-day work; they approach us to make suggestions on our work and to ask for our opinion on alternatives for relating to adolescents.

In our interventions we seek the collaboration and joint work of students, parents, directors and professors in order to change the perspective of "inadequate"¹ young people and acknowledge that it is the students and the whole school community which should and can make changes in coexistence.

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of all of this, we think that those of us we professionally intervene on this problem from the position of Social Work should not forget that violence is formed

¹ Bauman and Giddens define this stance as the "inadequation of "I", in which the young person himself is considered to be the only one "to blame" for his condition and problems.

through processes which are reproduced and recreated in our daily relations. From this perspective it will be easier to find breaking points which allow for changing violence in the school environment.

Intervening in school violence requires strategies which not only pay attention to the violence, but also seek to make the actors of the school community internalize and confront the violence which is reproduced on a daily basis. In order for this to happen, it is necessary to remember that violence brings with it other social problems such as illegality, gender inequality, lack of security, dropping out of school as well as other problems.

These strategies cannot be linear or rigid, but rather must be adapted to what reality and the context demand. This implies being involved in and taking into account the contributions made by the field work team and its actors who enrich and complement the intervention. In that way we will achieve flexible strategies which may be changed and that may be reproduced and strengthened until they become a model of intervention.

If we wish to create structural changes, it is necessary for civic organizations and government authorities to work together to develop in the actors abilities and aptitudes which recreate non-violent relationships within our schools.



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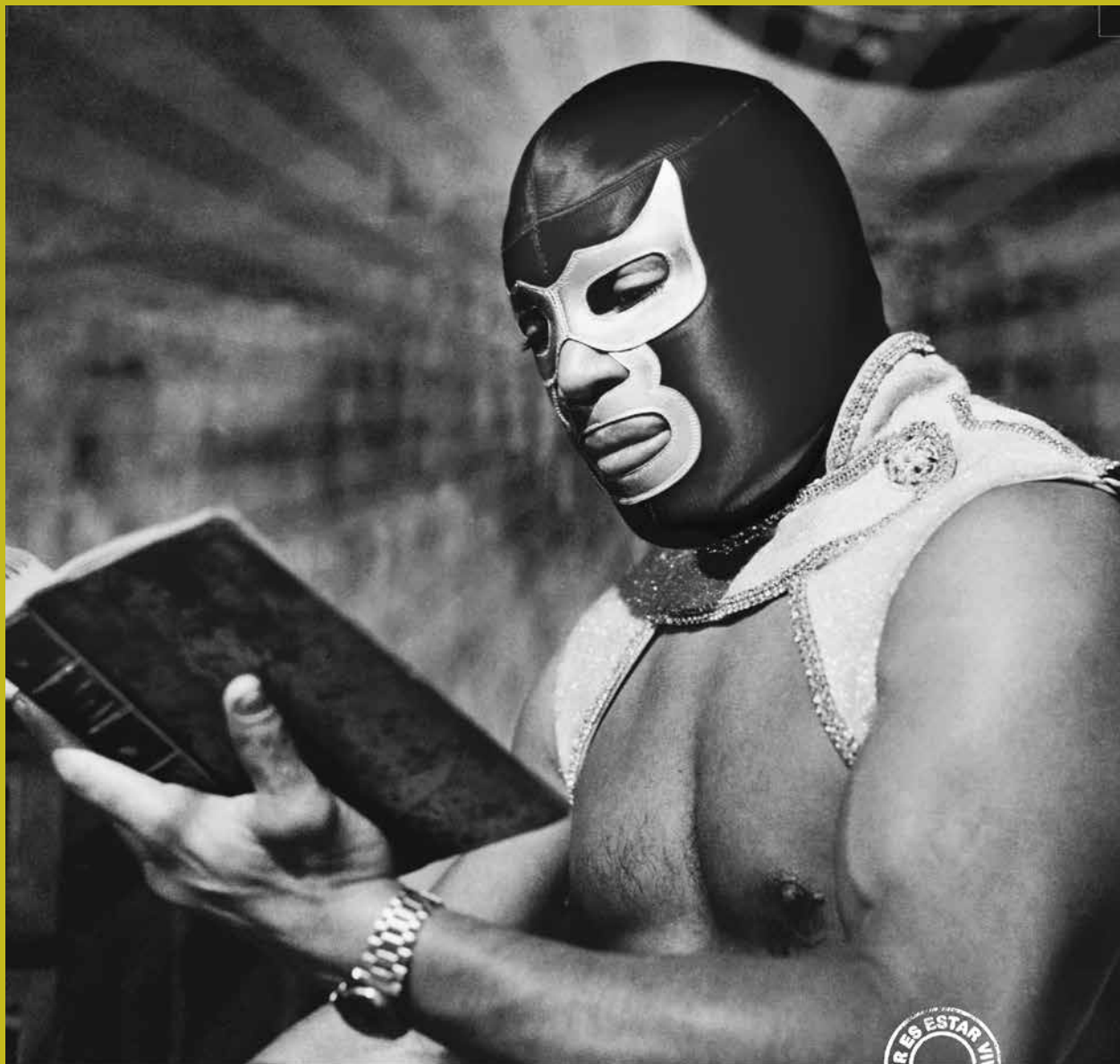
OBJETIVOS

- Identificar los cambios y retos de la política social para contribuir al desarrollo social y su vinculación con las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil.
- Conocer el impacto social de las iniciativas y acciones de la sociedad civil organizada, dirigidas a la superación de la desigualdad y la pobreza.
- Reflexionar en torno a los aportes de la academia y la sociedad civil organizada encaminados a alcanzar la equidad y la justicia social.

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