

## THEMATIC RESEARCH

### VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

*A Study at the High School Level*

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#### **Abstract:**

Presented are the results of a study on violence among peers (bullying) at Universidad de Guadalajara high school. The study was carried out in two phases. First was the diagnostic phase, based on the results of a survey answered by 600 students in the vocational school. The results were processed by techniques of descriptive statistics, leading to categories that refer to reasons, feelings and student roles in situations of violence at school. The second stage worked with a pilot group in a conflict-solving workshop. The results reflect changes in students' awareness of their roles in the phenomenon of violence.

**Key words:** school violence, high school, students, awareness, Mexico.

#### **General Considerations with regard to the Study**

This article presents the results of a research process focused on the problem of school violence, and specifically on violence among equals, or bullying. The study was carried out at the Universidad de Guadalajara high school by a team of teachers from the vocational school.

The fundamental aspect that oriented the study of school violence in this particular school (part of the universe of study represented by the high

schools in the Universidad de Guadalajara system) is the students' perception of violence. Such perceptions were based on students' contact with situations in which violence seems to be seen as "natural". In other words, the students showed no clear awareness of their actions, or of their actions' repercussions on others or on themselves. The result of such an attitude is deterioration in students' interpersonal relationships.

This article is based on the assumption that the tensions of our society are reproduced at school, in particular forms. Our position in this regard, however, follows that of Jares (2003: 87-106), who indicates that deterioration in interaction cannot be blamed exclusively on schools or on the educational system as a whole. In the school setting, conditions can be created to improve the development of individual relationships. Therefore, this study addresses the problem by taking into account the role individuals play in violence between equals; the purpose is to develop at school a proposal for intervention capable of modifying students' forms of interaction.

Analyzing situations of violence among equals, as well as the protagonists' awareness of such violence, requires the consideration of related elements of social dynamics along with the internal factors of indirect influence in the school: concretely, relationships between teachers and students, the school's climate, the subjective traits of students in conflict, and their habitual practices of interaction.

Such a condition of analysis is synthesized by Fernández (1999), who sustains the existence of a double influence in the phenomenon of school violence:

- 1) Exogenous agents, such as the society or community in which the school is inserted, the role of the media and the family factor.
- 2) Endogenous agents, including a crisis of values, discrepancies in the distribution of space, the organization of time, behavioral guidelines, the individual student's lack of attention in large groups, and the asymmetry of the teacher's and student's roles.

The framework built by these agents provides numerous factors for creating a favorable or unfavorable climate of interaction at school.

In short, school violence is an unquestionable reality that takes on multiple forms and travels in various directions: from authorities to students and teachers, from teachers to students, and from students to students. When the victims are students, experience shows—at least in the context in which this research was carried out—that violence is underestimated or persistent, without being a conscious object of attention. For this reason, an initial objective was to research students' perceptions of school violence, based on the system of roles presented by Olweus (1998)

as AVO (aggressor-victim-observer). This system collects data on the preponderant ways of occurrence and the position each role takes in situations of violence that are part of daily life at school.

Although this article considers structural or exogenous factors as elements of significant influence on subjects' actions, the primary object is the students, as protagonists in the phenomenon designated in the literature as bullying, or violence between equals (Olweus, 1998; Ortega y Del Rey, 2003).

The study includes two phases. The first phase utilizes the data provided by a test of the students—data useful for constructing an explanation of the way students view the phenomenon. The second phase explains the results of an intervention that attempted to provide a pilot group (formed by students from the same setting) with a series of tools for solving conflicts. Listed below, in general form, are the questions that determined the object of study and guided each phase:

*Phase 1: diagnosis*

What type of evaluations do students make of violence in the classroom and how do they resolve such violence in their daily lives? How does violence between equals occur, and particularly at school?

*Phase 2: intervention*

What effects did intervention have on the students' identification of roles and other factors associated with violence? What constructions can students make regarding the phenomenon of violence among equals, based on an experience such as that offered?

**What is School Violence? Theoretical Perspective on Violence**

Studying a problem such as school violence implies the construction of a conceptual referent in the field where the object is inserted. Specifically, this may be called studies on *school violence*. Before continuing, it must be clarified that this project considers the concept of violence between equals or bullying as part of the concept of school violence, according to the classification by Trianes (2000). The use of this concept is justified since the object of study comprehends primarily student interactions characterized by some sort of violence. Thus this section addresses a series of basic theoretical elements about how the category is understood, with the clarification that other categories are related to it and occasionally mentioned.

In principle, violence is defined as an attitude or behavior that violates or seizes from an individual something that is essential for him as a person (physical integrity, psychic integrity, moral integrity, rights and freedoms). Violence may originate in persons or institutions and may occur in passive

or active form. In addition to direct violence (visible destruction or blows), there may be indirect or subtle forms of violence (such as psychological violence) that may be more difficult to recognize although they occur daily in concrete settings like school.

In the historical development of humanity, violence, along with knowledge and money, are the principal sources of human power, according to Corsi (2003), one of the most enlightened theorists in the topic. At an earlier time, Lorenz (1978) sustained that the aggressive or violent impulse is a true instinct, whose primordial end is to preserve the species; it is dangerous because of its spontaneity. On the other hand, in 1986, a group of experts on the topic signed the “Seville Statement on Violence” (Genovés, 1991), which declares that affirmations linked to the idea of the spontaneous generation of aggression and the biological predisposition to war are scientifically incorrect.

Another general expression of violence is cultural, which some authors blame for social injustice. Such arguments attribute poverty, injustice and the absence of rights and opportunities to negligence in aid contributions, for example. As a result, due to direct actions or omissions, social inequality may lead to manifestations of individual violence. In the current study, the social and economic context of the universe of students is lower than the middle class, and reflects the predominant level in the area around the school. Thus while elements exist that influence school violence, the social condition does not necessarily determine the characteristics of the phenomenon.

On the other hand, violence is complex: it is not solely an expression of concrete acts since acts have underlying emotions and values. Such a perspective is supported by diverse studies based on the focus of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), the theory and methodology of emotional learning (Sastre y Moreno, 2002), and the theory of multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1993). The purpose of presenting these referents has been to take into consideration that violence at school is not a product of a single factor, but of various individual and social circumstances; and on the other hand, that violent or aggressive behaviors, although learned or copied, can be reoriented toward behaviors that are healthier for the individual and his society.

The concept of *school violence* is characterized by multiple elements. As a result, a broader definition of the concept is useful. Since violence does not adopt a single form or take a single direction, it is more relevant to refer to forms of violence; and all forms have the fundamental characteristic of being produced at school and exercised by the school’s members.

In the context of this research study, daily contact with teachers and students shows that among their notions of school violence, the forms that have to do with interpersonal relations are predominant. School violence

appears in the form of jokes, insults or social exclusion that assumes indifference, which the students describe as more painful than physical aggression in some cases.

The study presented here has the conceptual axis of bullying or harassment between equals, defined as types of school violence in research by Trianes (2000) and Ortega y Del Rey (2003). Although bullying is a type of violence that has been researched in many countries, as proven by abundant documentation and intervention guides, it has been studied little in our country. Trianes (2000) points out that bullying is a prolonged behavior of insults, social rejection, intimidation, and/or physical aggression of some students against others, who become the victims of their classmates. Thus bullying is defined as a group phenomenon known in most cases by the playing of the following roles: the aggressor, who may be the leader, or the follower; the observers, who may be passive, defenders of the victim, or encouragers of the aggressor; and the victim, either passive or a provoker of violence.

The aggressors, according to Trianes (2000), have an aggressive personality not only with their peers but also with authority figures such as parents or teachers. They have a positive attitude about violence and are often characterized by their impulsiveness and need to dominate others. Observers, according to the same author, are students who do not participate directly in the violence but are present at fights or are spectators of harassment. This definition of roles is shared by Olweus (1998), who distinguishes among three key figures in situations of violence: the aggressor, the victim and the observer, who represent the possible roles played by individuals in each situation (the triad referred to by its initials, A-V-O).

According to Trianes, the aggressor suffers from progressive deterioration that takes the form of academic failure and possible expulsion from school. His social relationships are affected, increasing the possibility of his belonging to violent groups and manifesting delinquent behavior. In this manner, the aggressor becomes the victim of his own behavior.

The psychological profile of the victim, on the other hand, is marked by low self-esteem and a loss of self-confidence. As a consequence of progressive isolation, the victim's unrelenting rejection of the school is ultimately projected to his family and social context, where his relations tend to be increasingly more problematic. He runs the risk of being afflicted with diverse psychopathologies, such as depression, neurosis, hysteria or social phobias. The third group, composed of observers (spectators) immersed in a climate that is far removed from satisfactory interaction, favors and reinforces conflict by means of passive behavior or concealment of the problem, and loyalty to the negative "law of silence".

Olweus (1998) points to four potentially significant elements for understanding the problem: *a)* external characteristics of aggressors and victims (physical traits, force, limitations, language problems); *b)* psychological and behavioral characteristics of aggressors and victims (attitudes toward violence, aggressiveness, degree of anxiety, self-esteem); *c)* background (socioeconomic characteristics, family relations, development and characteristics of the home, links with parents) and *d)* characteristics of the school context (size, teachers, group climate).

The term, bullying, is also used when a young person is constantly harassed by one or several peers. According to Ortega y Mora-Merchán (2000), for example, a student can be intimidated if other students talk in a mean or unpleasant way; if they laugh at him or call him insulting names; ignore him completely, exclude him from their group of friends or activities; hit, kick or push him; threaten him, tell him lies or untrue rumors, send him hurtful notes, and try to convince others not to associate with him.

The possibility of intervening in the phenomenon of school violence is supported by the above studies, which reveal interest in encouraging forms of pacific interaction at school. Some of the studies show similarities, specifically in the methodological orientation of proposed educational interventions and experiences; in allowing students to play a more active role in making decisions regarding policies for addressing aggression and violence at school; in the family's participation in processes developed at school; and in the need to extend the curriculum to the emotional and ethical field of all its participants.

### **Phases of the Study and its Results**

The research was carried out in two phases, known as *diagnosis* and *intervention*, in a scheme similar to that proposed by Ortega y Del Rey (2003). An analysis of the context permitted an understanding of problematic situations in existence (diagnosis), followed by the planning, design and implementation of actions (intervention). The use of a quantitative and qualitative focus is justified by the need to have a sufficient data base for the problem and its manifestation in individuals, as well as data related to work strategies adopted during intervention. Such data permit identifying the meanings that individuals assign to the phenomenon of school violence.

#### *Diagnostic Phase. Manifestations of School Violence and its Circumstances*

The central objective in this phase was oriented to identifying more precisely the ways the phenomenon of violence among peers is revealed on the physical, verbal and psychological planes. The universe of study was

formed by the students at the vocational school of the Universidad de Guadalajara high school system. A random sampling was taken of 600 students, representative of all shifts and semesters, based on the assumption that all of the school's students interact in potential situations of school violence.

To obtain the data, the testing instrument encouraged the students to give their opinion, in an anonymous fashion, on one of the previously characterized *practices* of violence observed in the school community; they were also asked to refer to the *circumstances associated* with the occurrence. The structure of the testing instrument considers these two categories. The data are organized in the matrix of analysis designed by Barragán (2001). In the first category, the instrument asked the students to specify which of the following manifestations they observed at school: insults, physical aggressions, threats, rumors or rejection.

On the other hand, the testing instrument asked the following questions about the circumstances associated with violence: Why do you use that sort of actions? How do you feel when you do? How do you think the other person, the victim, feels?

*Results. Elements of Diagnosis of the Problem at School*

The basis for analyzing the data in this phase was the proportion of the sample who answered the testing instrument. The most relevant data are presented below. The findings show that a high proportion of students declared turning to one of the practices of violence *as a form of defense* against previously suffered aggressions, as seen below:

| <b>Practices of violence employed as a defense (%)</b>   |         |                      |         |        |           |
|--|---------|----------------------|---------|--------|-----------|
| Type of practice   | Insults | Physical aggression* | Threats | Rumors | Rejection |
|  | 50.0    | 59.8                 | 50.0    | —      | —         |
| * An important proportion of the students (24%) expressed that they engage in physical aggression as a form of play. |         |                      |         |        |           |

This sort of data can be expected, since a person who receives aggression is likely to respond in kind. However, a comparison of the results with other data (such as the proportion of students in the sample who stated having positive feelings on becoming an aggressor, as shown below) reflected the existence of changing individual evaluations of the phenomenon, based on the person's role in the problem.

|   |
|---|
| <b>References to positive feelings on committing aggression (%)</b> |
|---|

| Type of practice | Insults | Physical aggression | Threats | Rumors | Rejection |
|------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|--------|-----------|
|                  | 76.0    | 80.0                | 42.0    | 60.0   | 56.0      |

The above results, interpreted from the perspective of roles in a situation of violence, suggest that students are simultaneously victims and aggressors when they respond to receiving violent behaviors. A student may also be a simple observer or aggressor, depending on the degree to which he is individually involved in the violent situation. In this regard, Trianes (2000) refers to the following degrees of types of individual implication in situations of violence between equals: *active*, if the individual helps or supports the aggressor; *passive*, if he reinforces him indirectly, by smiling or giving signs of attention; *pro-social*, if he helps the victim; or as a *spectator*, if do does nothing more than observe the situation.

When asked about their feelings for victims, most of the students mentioned feeling “a load on their conscience” after committing aggression, on recognizing that the victim feels “bad”, “offended”, “hurt”, “frightened” or “humiliated”. Such feelings contradict the *naturalness* that aggressors sometimes attribute to school violence, and can be interpreted in terms of an ulterior ethical evaluation by students (a realization that acting violently is bad). The process that mediates this sort of awareness and the student’s initial feelings is precisely what the phase of intervention hopes to generate.

| <b>Recognition of effects of practices on victim’s feelings (%)</b> |         |                     |         |        |           |
|---|---------|---------------------|---------|--------|-----------|
| Type of practice  | Insults | Physical aggression | Threats | Rumors | Rejection |
|   | 78.0    | 100.0               | 100.0   | 100.0  | 56.0      |

*Phase of Intervention: Learning to Live without Violence*

This phase was carried out with sixth-semester students at the vocational high school, as part of the subject of Human Relations. The group was heterogeneous, with a total of fifty young people from four classes. A workshop entitled “Learning to Live without Violence” was taught for three hours each week for twelve weeks, for a total of 36 hours. The techniques for compiling the information from the qualitative perspective adopted for this phase were the observation log of each session, which was videotaped, and the field notes prepared by the researcher.

In this framework, intervention resulted from the desire to discover students’ attitude changes in response to proposals for interaction,



cooperation and non-violence. The first actions taken into account were directed to attaining sensitivity in a series of programmed group sessions.

*Description of the Process and Principal Findings*

*From Indolence to Awareness of Violence between Equals*

The initial sessions dealt with sensitizing students with regard to violent situations that occur in diverse situations, according to the scheme of AVO. On a questionnaire, the students identified the different manifestations of violence they have observed at school, including violence they have suffered from and violence they have exercised. The questionnaire asked explicitly about the role each student perceives to be playing, in terms of AVO.

Subsequently, based on an introduction to the profiles of aggressor-victim-observer in the framework of violence in daily life, the students were asked to explain their experiences. They classified their personality according to the scheme and expressed the reasons for their positions, taking into account their actions at school and at other locations. The data compiled from the questionnaire indicate that the students relate violence to traditional aspects of association, such as insecurity and delinquency. One of the basic principles of the workshop, however, was that conflicts and violent situations have gone beyond such settings to take root in specific places at school, including the classroom. Thus the study was centered on identifying behaviors previously not considered violent: insults, humiliation, and contempt for classmates (bullying). Some of the data on the students' experiences are described below. They also represent an example of the way the information was processed.

ANDREA (VICTIM)

Andrea accepts making fun of others.

She perceives violence, especially psychological violence, as natural.

She does not engage in physical violence.

The most violent image she remembers is that of a teacher who made fun of a student because of his clothing.

(Field note): A constant in the experience of Andrea and most of the participants is having been the victim of robbery; this image is associated with violence.

GABY (OBSERVER)

Gaby associates violence primarily with forms of aggression like rumors, rejection and threats. She believes it is a natural form of interaction.

She does not engage in physical aggression and has not suffered from them.

Like other students, she reports having been the victim of robbery.

FELIPE (aggressor, victim and observer, in different stages of his life)

Felipe refers to insults in particular as a form of “kidding” (interaction among equals for entertainment).

In grade school and junior high he suffered from “teasing” (the object of classmates’ dislike, insults, humiliation, and scorn).

Regarding rumors, he points out that some people are specialists in slandering others.

He reports having suffered from robbery, and having committed robbery as a child.

(Field note): Felipe was the only person who referred to types of violence and the affect of violence as a whole on the school and family setting.

JUAN DIEGO (OBSERVER)

Juan Diego evaluates violence and especially psychological violence, as a normal situation.

He associates physical aggressions with junior high school.

Like the other students, he has suffered from robbery.

MARIO (AGGRESSOR)

Mario considers violence common, and remembers it from elementary and junior high school.

(Field note): He even boasts of his violent actions of “other times”.

In a more detailed study of the above mentioned roles, based on the viewing of the movie, *Bienvenida a la casa de muñecas*, the students added elements to their constructions. The most important elements are listed below:

- The victim can become an aggressor; or an aggressor can be a victim in another context.
- There are other important forms of violence equal to physical aggression. Of these types, psychological violence is identified as most frequent, in practices such as threats and discrimination.
- On occasions, the victim turns to his aggressor to attain acceptance by others.

Violence was also discovered to be a set of incivilities; i.e., daily attacks on the individual right to be respected, through hurtful words, cursing, interrogation, humiliation, open or diffused racism, mistreatment. The

students, especially those who participated in this proposal, complained about lack of respect for themselves or their personal affairs.

The emotional states that lead to the use of violence in the form of insults, physical aggression, threats, rumors and rejection, respond primarily to defense mechanisms in the presence of aggression, and to anger, ire or contempt.

As a result of this part of the study, the students were found capable of identifying their role in violent situations easily, based on three established categories: aggressor, victim or observer. They say most forms of harassment between equals (bullying) are normal, based on two constructions: a belief that bullying is “kidding” or “teasing”. The students agreed, however, that forms of concealed, subtle violence include rumors, insinuations and gossip.

Another part of the sessions was directed to having the students recognize the AVO profiles and their implications in real situations of violence a school. This exercise was carried out through a socio-drama. At the end of the representation, the participants were asked to propose a nonviolent solution to the dramatized situations. The activity showed that all the students clearly identified the AVO profiles, although not all could provide nonviolent solutions. Many in fact affirmed that conflicts cannot be resolved without violence. In other cases, the students proposed solutions that expressed values and attitudes such as tolerance, respect, a search for help, the increased self-esteem of victims, and the replacement of observers’ passivity with a mediating role in the conflict.

Along with the use of violence and the underlying emotional states, the participants recognized that victims do not experience well-being. Most students realize that victims feel discomfort, submission, humiliation, isolation and insecurity. Aggressors are thought to use violence towards their peers due to their fear of experiencing humiliation, insecurity and scorn. This part of the study, however, did not provide proof that aggressors attain their goals or enjoy greater acceptance among their peers.

The use of various tools during this section of the study facilitated increased student perception of aspects of violence previously omitted, such as the *damage caused others* and a modified willingness to confront them. The exercise carried out with the students, however, presented difficulties that require the use of other resources and strategies. In some cases, these resources and strategies are suggested by experience. An example in the pilot group was the inability to use intelligent mediation to address the solution of conflicts that arose or were mentioned.

In this sense, it is necessary to use pedagogical strategies that permit generating higher levels of student awareness of violent situations (psychological, symbolic or social) that form an imperceptible part of their daily lives. In this manner, they can understand that experiencing violent

situations does not make violence natural and normal. In other words, an effort is made for the students to progress from real awareness to possible awareness. For this reason, the exercise reported on in this paper attempted to instill a series of skills for resolving conflicts in a nonviolent manner.

Work was initially carried out in communication, with the use of two tools. The first was the technique created by Porro (1999) and called “Talk It Out”; and the second was the presentation of a conflictive incident with three different endings to show the students various ways of resolving conflicts. The “Talk It Out” technique recognized that situations that generate conflict involve:

- 1) Classmates who insistently ask to “borrow” materials from others, with no attempt to return them.
- 2) Classmates who act cynically as victims, as a strategy to satisfy needs by using others.
- 3) Excluding a classmate from participating in the activities of a group of friends.
- 4) Ignoring the comments of a classmate in a group conversation.
- 5) Hiding information from a classmate about a situation he “should” know about.

The second technique showed that including a form of physical or symbolic violence as a solution for conflict was not difficult for the students, who considered the use of such violence as “normal”. The third option—the use of agreement and dialogue—was not present in any case. Feelings in this regard are illustrated by the following expressions: “It’s humiliating to agree.” “The others don’t want to have a dialogue.” “There’s no willingness.” “People are closed-minded.” “Most of us don’t accept our errors.”

These activities reflect the complexity of having to agree, and especially if the parties are not accustomed to resolving conflict through agreement. And even if agreement is their intention, they lack the behavioral and discursive resources for achieving it. They need new tools for discovering and trying to stimulate the social skills described below.

- *Apologizing*: The students were told that apologizing is not equivalent to humiliation since it helps establish a relation equal to or better than the current relation.
- *Agreeing (negotiating)*: This skill encounters the obstacle of divergent individual and group interests. It was necessary to insist that the best way to agree is to select a solution that is fair, objective, sensible and favorable for the involved parties.

- *Responding to failure:* This part addressed various attitudes or postures with regard to a situation of failure, in order to avoid offensive attitudes towards others.
- *Facing pressure:* Alternatives for resolving conflict include responding to the pressures of school, work and other activities. Knowing how to act in different situations of pressure is a helpful skill in solving future conflicts.

Experiences throughout the workshop revealed the gradual incorporation of new alternatives in individual interaction, while representing a changed level in developing such skills. The following statement from one of the final sessions is offered as an example:

Classmates: I know that during the whole semester, I have had a very aggressive attitude towards all of you ... But before the year is over, I want to take advantage to offer you all an apology ... In this workshop, I have realized that I have been hard to get along with in many ways, without meaning to be, and I feel very badly. I want to take advantage to tell you that I like you and I recognize that I have behaved badly. I offer you an apology because now I know that I used aggression to defend myself. But it distanced me from everyone (Brenda, session 9, 07/05/04).

### **Final Reflections**

We believe that dealing with a problem such as that discussed in this paper, requires the joint participation of various entities—not only for researching and documenting the problem, but also for establishing initiatives of intervention that represent adequate proposals for high schools. This paper's object of study should be a central part of high school educational policies. Besides being a stylish topic to research, violence should have high priority as an issue of study.

A common denominator is the difficulty of intervening in situations of violence among equals. Working on proposals for interaction at school is not easy, especially when the educational community (teachers, students and parents) is also enveloped in unresolved problems and conflicts in the work or community setting.

Since parents and teachers spend a large part of their time with young people, they must be involved in any nonviolent proposal. They must participate actively to construct a culture that flees from rigid, unworkable solutions.

A fundamental product of this project was that the students modified their initial consideration of violence as part of the natural structure of their daily lives. After the intervention, they identified violence as a social construction. The group was able to develop sensitization processes, and

began to perceive situations previously not interpreted as signs of aggression or violence among peers.

It is important to stimulate greater awareness of the problem of school violence, particularly with regard to the participants' roles. Especially useful is the AVO system for understanding the phenomenon of violence and individual responsibility. As a result of this experience, the participating students concluded that dialogue is a better option than violence. They began to consider new personality characteristics, like those listed in one of the workshop's final sessions, as part of their learning:

- Being patient.
- Recognizing others.
- Trying to talk.
- Being willing.
- Opening their heart.
- Facing problems.
- Abandoning the ego and pride and learning forgiveness.
- Not avoiding problems; being open and understanding.
- Being humble.

For those of us who prepared the study, the experience has translated into the discovery of an issue worthy of future exploration. Our purpose is to generate knowledge (regardless of quantity or scope) that is helpful in establishing improved settings for work and interaction at school. To paraphrase Julieta Imberti (2001), violence may always exist as a possibility of human expression, but an alternative may be invented to eliminate merciless, destructive forms of violence and to remove violence as a common concern among peoples.

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