

## VIOLENCE AND DAILY LIFE AT SECONDARY SCHOOL

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### **Abstract:**

To understand how violence gestates among young people at school, a qualitative study carried out at a public secondary school considered various factors: the institution's role with regard to the problem of violence, measures taken in violent situations among students, and the causes of violence at school. Since we believe that the causes are at the center of the problem, we turn to family, social and school aspects that influence students' behavior. Our purpose is to find elements to explain the origin of this type of conduct.

**Key words:** school violence, secondary education, young people, social setting, family influence, Mexico

### **School Violence**

Visible and hidden violence at school are currently taboo in our country. We know that violence gestates within each institution in an indistinct manner. Some students take advantage or make use of violence, while others suffer from it. Parents do not really know how their children behave and interact with their schoolmates inside and outside of the classroom; even more uncertain is what their children are learning daily from their peers. At secondary school, many questions are formulated in terms of students' academic performance, as well as in terms of the effects on upcoming generations. In other words, parents are more interested in the surface of school life than in the real content of school (Jackson, 1975:14).

Well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, little is known in Mexico about school violence; the limited research includes the study by Gómez (1996) in elementary school, and the study by Prieto (2003) in secondary school. Increasingly more violence, however, is occurring at school. On some occasions, the facts are very evident and cannot be hidden from the public. For example:

Four secondary school boys went to pick up a female classmate on February 14, to go to a party. The girl did not return home from the party. Seventy-two hours later, the police found her partially buried, with lesions from rape and blows with a machete. She was still alive. The aggressors made their declaration to the press, saying that "She was stuck up and wanted to turn us down. We didn't like her." Both students were confined to the rehabilitation center for violators under age (Ibarra, 1998:33).

The described case is not isolated, but one of many that lead to more than a news item. The meaning of values has transformed, and young people have learned—from their family, social and cultural context—to refer to actions by using other concepts: "Aggression is a game; weapons are toys; pain is something that is not transcendent" (Guevara, 1998:5).

Of course the phenomenon of school violence is not new. If we take a personal inventory, we can recall that on more than one occasion we were victims, and on others, we were aggressors. Over the passage of time—the most serious aspect—we come to believe that violence is part of school culture.

Some countries, especially in Europe, are pioneers in the research of school violence—referred to as *moobbing* in Norway and Denmark, and *mobbnig* in Switzerland and Finland. The root of the word is from English, *mob*, meaning a generally large and anonymous group dedicated to harassment (Henemann, 1972; Olweus, 1973). The term has also been used to define a person who torments, harasses or bothers another. We must differentiate the term at this point from *bullying*, a word used only in the event of unbalanced forces (a relationship of asymmetrical power), in which

the student or students exposed to negative actions have difficulties in defending themselves; to a degree, they are helpless when bullied by their peers (Olweus, 1973 and 1978).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the phenomenon of school violence began to receive more attention from research in other countries.<sup>1</sup> The levels of analysis vary, as well as the way of addressing the different forms of school violence (incivility, indiscipline, harassment, bullying, mistreatment, exclusion, racism, intolerance, and so on). All approaches emphasize the influence of social, family, cultural and school factors on students' daily lives, behavior, and socialization with peers.

### **Regarding a Definition of Violence**

I shall call violence the “use of force, open and occult, in order to obtain from an individual or group, something not freely given” (Domenach *et al.*, 1981:36). The violence we are interested in is:

[...] the violence that one human being exercises over another. Fundamentally, it consists of a certain force employed to produce physical or psychic effects in the other that would oppose his inclinations, propensities and needs. As a result, it is a force of conflict, opposition and contradiction and tends to suppress, from the human viewpoint, the person who is the object of it (Domenach *et al.*, 1981:36).

At school, students can suffer from any type of harassment. According to Olweus: “the student is exposed in repeated form and for a time to negative actions (intentional actions that hurt or physically injure—kicking, pushing, pinching or blocking the passage of others), or negative behaviors involving words (ridicule, threats, name-calling or tricking)” (1998:25). Students can also suffer from bullying, considered as:

[...] an action more serious than harassment, with more violent aggression; in other words, to use properly the term, “bullying”, there must also be unbalanced forces (an asymmetrical relationship of power). The student who suffers from these negative actions has difficulties in defending himself and is somewhat helpless against the student or students who bully him (Olweus, 1996:360).

Aggression is a violent behavior with special characteristics, including repetition and an asymmetrical relationship of power. Although not all aggressive behaviors have to do with bullying, they affect students considerably in academic aspects (not participating in class out of fear of ridicule, little interest in attending school) as well as in interacting with their peers and sometimes with their teachers.

To characterize the institutional quality of secondary schools and their relationships with students, studies must be made of relationships at schools. According to Fernández (1994:36), that is the starting point for understanding how schools assert their norms<sup>2</sup> (fixed, stable). At school, students learn different ways of relating to power and authority, while constructing strategies to sidestep the norms and maintain their situation as good as possible within the system.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to know what young people experience at secondary school, the way they face and assume the school's norms, how they appropriate the necessary rules for interacting and surviving at school, and how they participate in constructing daily life, while remembering at all times the limitations and rules that are implemented at school.

On entering secondary school, students confront a series of institutional codes to which they must adhere. In this manner, they discover their position at school and learn the rules they must assume, without forgetting their personal and cultural experiences from their families (parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents) and neighborhoods (friends and the context). This fact can not be negated or hidden, and is a determining influence in the institution.

### **Possible Causes of School Violence**

The following factors can be considered in explaining school violence:

*Family:* Certain problems such as a lack of affection, attention and communication; parental separation, divorce or absence; being an only child; poverty and privation; an unstable and aggressive, or excessively strict or permissive environment; lack of control; parents or guardians who work double shifts and are unable to supervise the teenager (Funk, 1997:63; Campart and Lindstrom, 1997:95; Prieto, 2003; Levinson, 1998; Díaz-Aguado, 2001; Gómez, 1996).

*School:* The school organization, a hostile environment in the institution, the quality of teacher-student relationships (Ohsako, 1997), a lack of norms and educational values, recurring teacher absences or an incomplete faculty, the teacher's improvisation of classes and lack of control (Prieto, 2003); segregation, bullying, harassment and aggression among students (Olweus, 1998; Domenach, 1981; Gómez, 1996; Ortega y Mora-Merchan, 2000; Prieto, 2003); indiscipline and incivility (Furlan, 2003; Pain, 1994); belonging to a group and its implications (Eckert, 1989; Olweus, 1998; Gómez, 1996; Prieto, 2003); racism and intolerance (Stromquist, 1996; Eckert, 1989; Turner, 1998; Narodowski, 1998); scholastic failure and grade repeaters (Martínez, 2001; Prieto, 2003); and the occasional problems of school growth, which lead to greater aggression among peers and difficult control of students and teachers (Funk, 1997).

*Peer group:* In the school context, aggressive and abusive acts are performed most often by students who feel included and accepted by a group; the more aggressive the group, the more violent the attacks on its classmates (Olweus, 1998; Furlan, 1998; Gómez, 1996; Prieto, 2003).

*Mass media:* The media have become an important part of students' daily life, since violence is covered from various perspectives, in videogames, movies, television programs, music, the news and other media. A separate analysis should be made of the Internet, where children and young people have access in seconds to any type of information. Funk (1997) points out: "the higher the consumption of movies of terror and violence, the more common the existence of vandalism, fights, threats or sexual harassment, the greater the tension provoked in students."

### **Place of Research**

This article is the result of ethnographic research of an interpretative nature. Field diaries and observation logs were used, as well as interviews with teachers, students, parents and educational authorities. The objective was to observe the dynamics that gestate school violence; the study was centered on a public secondary school in Mexico City, and was completed during the 2001-2002 school year.

In an attempt to understand the students' values (family, religious, social, cultural and sexual), one of the fundamental parts of the research was to study the secondary school's surroundings. It is located in the Obrera neighborhood, known for its constant movement, from the early morning hours until late at night. Many businesses of various types are in the neighborhood, but there is an especially large number of bars, night clubs and hotels, which make the area a reference point of the capital city's night life. The atmosphere is hostile, a result of risk and violence, with a predominance of drugs, alcohol, prostitution and theft.

A detailed observation of the neighborhood allowed us to discover the characteristics of its inhabitants and their attitudes, actions and lifestyles. Most of the students at the secondary school under study had unclear ideas about respect, tolerance and discipline, and their parents are not generally present to teach or encourage such values. Thus street life, friends and the neighborhood atmosphere substitute for the lack of family; in such a setting, young people are easy prey of diverse social risks, including drugs and alcohol.

Based on observation logs and interview excerpts, we shall illustrate below the daily forms of school violence present at the secondary school under study.

### **Teachers through the Students' Eyes**

In their classroom life, students put cultural elements from their families and childhood backgrounds into play. Their identity<sup>4</sup> acquires relevance in the setting of shared meanings (jokes, humor) and nicknames, especially for teachers—the opportunity for a group of friends to share something they hold in common. The following entry was taken from a group of students (four girls and three boys), who were explaining their reason for talking in low voices and laughing:

It's because we gave almost all the teachers nicknames and they fit them just perfect [the classmates began to laugh; one would say the name or the subject and rest would say the nickname]. Look: Tere is "Quico" because of her big puffy cheeks; the Spanish teacher is "La travesti" ("The Transvestite") because she is husky, rough and talks as if she were getting nailed ... well; the other Spanish teacher is "La sapo" ("The Toad") because her ears stick up and are tiny, her mouth sticks out and her face looks green with buggy eyes; the teacher of Environmental is "Cocoliso" ("Smooth Coconut") because he is short, bald and has a big rear; the Physics teacher is "Pedro Infante", just look at his big moustache; they call the director "El Pablo" ("Barney") because he is short and the assistant director is "El Pedro Mármol" ("Fred Flintstone") from the Flintstones; the Beauty teacher is "Polly Pocket" because she is skinny and tiny; the Mathematics teacher is "El Pedro Ferriz" because of his big eyebrows; the knitting and embroidery teacher is "La mosca" ("The Fly") because of her big glasses; the Environmental teacher is "La machita" ("The Tomboy") because she is mannish and if she likes a female co-worker she goes after her; the prefect is "El morbillo" ("Sicko") because he looks at us as if he'd like to take our clothes off; the other Mathematics teacher is "El sope" ("The Tortilla Pie") because when he talks his mouth stinks like onion; the English teacher is "El tío Sam" ("Uncle Sam") because he thinks his English is so great; the other prefect is "Rocky" because he was a wrestler (R.O. 22/04/2002).

The students use nicknames because in their social context and often in their family context, they are called by their nicknames and not by their names. Sarcastic, joking comments are natural in groups of friends, and in this case are directed to the teachers. In this regard, Delamont (1985:109) mentions: "The students judge their teachers based on their personal appearance, physical importance, clothing, age, gender, race, language."

There's no room for you, at least not in my class.

The teachers form opinions about their students and catalog them by the "reputation" they acquire from their behavior and willingness to study, work and participate. On this basis, teachers make decisions about whether or not to allow a student to enter the classroom. One teacher comments:

In this group, the kids have no respect or order. It's the last straw. About five classes ago [...] a student asked me to explain the example because he did not understand me. I went to his place, with my back to my desk, when I heard the students start to shout, "Thief, thief!" [The teacher lowers her voice and then remains silent a few seconds, trying to relive the scene in a corporal fashion, with hand gestures as if she were seeing the event.] I turned around toward my desk and I realized that a student was taking my wallet out of my purse. [I told him] you're in the wrong place. If your father is a thief and you learned from him, you must also learn that this is not the place... [with an expression of astonishment, annoyance and anger]. You're a thief, as your classmates say, and there's no room for you in this classroom, at least not in my class. It's the last straw, that even at school I have to watch my purse and watch out for my own students. They stop at nothing [with continuing expression of astonishment and annoyance] (Interview 10/04/2002/M).

This case shows how the students put into practice at school what they learn in the streets or often in their families. The institution would seem to be surpassed by the social and cultural context of the students, who reproduce behavioral patterns. In the described case, the theft of the teacher's belongings gestates a violent situation between both parties. According to Funk (1997:53-78),

“Lifestyles are accompanied by the loss of a homogeneous system of values; this situation provokes symptoms of disintegration<sup>5</sup> among young people that can become manifest in violent acts.”

School is one of the institutions of greatest relevance, where cultural elements, norms, feelings, attitudes and values circulate, can be altered by violent situations, and are an important influence on students’ interaction and development. In another example, the Mathematics teacher comments:

On another occasion, in the middle of the class a student began to bother the boy behind him, and stood up and kicked him. When I went over... [astonished expression] to separate them, one of them kicked me. It made me was mad at the moment that I rapped him on the head. He cursed at me and I took him to the office. Just so you can see how far we’ve gone (Interview 9/04/2002).

The teachers believe that the only guilty, rude party is the students. But it must be pointed out that in this case, the person who condemned the aggression responded in the same manner, and then justified her action. In this regard, Debarbieux, the president of the European Observatory of School Violence, mentions: “A lack of respect [causes] distrust in one’s self and in others and a loss of meaning. At school, this translates into a strong identity crisis among students as well as among teachers. The central term in discourses is ‘respect’; without it, there is no prestige or solid social identity” (1996).

### **Any Time is Good**

The hostility that gestates within institutions is due to a lack of supervision, discipline and application of the norms (Gómez, 1996; Furlan, 1998; Prieto, 2003). Problems among students can emerge at any time, for any reason and at any place. Such a situation is illustrated in the following example:

To celebrate Children’s Day, the director hired a DJ for the students “to interact”—an objective that was to last only a short while. The young people danced, some in the patio and others in the halls. One of the groups included Claudia and Liliana, who were not getting along. When they heard the lyrics of a song they were dancing to, “eres como una ramera, que se enreda donde quiera” (“You’re like a whore, who gets tangled up anywhere”), the girls began to insult each other. Claudia, pointing at Liliana, said, “That’s like you.” And Liliana replied, “Whores are you and your damn mother.” The girls were separated but they went into the bathroom, where the insults led to physical aggression (punches, kicks, scratches and hair pulling). At last the prefect arrived, and told them, “You don’t understand. Look how pretty you are, all scratched up and wild-haired. You look like fighting chickens” (30/04/2002/M). The girls were taken to the counseling office, which sent a summons to the girls’ parents that was to go unheeded.

In this respect, Covarrubias (2000) comments, “It is evident that as adults we are not teaching our children and young people to solve their conflicts peacefully. Violence in the classroom generally has its roots at home.”

### **Ties of Friendship**

For most of the students, friendship holds a very important place. Almost everything revolves around friendship. Relationships are almost always “in danger” and individuals are submitted to various tests to prove if they are “worthy” of belonging to a group. Such tests, which may seem absurd or dangerous to adults, are considered inevitable by young people, regardless of the risks or consequences. They can range from dancing to wearing things that attract attention, dyeing one’s hair, getting tattoos or piercings—which could lead to sanctions or problems with parents. For the boys, another type of harder “tests” may be used.

Such is the case of Gerardo, the leader of a group dedicated to bothering classmates and known as “smart asses”. Two students who wanted to belong to the “gang” endured torment to attain their goal, until Gerardo proposed that they should go to the auditorium and do something to make the

school notice. That week, the janitor commented: “Who knows who went to do damage in the auditorium. The thing is that the curtains burned... Luckily I was sweeping near the auditorium; if not, who knows what would have happened” (R.O. 17/04/2002).

Students are willing to run such risks in order to belong to a group, heedless of consequences or repercussions. On the other hand, the director repaired the damage by buying new curtains, but never attempted to investigate what had happened. His attitude gave an opportunity and *carte blanche* to similar events, as the janitor mentioned: “The school’s trash cans are large and made of metal... The week after the curtains burned, who knows who lit trash in a trash can. I went right away for a bucket of water and put it out” (R.O. 17/04/2002/M). The lack of supervision at school and the failure to teach students the meaning of responsibility and a sense of belonging in a vital place, encourages this type of aggression and endangers the entire institution.

Friendship in the classroom is also a strategic factor for forming groups that try to protect themselves from “smart asses”. They can reach a type of alliance that in turn may lead to unsuspected extremes, such as bringing a weapon to school; teachers may remain uninformed, while the students know who brought the weapon, along with how and when. This fact was verified by the interviews, which affirm that the students know that some take knives, switchblades and even pistols to school. Gerardo and Yair (whose case will be presented below) are students who have been known to carry blades; on occasion, they have threatened their classmates, yet no one has said or done anything about it.

### **Concealed Sexuality**

With regard to students’ sexual preferences and tendencies, a series of aggressive relationships and situations is generated in which harassment, threats, bullying, abuse and rejection occur between teachers and students. Duschatzky mentions: “The place is not a simple territory but constitutes recognition, history and shared identities; occupying a place is to leave a mark and to be marked by the place” (1999:28-29).

The classroom is the space where students—in addition to attaining knowledge—learn to negotiate explicitly and implicitly with teachers and with their peers, in order to maintain communication. In these relationships, oral expressions and gestures are very meaningful because they represent a form of interaction. Since the classroom is where teenagers spend most of their time at school, it also becomes the place where abuse is part of daily life. Any opportunity can be taken advantage of for making classmates feel badly, through practical jokes and direct or indirect insults. An example was provided by Benjamin, a third-year student, as the Spanish teacher was teaching the class interrogative sentences:

Teacher: Interrogative sentences are used for questions... and they, they... What?

Student: Can you repeat it, Teacher? I didn’t hear you.

Teacher: You are all so slow! I haven’t even done a paragraph and you’ve already interrupted me. Be quiet! If not, you don’t hear... Interrogatives sentences are distinguished by having pronouns. Why? What? How? When? Where? They always have question marks, from beginning to end...

The teacher wrote some exercises on the blackboard and asked who wanted to come to the front. Benjamin stood up and the teacher nodded. Two students yelled, “There goes the queer!” “Now he’s going to start with his queer stuff!” The rest of the group laughed in a natural manner. Benjamin asked the teacher, “Did you hear, Teacher?” She answered, “I didn’t hear anything. Go sit down” (RO. 13/02/2001).

The lack of student respect and tolerance and the teacher’s indifferent attitude are evident: “The problem of discipline is the most important problem that the teacher has to face at school [...] Without discipline, no effective work is possible” (Hernández, 1969:7). The following entry reflects

the case of the teacher of the electricity workshop. Because he is in charge of the cooperative, he arrives 30 to 40 minutes late to class, sufficient time for a group of students to have bothered a classmate, Aparicio. According to the log, they locked him in the workshop with the lights out, and threw in a firecracker, while shouting at him through a small window: “so that you stop being queer, let’s see if you become a man, and stop being a queer” (RO:12/03/2001).

The teacher’s absence and the students’ lack of respect surpass the limits, regardless of the possible physical, psychological and moral damage to a classmate. The most serious aspect is that no one takes responsibility or stops this type of violent attitudes. Another entry shows a teacher’s comments on the sexual preferences of two girls:

Everything has happened at this school... Once at recess I was talking outside of a classroom with another teacher. I decided to go into the “D” classroom and I saw two girls kissing and touching each other everywhere. I asked them what they were doing, and told them they had chosen the wrong place. I asked them why they were doing their dirty stuff here. I took them down to Counseling and their parents were called. The good thing is that their re-enrollment was not accepted the following school year (Interview 18/03/2002).

The above examples show how teachers talk and act when a student has preferences other than what the teachers consider “normal”. The teacher emits a judgment by mentioning “dirty stuff”, and admits that it was the reason the girls were not accepted the following school year.

#### Daily Violence at School

To illustrate this part, let us return to the case of Gerardo. He is fourteen years old, speaks with a lot of slang, and often curses or uses obscene expressions; with the girls he is offensive, and hugs them or slaps their bottoms, but they accept him. As we mentioned above, Gerardo is the leader of a “little group” that acts like “smart asses” by hiding backpacks, hitting and shoving. If the group members want something, their classmates know they have to give it to them. Nonetheless, if Gerardo wanted to talk to someone, he was able to do so well. When he participated in the interview, he did not try to joke at any time. He told his classmates, “I don’t want to be interrupted [...] I might not tell anyone else what I am going to tell her [...] But I am going to tell her because—you know why?—she’s OK.”

At school I say that I live with my parents. That is not true because I live only with my mother. My father remarried. I have a half-brother who is older and a half-sister who is younger. I went to elementary school at Giner de los Ríos which, by the way, was not very good for me. [We asked why.] Because in the sixth grade, the truth is I started to hang around with some kids who were smarter than I was. One day they told me, “When have you seen a thousand pesos all at once?” I told them never, so they told me, “What would you think if we kidnap Mario?” He was a classmate who supposedly had money. We planned it for Friday. We waited until his mother left and we told Mario that we would buy him some candy at the store. He told us that we couldn’t leave school and we told him not to worry because on Friday the doorkeeper wasn’t at the door. He said yes and asked when. We went out to the store and we told him, “Let’s go to Álamos Park.” He answered, “No.” Then we told him, “You’re going to call your mother and tell her you’re not at school, that you’re in Álamos Park, and that if she wants to see you to come to the dirt soccer field, right at the goal, that she should leave one thousand pesos and go to the bus stop on Isabel la Católica, that she shouldn’t try to talk to anyone because it will be bad for you.

We were very stupid because in the first place, it was a very long message. The guy didn’t say it right when he called his mother. It was a true disaster, but the mother left the money there and Mario went to the bus stop. Covered by a sweater we went for the money, according to us so that we wouldn’t be recognized. And when we turned around neither Mario nor his mother was there.

[We asked him what they did with the money.] Well the truth is we went to buy some sandwiches. Then we split up the money and we agreed that no one would say anything and swore on it, but when I got home the judicial police were already waiting for me. My mother wasn't at home because she works, and we had to go and look for her at her job [...] She's a cook at a café and does laundry for people or cleans houses. When we went to get her, she got scared and called my father right away. But they took me to Juvenile Detention on Vértiz street. I didn't make it all the way in because my father made arrangements. The truth is I don't remember if it was twenty days or a month. They don't know about this at school!

Up to that time, the group members had no idea of what they had done. They thought nothing serious had happened, but Gerardo realized that having a record is not gratifying, and for that reason clarified that the school knew nothing. When asked what had happened at the time, he answered:

It's fucked up. From the time you get there, they take away your tennis shoes or shoes, whatever you have, and right away they ask you, "Why did you do it?" And you have to be very alert because if not, they grab you. There were kids smaller than me, but the truth is, they beat me up because I was afraid to defend myself. Until one night one came and he told me to give him something, and I said I didn't have anything, and he started hitting me and I defended myself and saw that nobody got involved. But the truth is that it's fucked up. If I wasn't alert, any could hit me, kick me, or anything could happen. But my father made arrangements. He went to talk to the father of Mario [the kidnapped boy], and the man withdrew the charges. I'm not sure what they did but I got out. Sometimes I see my father, but since his wife doesn't like me, I try not to see him when she's around because the truth is, I'm not little like before when I put up with it. But I see him when I want something. Although I don't even need him because I can buy myself whatever I want. But so he doesn't forget he has a son.

Gerardo has had an uncommon experience, and he reflects with his classmates at school what he learned at Juvenile Detention. The way he describes his father is distant. He tries to see him although he affirms not needing him. Later we asked Gerardo if he used drugs, and what had happened to his other two friends:

They stayed inside. The truth is we didn't even see each other. The truth is that I screw around. You didn't know? [...] Ask anyone at school. I know I'm not going to get a diploma because I failed two subjects in previous years, and I have failed five subjects up to now. But I don't come because of school. I come to do my stuff. The teachers are sometimes a real pain, but what do you think? That's why they get their cars scratched or their tires punctured (Entre. 22/04/2002).

He did not tell me directly that he sold drugs at school, but some students told me, "When you see Gerardo in the hall with his jacket on, he's selling." I began to observe him more and not many days passed before I realized that on Mondays and Fridays he wore a black gabardine jacket. What was most surprising was that the students who approached him seemed calm, and some were even good students; discreetly they would enter the bathroom. Gerardo knows—and does not care—that he will not earn a secondary school diploma. As he affirms, he goes to school to bother his classmates and sell drugs. However, it is not understandable that neither the teachers nor the prefects realized what was happening, although his classmates were quite aware of the situation. When asked about his relationship with his mother and siblings, Gerardo commented:

Although they're a half brother and sister it doesn't mean anything to me, the real truth. I don't get along with my little sister because she's a big crybaby, but I get along with my brother. He screws around too but the big difference is that my mother doesn't know. I don't get along very well with my ma, but she's



my boss. And even though she likes to drink, she pays for her bad habit. But sometimes because of that I try not to be disrespectful to her. But sometimes I can't, I yell at her and I don't listen to her.

Taking into consideration Gerardo's family atmosphere—an alcoholic mother, a depraved brother, an absent father—no one is present to tell him that what he is doing is not right.

### **To the Juvenile Detention Center**

Yair is a student who is almost sixteen years old. He has blue eyes, white skin and a slender build. He always uses big, untied shoes, with his pants at the hip (a size too large with the hems taken out, to make them longer and looser); his hair is light brown and he wears it short, with gel, sometimes in spikes; he wears five bright woven bracelets and a shell necklace. His white shirt is tight, with rolled up sleeves. Some of the girls call him "Rocky". He does not curse when he talks to the girls, but he hugs them all. If they ask him, "Are you going out with anybody?", he answers, "No, but if you want to, yes." The group he leads is called "Los Valedores" ("The Defenders"). They "skip class" as often as they can and if they do not like someone, they give him nicknames or slap, trip or push him. Their actions are provocations that go unanswered by their classmates. In the interview, Yair commented:

You know what? I like to be asked, because almost no one does. [I live] with my mother and my two sisters, who are older than I am. One goes to the university and the other one works; my dad just separated from my mom because since he supposedly is very good-looking, he ran off with another woman. But I don't care because I hardly saw him. He was never at home, and when he was, he was fighting with my mother.

[Later we asked him if he was in juvenile detention]: It was a year ago. That's why I am behind some subjects. I couldn't come to school, I was locked up. I was there about fifteen days. One day I was with some friends and my girlfriend. We went to a party, and there we started to drink. All of sudden I started to see that one of my "Valedores" gang was starting to fight. At that time, we didn't know why he was fighting, but we went to help him. We beat up the other guys, but then a patrol car came and the other guys said we were trying to attack them. They were lying. Then they took us to Juvenile Detention because we were minors. There I called my mother and they made arrangements fast. And when the other guys went to declare, they contradicted themselves, and that helped us. But the good thing about getting caught together was that we watched out for each other, mainly when we went to the bathroom and at night.

[Why?] Because since we're young, the others are meaner or something. For example, while we were there, a guy a little older than us arrived. He had raped someone, and the next day, right away, he turned up in the patio with a rag in his mouth and a bottle in his ass. We were there for only fifteen days, but they sent us to groups where there was a person who coordinated us. There were group talks where they told us that we shouldn't attack or fight. They tried to make us have a different attitude: not to fight, not to look for problems. I was going there because I had to for six months. It was almost one of the conditions for getting out. That's what they didn't know at school.

[We asked him if he used drugs]: No. I like to drink, but I don't use drugs. My vice is girls. I love them: little, big, whatever. Well as long as they are cool, and go along. What I don't like about some kids is that if you like something—for example, I like to drink—I'm not going to bring a bottle to school. Because they'll catch me and run me off. But here there are some who bring their junk to sell. And who knows if it is any good because they sell it very cheap. What I see is that no one tells them anything and I get mad about it. Well, why do I tell you? There seems to be more supervision now, so they go where they can hide. You watch (Interview 18/03/2002).

As we have seen, the secondary school had two powerful groups: Yair's and Gerardo's. Yair's group was smaller and sold nothing, but the other members of the class suffered in the same way

from the group's aggressions (jokes, nicknames, pushes, slaps, kicks, and arbitrary stealing without resistance), always under the orders of "watch out if you say anything". They took more advantage of first-year students, and very sporadically of third-year students. If Yair and Gerardo crossed paths, they greeted each other, while each following his own path. Both knew about their respective "pastimes".

The school was aware that Yair had been in Juvenile Detention, but it did not know about Gerardo. The teachers said that Yair was "playful" and a "good kid". He was so skillful that the teachers did not realize that he was the one who provoked his classmates—who were reprimanded instead of Yair. And he was so charismatic that some teachers helped him in their subjects to prevent him from failing the two-month grading period, and no one excluded him for having been in Juvenile Detention. According to our records, on at least two occasions he was taken to the counseling office for wearing baggy pants, for not wearing the complete uniform and for having spiked hair (dyed blue on the tips).

On one occasion, before the new biology teacher came in the classroom, Yair told his classmates: "When he comes in I'm going to shoot rubber bands at his butt so I don't get bored. You can tell he's dumb and boring." Everyone was waiting to see what would happen. When the teacher came in and turned to the blackboard, Yair stood up quickly and shot at him with rubber bands, "on the butt" as he had said. The teacher immediately turned around to look at the students and asked who had done it. The group remained quiet for a few minutes. Since no one answered, the teacher left the classroom. Yair took advantage of the time to tell his classmates, "Watch out if anyone says anything!"

The teacher soon came back in the company of the social worker, "Who did that to the teacher?" Once again, no one answered. "Since no one wants to say, the whole group is going to be suspended." Once again there was silence. The teacher said, "That's no way to learn. Everyone gets three points taken off their grade."

This type of situation—common with several teachers—in which students are punished because of one or a minority, is about fear rather than unity. But the social worker knew who had caused the problem, and decided to take Yair to the counseling office. She left him there for more than three hours, because she already knew that if they telephoned his mother, she would not go to school.

A characteristic of the school is that the parents almost never go to school to learn how their children are doing. When they are called, they do not report to school, as the students know. They go only in extreme cases, as when a student is not allowed to enter the building, for example.

#### Attacks at School

We illustrate this form violence with the log of third-year and some second-year students who are known as rude and aggressive. Their physical type was unimportant. Most were tall but even the shorter students were willing to fight anyone, including their own "pals". According to our observations, their form of attack was for one student to approach a classmate and say, "You're the prey or the choice. Come on." If that person for any reasons resisted, the indication was, "When school's out." Or as a group he was pulled in. The maneuver was so subtle that it seems to be that they were talking or playing. Victims were threatened, "If you say anything, first, they're not going to believe you, because we're all going to say you're a liar. And second, we're going to beat you up for being a tattletale" (RO. 07/01/2002/M).

During recess, this group normally stayed next to the office, behind a wall. They would ask students passing by for money. If they refused, the group kicked, pulled, or pushed them, and took away their money. They would lift up the girls' dresses and hold them, while the others fondled them, always with a threat, "Watch out if you say something, because then you won't see the end of us."

Threats, harassment and aggressions among students were present at all times, and the students did not dare to report the “group” to their teachers or parents. They tried not to pass by the dangerous area. But their attempts were in vain. One would come to tell them, “Loan me some dough.” Even if a student gave up the money, he would be told, “That’s it? Loan me more.”

The teachers, however, had a totally different vision of the matter, “I see that the students loan money to each other [...]. I don’t think it’s anything else because if it were, the students would be talking about it and we would have realized. But I haven’t heard about anything. And the truth is that students have to learn to defend themselves. Their mom is not here to defend them.” This attitude was very common among the teachers. If they heard about something that was not right, they became indifferent. Many of the students denied the situation as well, and others changed the subject. Some would comment:

They’re tough and since they’re in a group, they feel very macho. The truth is I prefer not to bring money. But sometimes I have to. Because many times if you tell them you don’t have any, they tell you, “Tomorrow you will, right?” The other day I didn’t bring any and they gave me some kicks, as if they were playing but it hurt. And they told me again, “Tomorrow you will, right?”

In the classroom, Joel and Ricardo feel very important because they are in the little group. They ask “Grandma”<sup>6</sup> for the homework and she has to give it to them. If she doesn’t, they take away her pen. They ask anyone for the homework and that person has to loan it to them because, according to them, they are asking for it in a nice way. If they make you give it to them, they yank it away. And they tell you right away, “watch out if you say anything because you’ll have to answer to me and my pals”. Both boys and girls do that to us. I’m afraid of them because they’re tough.

As the logs show, this group has become known through intimidation—always unpunished—but their secret is kept well at school. Certain teachers have had friction with some of them, but they have done nothing about it. Although the director assigned extra supervision in the patio, the steps taken have not been sufficient. The “group” is very skillful and well organized for attacking. It admits second-year students in order to have constant replacements and thus remain in control. If such attacks have been occurring for a time, we wonder why the other students have permitted violent behavior, why they are incapable of reporting it and why some even deny it.

## **Conclusions**

More research must be done on violence in our schools, and especially in secondary schools. We are confronted by a problem we cannot ignore. The educational authorities must intervene to provide solutions.

Some of the manifestations of violence that we encountered in the school were robbery, vandalism, and physical and verbal aggression. However, in the face of evident facts, the institution (director, teachers, and parents) could not join forces to combat the phenomenon.

As we were able to prove in our observations, the neighborhood is a determining factor for students; the setting plays an important role in their experiences. Their growing up around cantinas, night clubs, and problems of alcoholism and drug addiction, means that over the short term they begin to adopt negative attitudes, and reproduce what they see and hear in their surroundings.

School, after the home, is the place where the young people spend most time. It is their “second home”, the point of reference where they “learn” to defend themselves from their peers and teachers. In some cases, it is where they first learn about fear, robbery, fights, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs.

At the secondary school we studied, we found the existence of complicity between teachers and students. The teachers knew what was happening at school (the sale and consumption of drugs and alcohol, attacks and violence) without doing anything to report or prevent it. The students—to an

even greater degree—also knew what was happening at secondary school: they experienced and suffered from it, but pretended it was nothing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Outstanding work in other nations includes: Japan (Ohsako, 1997); Germany (Funk, 1997:53-78); Holland (Mooij 1997:29-52); United States (Levinson, 1998; Eckert, 1989; Stromquist, 1996; Lawton, 1993:662-659); England (Turner, 1998:591-602); Mexico (Gómez, 1996 and 2003; Prieto, 2003 and 2004; Furlan, 1998:612; Furlan, *et al.*, 2003:259-298); France (Debarbieux, 1996; Pain, 1994:27-31); Spain (Ortega y Mora-Merchán, 2000:7-27; Cruz, 2001:12-23); Chile (Cerdeña y Assaél, 1998:629-944); Argentina (Narodowski, 1998:603-609).

<sup>2</sup> According to Lidia Fernández, norms have been instituted at the institution; they represent the established order and give the individual the protection of a logic for organizing the world; and they maintain what is established.

<sup>3</sup> Fernández mentions that it is the institutionalizing party that questions or criticizes the established system.

<sup>4</sup> Goffman (1993:260) mentions, "Individuals identify and recognize each other because of certain attributes. An individual's identity is a product of his experiences, as well as of his inherent and acquired abilities." Individual identity implies an awareness of who and where one is. Personal identity is related to the idea that some people can be differentiated from others, through certain means in which social facts and a particular story are interwoven.

<sup>5</sup> For example, according to Heitmeyer, "a) the disappearance of relationships with other people and institutions"; b) of real participation in social institutions; c) of respect for the norms and common values" (1992:109).

<sup>6</sup> This girl is the most studious in the class, is a flag carrier, is quiet and has few friends. But everyone asks her for the homework and assignments. It seems not to bother her. But when these students ask her for something, she is reluctant to give it to them.

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