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Human rights violation within schools: mirrors game

Violação intraescolar de direitos humanos: jogo de espelhos

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Abstract

This exploratory research project studied multiple cases of schools considered to be violent. It focused on social relations among teenage students and the composition of aggression/protection groups with dominant leaders and dominated members. The schools mirrored the violence of their social context while at the same time acting as a sort of laboratory processing it and sending it back to the same context. As a result, they have become *loci* of human rights violations. Broad public policies, ignoring this subtle tissue of human relations, may not attain the roots of violence dynamics, thus not achieving their

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objectives and goals. We suggest some alternatives to overcome violence, founded on philosophy and the sociology of education.

Keywords: Basic education. Social structure. School violence. Philosophy.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa exploratória de casos múltiplos analisa as dinâmicas das relações entre estudantes adolescentes em escolas consideradas de elevada violência, pelas quais se constituíam grupos de agressão/proteção, com os seus dominadores e dominados. Os estabelecimentos se configuraram como reflexos de contextos sociais violentos e, ao mesmo tempo, atuavam como laboratórios de violências, onde, a estas eram importadas, ressignificadas e devolvidas à sociedade. Com isso, tornavam-se âmbitos de violação dos direitos humanos. Políticas públicas amplas que desconheçam essa fina tessitura das relações sociais correm o risco de não chegar à intimidade das dinâmicas da violência e, assim, de não alcançar objetivos e metas. Propõem-se alternativas para a superação das violências, nas perspectivas da filosofia e sociologia da educação.

Palavras-chave: Educação escolar básica. Estrutura social. Violência escolar. Filosofia.

Human rights violations are more apparent in the macroscopic than the microscopic scale. The unavailability of a place in school or of school transport are both more perceptible than the subtle tripod of the violence of/in/against school. These latter forms of violence, however, partially masked by the law of silence, contribute to make the right to education ineffectual. That happens because of the lack of security in schools (INSTITUTO INTERAMERICANO DE DERECHOS HUMANOS — IIDH, 2012) visible in the uneasiness prevalent among staff and students that is the fruit of the subtly interwoven macro and micro-forms of violence in the social weaving of school relations and of the complicity that exists between adults and students and among the students themselves. On one hand, violence leads to absenteeism, dropping out of school and low performance levels. There is, however, another less ostensive effect: the habit of practicing and suffering violence, mirroring the scenario in the surrounding community and a reflection of the school itself, as an institution.

Certain students become oppressed-oppressors, in the way that Freire (1997) described, reproducing the world around them and frequently magnifying the mirrored images. In this play of images the new generation receives a heritage of human rights violations. That is what research, carried out in schools considered to be violent in underprivileged social environments, reveals when it focuses on the texture of social relations among students, where it detects new relations established between the "masters" and their "slaves". Only a corner of the curtain has been lifted and there is much to report on the basis of data already in hand, and far more to be investigated in the hard existence of adolescents where hope, good examples, and dreams and projects for overcoming oppression are all equally lacking. Against this background, commonly ignored by the supposedly "wide-embracing" public policies, the seeds of the negation of human rights are sown in a process in which the school, while it may not necessarily be the central villain, does contribute towards the germination and eventual harvest of violence, whether that be through its own impotence, ignorance or deceit. After all, it is, historically speaking, a violent institution.

Young people and school today

Individualism, so typical of western societies and their young people, may well be present at the birth of all humans and needs to be processed, especially by the family and the school, in the interests of sociability. Nausea and violence may be among the effects that stem from the repression of certain instincts in the interests of social conviviality (FREUD, 2008). In recognition of that fact, Lipovetsky (2006) states that contemporary individualism makes it possible for people to observe and adore only what is the fruit of themselves, for themselves thereby incrementing social exclusion. As a result problems with relations among school colleagues proliferate in schools and it should be borne in mind that power struggles among groups of students may even lead to the ostracism of those that fail to participate in the violence being practiced. Thus exclusion, in the school environment, can sometimes be factors or effects of the forms of violence.

Violence as a constitutive part of the school ambience stimulates the groups of students to enter into constant conflict in the quest for dominion over territories both inside and outside the school. The social actors in their roles of "master" and "slave" are constantly changing their positions as the quest for greater power unfolds. If the terms "master" and "slave" are thought of in a Hegelian perspective the "master" is the strong oppressor and the "slave" is the oppressed individual (HEGEL, 2003). Thus the concepts of power and authority that Weber (1994) constructed, whereby authority is legitimate but power is not, are frequently perceived in a distorted manner leading to changes in the students' behavior.

The conciousnesses of domination

Struggles for power have been human facts since time immemorial; however, today they seem to appear in a trivialized, twisted and violent form in schools. Such behavior calls for a reflection on the consciousness of power. Such consciousness should be a consciousness of the spirit whereby the "I" is the "We" and the "We" shows itself to be the "I" (HEGEL, 2003). Thinking about will power and self-consciousnesses, in Hegel's perception, means thinking about a battle to the death between them in a dialectic process that generates the roles of "master" and "slave". Whichever wins the battle subjects the other self--consciousness to the condition of "slave" but, in doing so, the "master" comes to depend on the "slave" to gain access to the object (thing itself) so that, in effect, each of the self-consciousnesses depends on the other (LERES, 2002). In such situations Hegel (2003) proposes that the "master" has relations of pleasure with the "thing-in-itself" which is the equivalent of the negation of the "thing-in-itself" through the intermediation of the work of the "slave". Thus the aesthetics of the relations of dependency between "master" and "slave" are very much like a two-edged sword that cuts both ways; the "master" cannot be a "master" unless there is a "slave" and far less can he get into actual contact with the thing-in-itself. On the other hand, the "slave" becomes a slave through being unaware of his dependence and justifies himself through his submissiveness in the relations. Thus each one of them actually needs the other.

Power relations as postulated by philosophy have long been confirmed in the field of sociology. By 1932, Waller (1970) had already detected the conflictual relations that exist between educator and those being educated. With careful attention to the literature of the day, Antônio Cândido (1973) not only quoted Waller but went on to analyze the structure of groups and sub-groups of students and their integrative processes. What was found was that students' codes of behavior, one governing their reputation among teachers, and the other their reputation among their peers (which may be high among the former and low among the latter or vice versa) are frequently incongruent and that tends to induce conflicts of loyalty. The code of honor whereby one must not lose "face" and must "defend one's honor" involves complicity with the peer group and infractions of the established order in school. This close relationship with colleagues represents a form of support so much more important than any eventual failures in school that give rise to feelings of indignation and humiliation (MILLET; THIN, 2010). Historically, the way adolescence and the prolonged period of school life now enforced has been administered means that the students spend a long part of their lives in social proximity with one another and during that time they set up their own societies, with their own rules and sanctions that are often not apparent to adult eyes (COLEMAN, 1963). That means that intra-generational socialization far outweighs any intergenerational socialization.

Methodology

Research was concentrated on five urban, government-run schools in the Federal District, Brazil, deliberately selected because they were at different stages of implementing a school security project. As these establishments are ambient where there is serious violence, they cannot be considered as representative of the school network as a whole but constitute a kind of sample of an extreme condition. Given the qualitative and quantitative nature and the descriptive and exploratory characteristics of the research, embraced the sixth to ninth years of Fundamental (mandatory) education and the accelerated learning classes in the mornings and afternoons. Altogether 783 students took part, plus 111 teachers, eight police officers, ten members of school security councils, and five school principals, and 91 students took part in the focal groups.

Results: school context and ambience

In the schools targeted by the study 52.5% of the students were females and 47.5% males, an intriguing disproportion in regard to the masculinities found to prevail in the schools. Age group may well be another factor involved in the construction of violence: 22.3% of students were in the 10 to 12 age group, 67.9% in the 13 to 15 age group, 8.8% in the 16 to 18 age group and 0.3% were 19 or over. Relating the age groups to the school year being taken, according to Sucupira (2004) shows up the deficiencies in academic flows and school failure can be seen to be associated more strongly to some school years than others. Indeed 22.1% of all the students were in the sixth year and 23.8% in accelerated learning classes, i.e, classes for multiple repeaters. That bottleneck effect in the students' academic flow denotes failure on the part of the school and a heightened possibility of students' dropping out in the succeeding school years, often due to a lack of sufficient motivation to carry on (FRANCISCHINI; SOUZA NETO, 2007). Accordingly attitudes spring up of the type formerly known as "keeping face" or "defending honor" with the support of colleagues. Indeed in the focal groups many students emphasized the lack of motivation and the heightened violence levels in the accelerated learning classes: "the students in acceleration are usually older and stronger, do not care for studying much and whenever they can, attack weaker colleagues or those on their own...". For that reason many students feel insecure both inside and outside of the schools and that obliges them to form groups in a bid to preserve their physical and psychological integrity (ZALUAR; LEAL, 2001).

Actually, much of the violence has its beginnings outside the school walls so that students tend to form groups to protect themselves from violence on the way to school (GOLDSTEIN, 2008) because there are many gangs waiting for them. In their replies to the questionnaires 60.0% of students declared that they almost always went to school accompanied by someone because they were afraid. In confirmation of that information they declared: "We cannot come to school alone, there are always some louts hanging around the football pitch waiting for a chance to steal [...], but I saw them first and ran...".

The violence in the surrounding areas can have a strong influence on what goes on inside the school walls in terms of forming groups and the practice of offensive forms of behavior that give rise to physical and psychological violence. In the view of Sposito (2001) it is possible that violence seen and experienced outside the school is reproduced inside it, not through any deliberate thinking but rather, instinctively.

While 50.7% of the students interviewed considered that the ambience inside school was pleasant, 66.7% of teaching staff declared that fights took place inside the school. By cross checking the data collected from the students and then checking them against those gathered from the teachers there were repeated contradictions between the alleged positive relations and the records of specific violence. Actual observation confirmed the frequency of occurrence of violent incidents.

The false impression given of the existence of a "good" social atmosphere inside the school is often due to the existence of the "Law of Silence". Once the students got to feel more comfortable with the researchers themselves they made declarations such as: "Once I bought a new pair of sneakers, my mother told me to take care, they were nearly stolen from me when I was on my way to school..." Another student declared that in the previous week: "a student brought a razor, a knife, I'm not sure ... there was blood in the fight..." So in that case, as in others that were subsequently verified, in order to avoid stigmatization of the student involved and to "preserve" the school's reputation, the fact was concealed. The educators, in this case, do have some reason on their side: if there were to be police involvement the girl student involved could very well become a heroine in the eyes of some of her colleagues, and become all the more powerful to inculcate fear in them.

Thus the tragedy of the other becomes a fact imbued with banality and filled with despair (CORTELLA, 2009), making the perspective of the self in the other become construed only in its purely consumerist and objectifying aspects. The relations between the supposedly "good" atmosphere in school and the violence it actually contains is typified by the way violent behavior is seen as so trivial and common in the eyes of its beholders to the point of being almost invisible (LIPOVETSKEY, 2007).

Those two facts added to the influence of the media can constitute a veil so opaque that whenever violence does break out, there have already been so any instances of it that it has become a banal occurrence and its impact is reduced and indeed many students actually become proud of it (LIPOVETSKEY, 2006). Among other influences, the great sway that the media holds over young people is apparent in the statements of two students:

> [...] What I think is that there is violence on television, on the Internet, because nowadays children watch a lot of television and everything they pick up from television they imitate. At home the father hits the mother; they think that is OK [...].

> [...] Many students watch combat movies and at break time they play fight games; sometimes a real fight breaks out [...].

One of the most typical features of the lives of young people today is their accelerated experiencing of change in various aspects of their daily lives. As an example, more and more information is being produced but they feel themselves to be uninformed; they live in the midst of many people but feel themselves to be alone. The mobile phone, Internet and television are a part of young people's spaces that they share in their daily round and that enable them to learn and imitate models of social aspiration that are actually socially reprehensible but which they apprehend as natural or banal within their various social contexts, the school being one of them.

Where does violence in schools come from?

However, the forms of violence structured on the basis of fear, those that impose the reign of silence, often appear to be determinant in turning the school into an arena for violent disputes for hierarchical status. In that light, when students were asked whether violence originated inside the school itself, 67.9% of them declared that a lot or a little of it did. In the same vein, Moignard (2008) states that violence as a social construction, with all its power to coerce members of the school community, often shows itself to have actually been learnt outside of the educational environment. One student, in alignment with that proposition and also with the results of the opinions of teachers declared: "I think much of the violence comes from outside, because they learn it there and then come and practice it in here, but there are others that learn it inside the school itself ... ". A student from another school made a similar observation: "There are people that climb over the school wall and come inside the school just to beat people and steal...". Besieged, as they are, 42.0% of students stated that they were just as worried about violence inside school as outside. It would seem that the influence of the environment surrounding the school can make the establishment mirror the situation existing in the respective community, not only in the aspect of violence but also of sociability in general (BOWEN; RICHMAN 2002). In that light the school shows itself to be a laboratory for the experimentation of new forms of violence.

One of the most notorious examples of the effects of intraschool factors is the practice of "settling accounts" outside of school limits, so as not to incur the sanctions associated to school rules; that is when the educators do not turn a blind eye to infractions inside school. It was quite common for invitations to circulate for the "audience" to watch such aggression in the role of enthusiastic supporters. That means that the school environment not only "imports" and "processes" violence, but actually exports it (MOIGNARD, 2008).

The power struggles to gain a place in the hierarchy of groups in schools has a heavy toll in the form of victimization. In many cases, the process of creating victims may actually not stem from the protagonists of the violence themselves. Sometimes it is sufficient for a person to look on at the phenomenon to become a victim too whether in the form of the imposition of keeping quiet about it or actually suffering the physical violence (ASSIS, 2004). The act of looking on can be the trigger for new violence, because observing an aggression take place may lead the way to other forms of violence. Watching and practicing forms of violence may sometimes be camouflaged by alleging them to be just playing around. That elastic classification may well be because it is fun for the aggressor, but certainly not for the victim; a situation similar to a cat playing with its mouse victim. Acts of aggression may often result from apparently futile incidents that then get scaled up. As one student put it, "[...] *a lot of fights start off as stupid jokes like insulting someone's mother or giving someone a nickname...*".

However, it could be seen that it was not only students that were the victims of the violent disputes for hierarchical status: many teachers seem to get caught up in the waves of aggression, as one of the students reported: "[The teachers] get scared from the threats they receive too, students say they will beat them or threaten to kill them...". It was apparent that some of the teachers were drawn into the circle of violence by the threats they received so that their silence was actually more eloquent testimony than if they were to actually speak out.

With this process of victimization permeating the entire school it becomes essential to conduct a linguistic analysis of the context, because,

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insofar as the words and the conversations increasingly trivialize it, the violence may tend to become even greater. In the absence of such dialectic, the meanings that can be read between the lines of discourse of both teachers and students may fail to be interpreted in a coherent manner, making the metaphors and language perspectives in use a process which, in itself, sets in train an increase in violence in schools (MOSÉ, 2005). That is why the "dialects" that spring up among the students with which they communicate and assert their identities, are far different from the formal standard language taught in schools and they may well become a form of symbolic power (OLIVEIRA; MARTINS, 2007). In the process of developing a language, at the same time a system of signs or signifiers is constructed making it a reductionist process that gives the student an impression of identity. Thus the dominant language establishes a collective consciousness and that consciousness by means of the struggle of self-consciousnesses makes the language emerge as a signifier of herd [membership] (NIETZSCHE, 2005). The power of the dialectics of consciousnesses that constructs power relations in schools bases the herd signifiers on the dialectics of "master" and "slave". That means the verbal aggressions appear as a kind of ante-chamber to the world of physical and other forms of aggression that go beyond the ambit of power struggles in the schools.

Linguistic disputes are not limited to the students who make their language a form of self-characterization, a construction of reality and a means of imposing power. Many teachers in advanced stages of loss of authority try to take on the role of "masters" in their relations inside and outside of the classroom by means of a linguistic dispute, but they end becoming placing themselves on the same level as their students. As a result, their already fragile authority becomes even more debilitated. As an example, one student on being questioned about the cancelling of the "accelerated learning" classes attributed it to the teachers' dwindling authority: "Accelerated learning was cancelled because it was giving a lot of [disciplinary] trouble. [...] The teachers never do anything about it; some students even threaten the teacher...". There are several factors that may be contributing to that weakening of authority such as the lack of security in the social order in schools; the loss of impact of certain punishments because of being used so frequently; the internal and external informal "powers" like gangs; and the undermining of teacher authority resulting from excessive giving in on the part of the teacher (e.g. the teacher who always tries to please the students whims) or from the teacher's putting himself on the same level as the students in terms of practicing forms of violence, visible in the following declaration of one of the students — "There are teachers that vent all their feelings on us. The Geography teacher called me 'stupid'". The same student recounted another example of aggression: "There was even one teacher that threw a piece of chalk at me. Everybody laughed at me and he didn't care at all".

Considering the overall set of those being educated as a constellation of social groups and sub-groups, capable of cooperating, competing or entering into conflict with one another, then we must refer that there are between them gangs, specifically dedicated to conflictive processes that lead, among other things, to the demarcation of territories in the surrounding areas and even within the school itself. Gang actions are not restricted to fights and physical violence inside the educational establishments which come under the heading of violence in schools, but they also involve violence *against* schools. Whether they be inside or outside the school or ramifications inside the school of gangs in the surrounding areas, they all target school property or teachers and students as their victims. As one student recalled, "... often people from outside come into the school through holes in the school walls and they steal stuff from the classrooms; rucksacks, notebooks, money and anything else they can find in the classroom...". According to students, 22.2% reported having been robbed while 30.9% abstained from answering the question on that issue.

Observing the violence from the young people's point of view, however, such actions tend to confer prestige on those that practice them. That in turn contributes to incrementing violence and all the more so when girls actually dare the boys to do such things: "*The girls like those boys that belong to gangs, that like to beat others, wear designer clothes...*". A girl student from another school declared: "*They smoke, they break stuff,*

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they drink and nobody does anything about it. And some of the girls like that kind of boy, so then they carry on doing it".

The forming of groups inside schools is a phenomenon that involves a broad network of factors. Their origins may take place in a series of different spheres like the formation of verbal and non-verbal language codes, disputes for territories, vanities associated to the imposition of a consciousness of power and violence, and others. In this context a useful alternative is to have recourse to a Hegelian vision to gain an understanding of the phenomenon. The relations established among peers and among groups of peers always lead to an almost inseparable connection between masters and slaves who are constantly waging their wars in the school environment. It is in that way that the authors of violence, or "masters" impose themselves on their victims who become the "slaves".

The violence of the "masters"

In this adolescent society divided between "masters" and "slaves", phenomenological speaking and in all aspects associated to consciousness of it, the violence tends to take the form of a brutal imposition of the perspectives of one on the other. In that light, however, the "master" only gains access to the object (thing-in-itself) by means of the "slave" thereby imbuing the relationship with a tautological quality because in a sense the "master" comes to depend on the "slave" not only to access the thing-initself but to be able to impose his power and exist as a sovereign.

That becomes apparent when fights break out in schools. The leaders rarely take it on themselves to solve their problems on their own or even directly involve themselves, as an illustrative account given by a student shows: "*He has his own little group, he does stuff and when he is about to get what he deserves for it, his group steps in*". In that way those that dominate the groups tend to not enter directly into the conflicts. When they want to show off their power they get involved in incidents but always in such a way that they have the advantage and complete dominion over the situation. Analogously speaking, those leaders are similar to the king in a game of chess, who must at all costs be protected by the other pieces in the game. Thus the "masters" close the three side of the power triangle: seduction, fear and violence. Impunity steps in to make that power tripod even stronger.

The entire process has its original foundations in a war of consciousnesses whereby the being-in-itself wages a fierce battle to attain the being-for-itself which can only be achieved by means of the "slave" who must be subjugated in order to enable him to get access to the thing-in--itself. In his perception of that natural relationship Nietzsche (2006) states that this mechanism can verified analogically in the forms of social behavior. However, man has introduced an inversion of the natural perspectives into the relations of forces whereby it is no longer force that determines who is the "master" but rather, the imposition of moral ideologies of the "Herd".

The chess game played out in the school environment in the quest for hierarchy, glamour and social prestige is capable of disseminating fear and silence in its corridors. Each move made within the school is charged with all the pre-game tension where any move made will have consequences, making violence a categorical imperative for all those that find themselves on the checkerboard. For the gang leaders whose role is similar to that of the king in chess, which has to be protected at all costs, power is something of fundamental importance and acquired and used through the intermediation of the "slave". In that regard, the groups gain force in their disputes for territory because they are structured and formed around their own ideology, an ideology that involves ways of dressing, language and behavior that are all designed to distinguish members of one group from another.

Conclusion

The school, far from being a place where citizenship is practiced, has now become a laboratory of violence where the groups and their

associated masters divide and confront one another, mirroring in many ways the social context and sending back out the magnified images of it. The children of oppression, become further oppressed by those of their number that conquer the position of oppressor in their midst. The message that many of them get from the situation is that there is no other way out than oppression. Human rights, if they are mentioned at all, are a mere mirage of socially better off people that have been born outside this cruel circle of steel. This interweave of power relations, this fermentation of social relations, in whose interstices drug dealing, prostitution, trading in pedipornography and all sorts of abuse take place, tends to be by-passed by the wide embracing policies designed to promote human rights, especially when these policies address large-scale goals, objectives with a wide outreach and macroscopic strategies and which, nobody is quite sure why, are so often unsuccessful.

Of course public policies are welcome and urgently needed since most social and economic problems that affect school are beyond their limits of action. If the school is being looked to as a panacea, it is not even capable of carrying out its own intrinsic functions, much less others. However, in order to promote human rights, it is crucial to penetrate to the very heart of oppression and despair dynamics. It is necessary to develop in schools a new perception among students, building up strong ethical foundations governed by obligations to the other and a strong commitment to otherness.

Such an attempt at imbuing understanding could be made by means of a dialogical form of education because it would offer the students the means of expressing themselves and reflecting, as Freire (1997) put it. Intense, social projects promoted in an interdisciplinary framework constitute a dialogical education resource that needs to be urgently adopted, contributing to interaction between school and society, to the construction of a reflexive emancipation and a very strong association of school contents to daily practices. That process stimulates a reflective act of the being-for-itself and its social relations, while simultaneously attenuating violence between "masters" and "slaves" in the struggles for power in the school environment.

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