

SCHOOL VIOLENCE IN THE VIEW OF ADOLESCENTS: POSSIBILITIES FOR ITS CONFRONTATION

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ABSTRACT: This exploratory-descriptive study, with a qualitative approach, aimed to investigate and analyze the concepts of school violence and possible actions for confronting it in the view of adolescents. The research was undertaken in state schools with 13 young people aged from 16 to 18 years old, who were attending the second grade of senior high school. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, in August 2010. The analysis was undertaken through the thematic modality, from which emerged two thematic axes: *Violence in the school – a “naturalized” attitude in the relationships among adolescents, evidencing that school violence is related to physical and verbal aggression*, and *Actions for confronting the violence: possibilities for intervening*. The adolescents consider access to study and to knowledge to be ways for confronting the violence, but consider this confrontation to be difficult. This study’s findings reinforce the need for interdisciplinary and intersectorial work to strengthen that which already exists.

DESCRIPTORS: Community health nursing; Adolescent health; Violence.

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INTRODUCTION

School violence is being discussed and researched worldwide due to its appearing as a routine issue of society. What calls attention is that this question becomes visible because of fatal occurrences, such as death, or highly serious incidents in the vicinity of, or inside, the schools, often masking other types of violence which occur in the school environments and the spaces around them⁽¹⁾. Society, in general, is concerned with this phenomenon, which affects the routine of teachers, students, head teachers and staff, and is reflected in the relationships, the quality of teaching, and the students' performance and interest in their studies⁽²⁾.

The violence suffered or practised in the schools is manifested in a distinct form and is influenced by the conditions associated with social strata, type of institution, culture, and gender. Humiliation is the type of violence suffered most, followed by theft, threats, and destruction of belongings; humiliation and theft are present in the private schools, and assaults and vandalism are present in the state schools; in those schools located in areas of intense violent conflict, firearms are the instrument of violence⁽³⁾.

The conception of violence in school is evidenced differently by the actors involved; teachers, students and employees have differing conceptions of the problem, perhaps because they are profoundly linked to each group's specific characteristics⁽⁴⁾. The violence emerges from problems which form part of the day-to-day and can only be resolved if considered collectively⁽²⁾; even so, there are conceptions from young students and teachers which are convergent, for example, dialog and the use of rules of behaviour and punishment for transgressions – a necessary practice for preventing violent stances in school, so long as they are adopted with justice and fairness⁽⁵⁾. Another aspect in common identified in the studies is greater interaction between the school and the family, and the introduction of new strategies for confronting the violence, it being considered that these two institutions occupy privileged positions for the action⁽⁶⁾.

Investments have been observed on the part of the health and education sectors in combating violence in the schools, with the adoption of policies in states and municipalities; in order to carry out actions, greater interaction is necessary between these and other sectors. The actions can only be planned if there is knowledge of the actual violence experienced in the schools and if the possibilities can be identified for actions of preven-

tive intervention and promotion, taking into account that the school is a complex and dynamic place. Thus, in order to propose interventions, it is necessary to investigate what those who form part of the school think and experience, especially the young⁽⁷⁾.

It is in this context that the authors sought to investigate and analyze the conceptions of school violence and possible actions for confronting it, in the view of the adolescents, in state schools, so as to encourage the planning of local and municipal intervention strategies relating to this issue in the intersectorial perspective.

METHOD

Based on the issue and on the objective of this research, the decision was made to use an exploratory-descriptive study, with a qualitative approach, so as to incorporate the question of the meaning and the intent as inherent to the acts, the relationships, and the social structures, these last being taken as meaningful human constructions both in their beginnings and in their transformation⁽⁸⁾.

The study was undertaken with two of the nine classes of the second year of senior high school from state schools of the municipality of Palmeira das Missões in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, classes suggested by the directors of the schools due to their being students whose behaviour was considered inadequate. The participants were adolescents and the inclusion criteria were: to be aged between 16 and 18 years old, attending the second grade of senior high school, to be officially enrolled, to be present at school at the time of data collection, and to consent to participate in the study using the Terms of Free and Informed Consent, signed either by themselves or by their legal representatives, in the case of minors. The exclusion criteria were: to be away from school activities due to illness. A total of 13 adolescents participated in the research, three male and 10 female.

Data collection was undertaken using semi-structured interviews in August 2010, guided by a guide script for the interviews which was divided in two parts. The first contained socio-demographic data, and the second, open questions referent to the research problem.

The meetings for holding the interviews were previously scheduled with each adolescent and were undertaken in a room in the school which was appropriate for holding a dialog with the guarantee of privacy. Before starting, the participants received information and clarification about the research and signed two copies

of the Terms of Free and Informed Consent (TFIC), one of which remained with the interviewee and the other with the researcher. In the case of students below 18 years old, the TFIC was handed to the parents for signing and, following its return, the interview was arranged. The interviews were recorded using an MP3, following the participant's authorization, the purpose being to record the content in full and ensure reliable material. The content was later transcribed in full for the analysis phase.

For analyzing the data, the researchers decided to use Content Analysis, of the Thematic Type⁽⁸⁾. From the guiding questions, two thematic axes emerged: Violence in the school – a naturalized attitude in the relationships among the adolescents and Actions for confronting the violence: possibilities for intervening.

This study was undertaken following the rules of research ethics; data collection was undertaken following approval from the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Santa Maria, under Protocol number 23081.009915/2010-11. The students were identified by codes; the letter Y for the term 'young', followed by A for one of the schools and B for the other, followed by the sequential number of the interviews.

RESULTS

The first thematic axis, *Violence in the school – a naturalized attitude among the adolescents* shows it to be a normal manifestation in the adolescents' relationships, resulting from discussions which could be resolved through dialog, causing embarrassment and discomfort in this group, which considers this form of behaviour to be bad, as evidenced in the accounts:

[...] *It is a bad thing, you know, which happens because they fight over any old thing. With us for example, sometimes, it's just because of bumping somebody.* (YB1)

[...] *We hear about it, we practice it ourselves, and [physical violence] exists, fights, it's a normal thing.* (YA1)

The banalization of violence is characterized by the use of physical aggression as a means of resolving conflicts of interest, between people or groups. Adolescents resolve their relationship problems both in and outside the school, often using violence. The accounts below confirm this:

[...] *We were playing ball as usual, and as usual there were some people wanting to throw their weight*

around. As normal, the guy came over, claimed a foul, and there was a fight. A fight happened, but it was the only one. (YB7)

[...] *When I entered school he was there, I didn't know who he was and he just walked up to me and hit me, so I hit him. Then some of the other students who are friends of mine came along and separated us. It is because there was a new girl who had come to the school, very pretty, well made-up, already over the age of consent. And she had said, no, I'm single. . . . So, we went to the house of another friend, she was there, I was there, and we got together. [...] It's just that I didn't know that she was married, otherwise I wouldn't have got involved.* (YB3)

It may be observed, in this study, that the fights among the adolescents are not linked to the issue of gender, and the causes are the disputing of power in some affective social area, dating or friendship (jealousy of boy/girl-friends or ex-boy/girl-friends) and games which occur inside or outside the school. The interviewees' accounts demonstrate what was evidenced in this study:

[...] *I have already seen it. The girls fight, over the boys. Like, slaps and hair-pulling. The reason is because some poke fun at others and because of boys.* (YB1)

[...] *It happened here in the school recently, some girls grabbing each other by the collar over something unimportant, and a fight among a couple outside school, one incident had nothing to do with the other.* (YB8)

The second thematic axis Actions for confronting the violence: possibilities for intervening shows some possible actions for confronting this issue, such as strategies for improvement in education and greater investment in the family. Although the participants consider resolving the problem to be difficult, they emphasize as positive aspects the rules for social coexistence developed by the school administration, and the integration of discussion of this issue in the classroom by the teachers. The accounts below confirm the existence of these actions:

[...] *I think no, you can't get rid of violence. Because you can try to prevent or avoid it, but there is always somebody or other who will go back and do it all again.* (YA3)

[...] it's difficult, I think the only way of preventing it a bit is how people are brought up at home, more than that is pretty, very difficult, very difficult. (YA1)

[...] the school principal, the school board, is always seeking something to show the young people that violence is bad, that this is not for them. (YA2)

[...] it exists, the teachers even spoke about it. There has been quite a lot about bullying, it was interesting, we did quite a bit of work on it. (YA3)

One can observe the wish for the presence of people for helping in confronting the violence. In addition to this, the adolescents recognize that equipment, such as video cameras in the schools, also contributes to reducing violent attitudes in this space, although some state that the use of cameras is not an effective measure. These recommend more dialog between teachers and students and more staff carrying out monitoring duties inside the school, as may be observed in the following account:

[...] I think that cameras in the college, for example, don't make much difference. Partly because it's unusual to see someone taking care of the cameras all the time. I think that all that is needed is more staff carrying out monitoring, and more dialogue from the teachers with the students on this question. (Y3A)

Another important aspect is related to the attitudes to combating violence in the school, which are represented through the development of codes of conduct and are distributed by the managers to the adolescents who must follow and obey them, and in the case of failure to do so receive warnings, with punishment and suspension. To this may be added public safety, with the presence of police officers and the Guardianship Council, which are called by the school administration to control more serious situations and provide more precise options. These measures seem to have been adopted for a specified period, in which severe violence was more present, which is confirmed in the following accounts:

[...] during break time, I think, one kid asked to go out with her, you know, and the other girl, who was his ex-girlfriend, got jealous, so the two fought. The school called the police, they always call the police. When there is a fight. There used to be police who stayed here when it was time for us to go home. Not now, but there used to be. (YB1)

[...] the school's senior management sign a formal document suspending them. They call the police. The police come and enter the school. [...] There aren't any more police now. (YB7)

[...] they call us, make us sign the document, call the parents, if the case is very serious they even expel people from the school or give suspension for three days, they make a big effort. Sometimes they call the Guardianship Council, whether the person is a minor or not. (YB8)

It may be observed that the school, the police and the Guardianship Council act as one to combat violence, recognizing each field's limits in the face of this complex issue and the need for them to act in tandem.

DISCUSSION

One can start the discussion noting that violence appears in the students' accounts as something common and naturalized, and the reasons for the fights are banal – disputes over boyfriends or girlfriends, competitions between sports teams, and the need for self-affirmation among others; and the school environment is the stage for these fights motivated by these banalities, involving teachers and students. It is evidenced, therefore, that violence is considered an occurrence which develops naturally in life, a common situation arising from banal causes⁽¹⁾.

Being feared and daring is a representation of masculinity, reinforced by the concept of gender present in society and in the school environment by the young students themselves, who stand out because of, and are respected for, violent behaviours⁽⁵⁾. Fights occur among the girls, but are more frequent among the boys⁽⁹⁾; those which occur among females have certain characteristics, represented by slaps, scratching and hair pulling. The motivations behind the fights also call attention as they are considered silly, such as jealousy, gossip, and disputes over boyfriends⁽⁵⁾.

According to the study titled *Revealing intrigues, discovering secrets: violence and coexistence in the school*⁽⁵⁾, undertaken with students and teachers from state junior and senior high schools in the Federal District of Brazil, violence among females has increased in scale over time, and – even though males still predominate in aggressive attitudes – women's aggressive conduct must be considered significant, principally when it affects girls in the school environment. The

study shows the transformations which womanhood has undergone over time, and various meanings are attributed to these changes: the deterioration of female moral values, the expression of a corrupted female standard, and also, women's empowerment⁽⁵⁾.

In relation to the characteristics of the girls' family structure and violent behaviour, the tendency is for them to be more aggressive when those who are responsible for them and with whom they live are male, which may be related to the conflict resolution model historically expressed by the male gender, causing them to reproduce this behaviour with their peers. To this may be added the fact that the more aggressive girls live with older brothers, who provide examples of violent attitudes⁽¹⁰⁾. The way in which the parents or those responsible for the adolescents relate inspires the reproduction of inappropriate conducts by the children, showing the families' strong influence on the adolescents' behaviour. The more intense that the family situations of violence are, the greater is the possibility that those behaviours will be extended to peers and to school⁽⁶⁾; the probability of a girl being a victim or an aggressor is related to coexisting in families whose form of communication is violence, which contradicts the idea that only boys are aggressors⁽¹⁰⁾.

There is significant difference between the female and male genders in relation to violence; there is a higher rate of physical aggression and involvement in fights using firearms or blunt/edged weapons among males, showing that the boys are more exposed to violence, which may be explained by the difference in roles which exists between men and women, and how society and culture characterize them. Women have always been considered delicate, fragile, peaceful and capable of controlling their actions; while men are associated with the expression of aggressiveness in social circles⁽⁹⁾.

Another aspect observed is that the violence experienced among the adolescents in the school space may be taken outside school, in the same way that it may begin outside and come into the school, reinforcing the idea that violence is in society and that the limits between the spaces outside and inside are tenuous. In addition to this, the conditions of the school's surroundings can also influence the emergence of violence. Homicides, rapes, and assaults with weapons used to be the most serious forms of violence, and were distant, but are nowadays present in the vicinity of the schools. These facts give the impression that there are no longer any limits, that is to say, that from now on, anything can

happen in the school, contributing to produce social distress in the face of violence⁽¹¹⁾.

One relevant initiative is bringing discussions on the issue of bullying to the classroom. A study undertaken in Lisbon in Portugal showed that there was considerable reduction in violent behaviours after the implantation of a bullying prevention program in schools. Prior to the program's implantation, those students who were hurt retaliated with further aggression or hid the situation, showing that, in addition to causing suffering, bullying can also become a silent act, being difficult to identify⁽⁹⁾.

The above study evidenced that the educational activities provide the adolescents with the knowledge of other types of violence which occur in their school routine, demonstrating that information assists the shaping of the individual's critical thinking and the raising of awareness for the combating of violence in school, as the adolescent, being able to identify those practising violent acts, enables the intervention from the school, the health sector or any other sector to be more effective⁽¹²⁾.

A school which seeks to promote new methodologies of violence prevention needs to start the process of including families in school activities. It is known that the family environment directly influences adolescents' behaviour, and it is important for the family to become a partner in the construction of new ways of optimizing education and to be present in the school's decision-making, for the meetings to contain dynamics which encourage the parents to participate in activities in the school environment, and for parents to perceive their responsibility regarding their children's education within the school, and how important this participation is in the prevention of violence⁽⁶⁾. The recovery of dialog in the family is also a behaviour which is necessary for preventing violence⁽¹²⁾.

The presence of supervisors in play areas, monitoring the adolescents, curbs violent attitudes. The aggressor is deterred, and the victim feels protected, reducing the levels of bullying⁽¹⁰⁾, above all because the parts of the school where violence occurs most, apart from other external limits, are the schoolyard, corridors, sports area, classrooms, toilets and canteens; the times when violence occurs most are when the students leave to go home, break-times, during classes, during activities in the school which take place outside lesson times, and before the lessons start⁽⁵⁾.

The adolescents emphasize that dialog is able to prevent violence; even though many people still do not

believe that this method of prevention is efficient and the most correct way of resolving conflicts⁽¹⁴⁾.

Dialog and respect between teachers and students is one measure suggested as facilitating relationships. In contrast, the teachers' authoritarianism causes the students to distance themselves and hinders the establishing of a trusting relationship. Attitudes of verbal violence, humiliation and discrimination in the classroom on the part of teachers contribute to the students' low self-esteem and, consequently, to a drop in learning⁽⁴⁾. In this regard, it is recommended that a new model of relationship between teacher and student should be created, with greater flexibility and tolerance, involving the construction of a new concept of discipline as a component for the learning process⁽³⁾.

Violence's complexity requires the services of education, security, defence and protection to work together and intersectorially, allowing the flexibility and broadening of the flow in all the dimensions of care⁽¹⁵⁾. In this way, work organized in the form of a network can optimize actions for intervening in violence in each sector, allowing care which is closer to the adolescent and the family, this being able to occur in the Family Health Centers through the running of reflection groups with the families, in the schools and Early Childhood Centers⁽¹⁶⁾.

The school has the role of assisting the development of interpersonal relationships and the individual's physical and moral abilities through educational actions. In the majority of school institutions, generally there are rules applied to the routine, related to school attendance, use of the uniform, and the practices which are permitted or prohibited in the school environment. While some schools may be more flexible than others^(1,3), the school is a place where conflicts and fights with physical manifestations of aggression occur; and to control this violence, the school administration adopts more rigorous instruments – warnings, suspensions, transferences and expulsions, depending on the seriousness of each case. The practice of punishing is one of the components for modelling behaviours and minimizing violence, but it is necessary to reflect that the adoption of this strategy can both promote behaviors accepting it and cause the students to rebel, and engender new forms of violence^(1,3).

The active participation of the family in the school environment constitutes an important contribution for the prevention of violence in schools and can facilitate relations of coexistence at home, as the family is the space in which the adolescent seeks support in guiding

his or her life choices, and it is where he or she finds the examples for coexisting in society. For the family to be more present in the education of its children, and partner the school in combating violence, it is necessary for the school to rethink new methods for developing a closer relationship with family members, which would contribute to the building of a healthier and less violent atmosphere in the school⁽⁷⁾.

It is necessary to understand that violence is present in the community, which must call people to participate in confronting violence in a joint action with the school. In relation to this aspect, community leaders become important allies in combating violence. It is observed that communities have great difficulty in accepting the existence of violence in the neighborhoods, and the best organized groups have a broader, more complex perception of the violence, encompassing exclusion, poverty, social inequality and corruption⁽¹⁷⁾.

It is necessary to invite other professionals to act in interventions for confronting violence in schools, given the importance of other opinions in creating substantiated and concrete discussions on the issue, and that this assists in seeking new intervention strategies. As a result, it is important to invest in research and interventions which help create new public policies, which may be efficient in preventing and reducing violence in schools. An interdisciplinary approach is suggested, with varying areas of knowledge, including occupational therapy, pedagogy, arts and communication, in workshops and game activities with audio-visual resources and dialog for bringing adolescents and health professionals closer and strengthening the link between them. Even though integrating other professionals in violence prevention in the school remains a challenge, it is necessary to invest in interdisciplinary and intersectorial interventions so as to seek new perspectives on actions for combating violence in schools, and for the universities to produce professionals who are committed to social issues⁽¹⁸⁾.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In spite of not believing in the prevention actions, the adolescents perceive the possibility for confronting violence in the schools through actions for improving education, and – at home – through greater investment in the family; they value the rules for coexisting at school, and the inclusion of issues related to violence at school - bullying on the part of some teachers, security cameras and the intervention of the police and

the Guardianship Council; they call for the inclusion of more assistants (supervisors) and teachers in the school, and for greater dialog with the teachers.

This study's results show the need for greater investment by the authorities in actions which keep families closer to the school, providing opportunities for education, work, pay, health and leisure, with a view to transforming the family environment, making it as little vulnerable as possible.

Creating safe and pleasant environments in schools, communities and society is the responsibility of the public authorities in their three spheres of government, whose actions are based in intersectoriality and collective participation, in which educating for peace and encouraging positive attitudes among the members of the school community is the path to be followed.

It is recommended that there should be greater support from the State for the school institution, with encouragement for the professional qualification of the members of the school for acquiring competences so as to overcome those conflicts existing among the human beings which may be resolved through dialog; and that a form of intersectorial work, with the integration of partners from the sectors of health, security, justice and bodies for the protection of young people, should be strengthened.

The implementation of social policies aiming to promote the living conditions of students' families – access to work, housing, culture, professional qualification, and minimum salary, and health and leisure services – could contribute to mitigating the situations of vulnerability and social, family and school violence.

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