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Conflict and Violence in Spanish Schools

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to obtain a description of different research about classroom misbehaviour and evaluate to what extent the beliefs guide the decisions in the educational context, and a description of the main results of research on discipline and school violence. Spain was chosen for this purpose since diverse professionals were interested in discipline in schools.

The studies proposed by different researchers will help us to approach this phenomenon. There are several interesting issues that are to be addressed: school life, neglect of parents in their duties, the relationship between two concepts as conflict and violence, the circumstances and personal characteristics and guidelines for developing a disciplinary education programme.

Key words

Attitudes, classroom management, conflict, intervention, school

Introduction

While educational contexts are understood as extensions of the social world, they also present special rules and conditions that are different from the wider social world (English, Hargreaves, & Hislam, 2002). Well-planned classroom discipline must therefore emphasise what is essential for achieving a good working environment for teaching and learning (Winter & Yackel, 2000).

One of the main worries of educators in schools continues to be classroom discipline. Teachers invest much effort and energy in order to ensure that rules will be observed, and that students respect them while using their authority to maintain order so that classrooms function effectively. At the same time, they attempt to instil obedience in their pupils. On the other hand, it is probably inappropriate to expect classes to be “as



calm as a millpond” with everything under control, since the absence of conflict can be a sign of regression or a lack of risk-taking in learning.

The theoretics of education recognise that the authoritarian model is inadequate to guarantee either good learning, or the personal, social and emotional development of learners when traditional teaching plans are conceived from the teacher’s perspective, rather than the learners’. These plans are saturated with authoritarian connections and tend to be non-contextualised to social, economic and political events, or even specific groups of learners.

Despite this, many schools still function using pedagogically traditional practices, keeping outmoded, old-fashioned methods which ignore the social-cultural characteristics of the present, often contributing to generate discontent, lack of motivation, boredom and removal from school reality. All this leads to increased disruption and potentially violent schools. In short, such practices are counter to desirable school conviviality, made clear by the data derived from research into school violence, particularly in Spain (Cerezo, 1999; Defensor del Pueblo, 2000; Ortega, 1997).

According to such research, schools are not places in which acceptance and respect for difference prevails. On the contrary, school is a space where pupils have to remain eight hours daily and where the teachers have to take care to keep order and to guarantee an adequate model of teaching for their pupils.

All of this, plus the parents’ abandonment of their educational obligations to their children, the lack of motivation of the students and the excessive bureaucratisation of the school centres are contributing to deterioration of the safety of schools where insults, threats, fights, refusals, marginalisation are becoming common. With such conflict, violence and indiscipline prevalent in Spanish schools, and particularly in secondary schools, life becomes uncomfortable for staff and students, and undermines the positive development of the teaching-learning process.

Defining concepts

Before describing the current state of the conflicts within the Spanish education system, it is necessary to identify what we understand as school conflict by examining research into this topic.

The range of concepts commonly used includes aggressiveness, violence, conflict, intimidation, bullying, vandalism, anti-social behaviour, and disruptive behaviour. It appears that the concepts commonly used indiscriminately are “conflict” and “violence” as if they were synonymous. While “conflict” is part of the everyday social and scholarly life, where clashes of interest, discussions, debates and the need to solve problems are healthy, “violence” tends to refer to destructive events or circumstances.

While a relationship exists between conflict and violence, it is not bi-directional. Conflict is not always accompanied by violence, because human beings have a wide range of behaviours that help them to discuss some topics without the need to resort to destructive actions. Violence, however, is understood as a destructive form of conflict. According to Grasa (1987), a conflict suggests a contest between people or independent groups that have different agendas or incompatible perceptions about the same situation or circumstance. In such situations, debate ensues in order to reach either a compromise or solution. From an ethical perspective, a conflict could be defined as a confrontational

situation due to a difference of interests. On the other hand, violence could be defined as using power to annul the rights of others in order to win.

In a school setting, conflict can be healthy, while violence is not. However, agreeing what constitutes violence in educational settings is not always straightforward. Developing shared understanding about this means communities, parents and students will probably need to work together. Processes that manage conflict and violence in school settings in positive ways that contain the attributes of negotiation, compromise and empathy with others' views lead to better understanding. To conclude this part, one must emphasise that school conflict and school violence need complex analysis of the factors that make up the origin of both. Recognising that the potential for violence is present in any school is important as a place to begin this negotiation about understanding conflict and violence in relation to student behaviour in schools. For example, Vázquez Gómez (2001) notes that some people are naïve in thinking that school conflicts in "our" country appear in "another city" or in a distant district or in a specified educational centre where fortunately "I do not send my children". In other words, it's often seen to be someone else's problem.

The Defensor del Pueblo (2000) report on school violence suggests that it cannot be explained only from variables within the school. Other social and cultural factors also exist, which gives us an understanding of the complexities involved.

Schools: A view of their conflicts

A growing body of research focusing on the prevalence of violence among school-age youth has indicated that school violence has been steadily increasing across the world (e.g., Boulter, 2004; O'Donoghue, 1995; Srebalus & Schwartz, 1996). The studies have given such high importance to the incidence of conflicts in schools that there is the appearance of a lack of discipline and authority in all schools. But the question is: Are all schools bad? Are all students and teachers in danger in their schools? Do schools generate bullies or delinquents? The time has arrived to analyse to what extent the media portrayal is real.

Incidents

The majority of studies about school conflict suggest that Spanish schools do not keep or maintain a register of incidents that quantify inappropriate behaviour in lessons. For example, how often the pupils leave their seats without asking permission; how many class discussions have led to conflict and how often the ideas and views of the students differ from those of the teachers, and also the time taken to resolve problems satisfactorily. Conflict in schools is not being investigated in its globality but as a partial vision of itself. The research does not focus on the positive perspective of conflict but rather concentrates on aspects such as registering how often conflicts escalate into violence in the schools, the type of conflictive answer that was manifested, the place where it took place, or the gravity with which pupils perceive it.

The data about pupils' perception of violent behaviour in schools collected in the Defensor del Pueblo (2000) report shows that the majority of students believe they have witnessed violent situations, while a minority have been involved directly in an aggressive situation. It appears too that the number of aggressors is higher than the number of victims.

Another study carried out within the community of Valencia (GICA) revealed that the majority of surveyed students believe they are morally competent and capable of solving their problems and conflicts without resorting to violence. Only a third of them would use violence as a solution in some occasions. In this study it can be considered a worry that 5% of the students do not respect their teachers, and fight against their classmates without trying to find a way of solving problems. Some students also consider themselves intolerant and do not realize how much pain and damage they can cause to others (García López & Martínez Céspedes, 2001).

On the other hand, teachers, in general, believe that problems related to the strain of conflict and aggression in schools take place less frequently than indicated by pupils.

The research for the Valencia study was carried out with 1389 students (13 to 16 years old) and 170 secondary school teachers from northeast Spain, using a questionnaire designed to understand their views on conflict and violence in schools. Results show that behaviour considered socially undesirable is seen as more deserving of penalty than misbehaviour with a less negative social evaluation, even when the latter may greatly impact on teaching and learning activities (Castelló, Gotzens, Badia, & Genovard, 2010).

Conflicts and places where they appear

The national study by Defensor del Pueblo (2000) suggests that conflicts can be classified as verbal aggression and social exclusion, two types of conducts that student aggressors and those students who identified themselves as victims saw as most prevalent. On the other hand, those students classified as most violent considered that conduct like abuse, hitting, and bad treatment of others (physically) was more common than the victims perceive.

According to Hoffman (1970) different types of conduct have been classified as

- verbal treatment: to insult, to call nicknames, to talk badly about someone;
- physical treatment: to threaten with guns, to hit, to hide things, to break things, to steal things;
- verbal and physical treatment: to threaten with the aim to intimidate, to force someone to do something by threat, to abuse sexually; and
- social exclusion: to ignore someone, not allowing someone to participate in an activity.

The perception that Catalanian students have about the behaviour of their peers and how they understand discipline is very interesting. The Department of Education, and later on of the Generalitat of Catalonia, twice carried out a comprehensive survey about the problems of sociability and safety among secondary school pupils, in 2001 and again in 2006, comparing the results. It involved many schools, asking several questions about classroom discipline and the perception of discipline among secondary pupils. Those that consider there is less discipline than necessary increased substantially from 2001 to 2006, generally going from 25% to almost 36% respectively. Also the perception of the existence of bullying at school has increased considerably. The number of those that believe that there are “quite a few” bullied pupils has doubled, while those who believe that there are “a lot” has almost tripled. This evaluation suggests that there may be an increase in the awareness of the problem rather than an increase in the number of cases of bullying recorded. This may correlate with an

increase in media attention, particularly when considered alongside the question related to assaults against teaching staff. The variables measuring victimisation or recognised problematic behaviour show considerable stability across time, while the perceptions about the problem being worse have intensified drastically.

Also the perception that there is theft in some classrooms among youth is quite high. In 2001 35.9% of youths considered that people of their age suffer a lot or quite a lot of robberies; that number is now 42%. Also, the number of students that admit having painted graffiti in public places has clearly increased since 2001. At that time 22.6% admitted having painted on a public place, and in 2006 it was 33.9%. In addition, some of them had committed vandalism against urban installations. This vandalism also takes place inside schools, where students do not respect public furniture.

Gender

The majority of studies about conflict and aggression agree in highlighting the relationship that exists between violent conduct and gender. Pupils that fight, threaten others, steal things, call nicknames, insult and so on are predominantly male. There is only one type of female behaviour that stands out over all else, and that is conduct related to social exclusion (such as deliberately ignoring peers, or maliciously gossiping about others). Therefore, according to Cerezo (1999) and Olweus (1998), direct forms of aggression are typical of males, while indirect and psychological forms of aggression are more commonly female forms of behaviour.

Proposals for educational intervention

The context and personal characteristics will determine the selection of the activities to resolve behavioural problems. The needs are different according to school reality. It seems very important to assume that teachers spend a lot of time with the children every day. Probably children spend more time with their teachers than with their parents. Because of that situation, teachers gain much knowledge about a pupil's characteristics, and they can use didactic material in order to develop and improve the behaviour of that pupil. Teachers therefore seem to be the ones whose help can stop the violent actions, with thanks to improved educational programmes, but of course, parents have the last responsibility.

The majority of teachers are very skilful at creating resources for use in their own classroom. At this point it is very important to define different targets and to develop an educational project that contemplates different approaches. It would be interesting to include television programmes in this project.

Villa (2001) has shown that there is a positive correlation between television violence and aggressive and antisocial behaviour in individuals, although it is impossible to predict the precise effects on individuals at any given time and place. Parents have the moral responsibility to transmit their values, and those of the society around them, to their children. Government, as a social guardian, has the responsibility to protect societal values. This responsibility is exercised through existing legislation. Research has shown that television programmes tend to be violent. We consider the advice of experts on whether television violence causes aggressive tendencies and antisocial behaviour in individuals. We also believe that Spanish parents should share

the responsibility for what their children and teenagers watch on television, but that they need to be better equipped to properly exercise their freedom of choice.

Brophy and Rohrkemper (1981) developed an approach centred on the prediction of undisciplined conduct relating to personal characteristics of the teachers. Two elements regarding context should be kept in mind for behaviour control: firstly, the insensitivity of the bad behaviour and, secondly, the apparent cause of the disruptive behaviour attributed to the teachers.

Fernández-Balboa (1990) developed a process called “assertivity”. It was for inexperienced teachers, and it involves following different steps: to express the teacher’s feelings, to know the pupil’s feelings; to explain the effects a particular behaviour has on both the teacher and on the rest of the class; to establish expectations for future behaviours in order to reinforce good behaviour; to establish consequences to the undesirable behaviour and to finish the performance in a positive way. With this process they try to decrease conflict at schools and at the same time in the society.

In short, Fernández-Balboa’s (1990) assertiveness process contributes beneficial effects to the students. It provides them with a good self-image, a positive attitude, and increases their co-operation. As for the teachers, it decreases anxiety, increases confidence in their work and establishes a work environment where cooperation, respect and learning are permanent. Combined, this decreases behavioural problems in the school.

A positive attitude gives the teachers more time to correct work and to have feedback from the students, increasing the level of participation and the efficacy in the classrooms, and consistently, the learning. In this sense, Downing (1996) described the excessive use of the reactive method used by some teachers to solve behaviour problems that take place in the classroom. The negative or unpleasant consequences of reactive methods to behaviour deemed wrong by an individual or group, include

- the punishment can turn out to be inappropriate;
- the punishment can reinforce inadequate behaviour; and
- pupils through the years can develop anger and fear towards the person that punishes them.

All incidents that occur because of the reactive method decrease the time for academic learning in the class. On the other hand, the positive method provides a systematic approach to reduce the behaviour problems and to increase the time that students give to their work. A good discipline programme should have the following phases: establish the rules; create a record to keep the social system updated; determine a procedure to provide individual and group feedback and to determine the consequences of bad behaviour (individual group). There are several authors (such as Kennedy et al., 2001; Turnbull et al., 2002; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988) who suggest the use of intervention programmes in school and creating a good environment could reduce the possibility of finding undesirable behaviours inside and outside schools.

It makes common sense to say that teachers and students will obtain more benefit from creating an environment where the majority of class time is dedicated to learning and teaching and not just to discipline. Teachers and students could become collaborators not adversaries.

In order to develop effective work in classrooms, teachers should create a warm environment; establish few rules, and those in a positive way; guide their students to

establish their own class rules; teach them how to control their own conduct and to solve their own problems; and try to recognise their unpleasant (bad) behaviour in order to be responsible for it. This is why some authors like Genovard and Gotzens (1997) discuss the operant theory, and consider it to be non-effective in the long term in controlling class behaviours. Instead, the authors propose a control system where students would develop through self-discipline. In short this system would allow students to be self-disciplined but at the same time they would have to confront the consequences of their conduct and analyse them.

Conclusions

Most studies indicate a growing interest by teachers, students and professionals (most of them from secondary schools) regarding disruptive behaviour and antisocial behaviour problems. Most research emphasises that positive behaviour by teachers may help reduce discipline problems, increasing efficiency in the classroom, and consequently learning. At the same time, they agree on the phases that indicate a good educational disciplinary programme, which should contain:

- school discipline: this implies that the whole school community, including parents must be involved in the discipline process;
- self-discipline and individual acceptance of the school rules;
- the use of beneficial methods to achieve discipline;
- the implementation of the known and accepted rules by pupils and all the educational staff;
- effective teaching;
- the establishment of an environment which helps student learning and helps to promote good behaviour; and
- co-operation and involvement of parents.

Supaporn, Dodds and Griffin (2003) indicated in their studies at least four ideas that teachers can use in order to reduce indiscipline in the classroom:

- identify and reinforce the rules, routines and expectations of the class;
- provide explicit instructions about the work in order to limit misunderstanding and negotiation with the students;
- have a strong personal definition of behaviour catalogued as bad or undisciplined and communicate such definition to students; and
- pupils should interact with their peers in order to improve the learning process and to find solutions to problems. This concentration of learning by socialisation produces a good compromise in the teaching-learning process.

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