

FROM LINEAR CAUSES TO A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

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Introduction

A unilateral and linear approach to conflict has made schools a frequent object of news reports. Rather than highlighting schools as places of learning, these reports tell tales of violence with school personnel in the role of either victim or aggressor. This cause and effect approach not only produces a sense of discomfort but also of insecurity and conflict and makes it difficult for different players in the process to employ more constructive readings of reality.

This discourse of insecurity tends to be reductionist and creates an aggressive image of our students, portraying them as lacking in values, incapable of obeying rules and displaying inappropriate behavior. Our families are seen as unable to fulfill their roles as parents and our schools as incapable of educating or training our youth. This discourse is not new. It has always existed and its purpose is to find the guilty party. However, the complexity of human relations makes it impossible to find single answers, because we work in a field that has idiosyncratic variables and fragile borders. In other words, the same event can be interpreted in a variety of ways by different observers depending on their pre-existing relationship with the persons involved, how they interpret intentions, and the physical and temporal context in which certain behaviors occur.

There are many approaches to the negotiation and management of violence and conflict. Some of these try to identify standard external causes such as family dysfunction, social degradation, the student's ethnic background, etc. Others focus, for the most part, on more formal or instrumental questions and try to develop combinations of more or less standardized strategies based on competencies; in other words, they try to control possible student behavior.

Students, teachers, and staff - all of them different - coexist and interact in a school environment in spaces and groupings that have specific characteristics. Each has a different level of development. Each has a particular background, different experiences and perspectives, his or her own life circumstances; in other words, self-identity. The interaction of these multiple factors is what makes up the identity of a school community. But a "school" is an open system related to the outside environment and it is influenced by different variables, be they distal (history, social change, ...) or proximal (family, community, educational policy ...). In other words, in order to understand conflict, we must contextualize it in space and time for each of the intervening parties. Its meaning is not universal or atemporal, and it is colored by a specific culture and a specific narrative. Therefore, in order to intervene, we cannot carry out an atemporal reading using universal categories, but rather must be open to change and to the uniqueness and specificity of each situation.

Ideally, a school's identity is based on a balance between the autonomy, differentiation, and dependence of students in relation to teachers, and of the teachers in relation to curricular

requirements. Thus, the confluence of these interactions, given that those involved are at different points in their development and play different roles in the process, is, by definition, conflictive. Conflict should be allowed, not avoided. Having a different opinion or perspective makes one feel different, and feeling different is inherent to human relations and can bring about growth. Discussing these differences, even arguing about them, shows that we do not all think alike, and this is totally healthy. A variety of life experiences strengthens our ego, and continual interaction allows new structures to be built that alter the needs and motivation of human beings. In this way, development takes place in an ongoing process of assimilation and accommodation. The more varied and challenging this process is, the more capable it is of being a source of security and of promoting adaptation, thus making it easier for individuals to constructively accommodate their environment.

School is by nature, "relational", and consequently it is a context in which meaning is construed and reconstructed. We learn about ourselves and about the world by examining our own relational experiences. The results of this examination allow us to evaluate our interior world and construe and reconstruct ourselves and others as well as our "self" in relation to others and to the world. Conflict and response to conflict will be at the center of these interactions. This is why insisting on a negative view of school and the interactions that take place there destroys its importance as an institution which promotes development and negates its complex nature.

This being the case, it seems wise to approach violence by keeping in mind that conflict is part of human relations and comes from the dynamics of differentiation, autonomy and dependence between the different bio-psycho-social subjects that make up the relational mega-system called school. Thus, we propose a multi-systemic approach at different levels, starting with the individual system and progressing to the macro-system.

Uniqueness in shared space

Adolescents spend a great deal of their time in school where teachers and staff are the protagonists. For the most part, these professionals choose freely and willingly to interact with a wide variety of young students who live in different communities each with its own specific characteristics. In this system of actions and interactions, there exist individuals with different levels of development and various strategies for dealing with situations which differ in complexity.

We shouldn't forget that the students we are discussing are adolescents and that they live in continual conflict with authority and with established rules and values. Moreover, they need to feel different in order to forge their own identities. From this perspective, some behaviors, such as challenging rules or rejecting a teacher or staff member, can be understood as something other than questioning authority.

Provocation between peers, which is often considered negative, can only be understood if we try to understand the meanings and intentions of the individuals involved. In other words, what might be

considered by some as a threat can be seen by others as simply an interactive behavior with a relational purposes, although it may seem somewhat impulsive.

The best psycho-social space for self-validation is the peer group, where one is accepted, understood, and admired. This helps us understand that many behaviors that are often considered excessive, make an adolescent feel valued and reinforce his sense of self. When a young person dresses, thinks and acts the same way his peers do, it gives him a sense of belonging. Fear of being different and excluded from a group explains many of the things group members do.

Finally, given their socio-cognitive development, adolescents are naturally more impulsive as regards the strategies that they use to deal with conflict. They often recur to physical force. The difficulties they have dealing with frustration and not being able to anticipate consequences for their actions, together with their limited ability to be empathetic, help explain their behavior and impulsiveness which often times symbolically serve to break down barriers that keep them from exploring and becoming part of the world in which they live.

The point we wish to make here is that from a psychological point of view, we cannot stigmatize behaviors by labeling them as negative and ignore the fact that they are expressions of affect, calls for attention, appreciation for self and for others and evidence of a sense of belonging. Our intention here is certainly not to suggest that violence is not negative, but rather to question the criteria used to categorize certain behavior as violent without taking into account the meaning given to that behavior by the alleged perpetrators and victims. Furthermore, each adolescent's maturity and level of development should be taken into account when trying to provide a sense of ethics and morality so that they can learn to discriminate between "what is right and wrong" and what is fair and what is not.

Of course we cannot disregard issues related to individuals such as specific behavioral problems and their causes, evolution and meaning. Thus, any intervention that attempts to directly treat a symptom simply creates an illusion that we are treating the problem and legitimizes the commonly touted phrase "young people are violent."

Is a student violent if he physically or verbally attacks someone because he does not have any other strategies for resolving conflict or because he is incapable of understanding someone else's point of view or feelings? Is a young person violent if he challenges the authority of his teachers or other adults because he feels a need to question this authority? Is a person violent if he impulsively reacts to insults to his dignity and does not know how to deal with frustration, anguish and conflict? Is a student violent if he steals or damages something because he has not been taught any other way to manage his needs and desires?

Or is just the opposite true? Are adults aggressive because they do not respect anything new, or because they consider the problems of youth inconsequential and ephemeral and therefore not worthy of respect because they do not cause enough suffering? Is an adult violent when he makes public comments (in class or around other adults) that are not appropriate and are often even cruel thinking

that he cannot hurt a young person's self-esteem? Are adults violent because they have forgotten that they were once young and think that as adults they have the right to make comments that humiliate others? Are adults violent because they are not able to value small achievements and thereby provoke feelings of unfairness and contentiousness and a lack of motivation?

Are adults who promote extreme competitiveness and forget that solidarity is an essential value in human relations violent?

Are adults who want young people to hear what they say but not see what they do violent? We know that the relationships between teachers are not always models of mutual respect, solidarity and understanding. So are adults who want young people to act like adults, violent?

It does seem as if teachers try to attribute their problems dealing with students to external causes, thereby eluding questions about themselves and their own insecurities and fears and about the methods and resources they use in class. This makes them spectators and not participants in relationships in which the interlocutors share the responsibility for that relationship.

Finally, are young people who commit suicide, take drugs or stop eating violent? Are these extreme examples needed to make adults realize that something is not exactly right? Who then, is the aggressor, and who is the victim?

In school, there are many adults who interact with young people on a daily basis. These adults are human, and therefore imperfect. They have personal histories, a self, and problems. They construe meanings that determine the way they deal with and approach different situations. Some teachers are still quite young themselves and are insecure about their new role as would be any person starting a new job who is trained and qualified professionally but may not be sure he is prepared as a person. The work of a teacher is basically relational and quite complex, and a teacher should always try to recognize his own limitations.

When we are insecure, we fear being judged and find it difficult to concentrate on ourselves. Consequently, we are not able to understand others and their realities. On the other hand, regardless of the number of years of teaching experience teachers have, they are always evolving, and the transitions in their lives often coincide with the transitions in the lives of their students. It is not enough to be an adult; we must also be able to function as an adult, and this implies being able to analyze our behavior, even though we often act basically to protect ourselves. A teacher is a model as well as a teacher; responding to a student's behavior with similar behavior will only perpetuate the problem and create a vicious circle. We can only achieve something different by being different ourselves.



Knowledge promotes interaction

We all know that a classroom is a system of relationships in which communication should be bi-directional or circular and where everyone should participate; it is not simply a place where knowledge is imparted verbally and there is a "transmitter" and a "receptor". It is generally accepted that communication is complex and that messages are received in different ways by different receptors. What might be stimulating to one person may not be to another and this is where "non-verbal" cues affect the way in which a message is received or even if it is received at all. In order for communication to be circular, we must listen to the messages our young students are sending us, decode them and accept them. It is not enough to admonish someone, but rather to transmit to him that we understand that something is happening and help him participate in the relational process. We must not forget that in the abrupt, corporal and psychological phase of development that adolescents are going through, it is not easy to sit still for several hours and participate actively in closed spaces when they feel full of energy and cannot always understand or control their feelings.

Attitudes which try to control the problem only tend to cover them up and never discover the message hidden is a specific behavior. They also do not promote a student's development. Full participation by everyone in a classroom can only be achieved in a special context in which all channels of communication are open; in order to achieve this, eye contact between all of the participants is absolutely necessary. If this is true, it is hard to understand why classrooms are often designed so that students cannot see one another, even though the teacher can circulate throughout the room. The teacher then becomes the main actor and the students mere spectators, which only promotes a non-relationship.

There is another important point that should not be ignored if we want to understand the truth about relationships in this system. If in the past teachers and students came from a relatively homogeneous socio-cultural background, today teachers are confronted with students from extremely diverse socio-economic and cultural strata. They must adapt to these new cultures, values and views of the world, a task for which they are often unprepared. This situation, which should, in principle, be an opportunity for growth, is often just the opposite, and a lack of acceptance of differences limits the possibility of creating genuine relationships between teachers and students.

In these circumstances the use of what for some might be more or less comfortable strategies such as gathering all of the students with problems in one classroom or space is a common practice. But they forget that when students are made to feel different and when they feel isolated and unwanted, tension rises. Putting a lot of young people together in these circumstances is bound to create stress and uncontrollable situations.

So, to sum up, if there is no relationship, there is no knowledge. Without knowledge we tend to assign meaning to situations only according to our point of view. When we focus on ourselves, we project our own identities and this hampers meta-communication. If there is no meta-communication, the situation will escalate and lead to a dead end.

What kind of models are we? What kind of models do we want to be?

When a society, culture or institution (family, school, etc.) is not able to provide guidelines for interaction, young people's development is affected. They lose confidence in themselves and in others and have a very diffuse sense of personal identity. Too often adults tend to believe that young people are not capable of creating a life-plan or of dealing with frustration. They consider them violent and lacking in constructive interests. The guidelines offered to young people are frequently paradoxical, placing them in a conflictive situation in which they must live in the present according to patterns that we have provided them, in a consumer-oriented society, with an uncertain future and a great deal of competitiveness.

In order to grow, a safe and protected environment with rules, objectives and a sense of responsibility is fundamental. There must be well-defined limits and hierarchies which everyone knows and respects and space in which everyone can feel free to carry out their respective roles. However, most of the time, we offer a fragmented identity with no sense of uniqueness, continuity or unity. How can we, then, contribute to forming an identity for adolescents when they need a structured context which serves as a safe and secure base from which they can explore the world and themselves at the same time, with respect for themselves and others?

Situations which affect the well-being of the people involved should be analyzed systemically, not unilaterally. This is why the focus in violent situations should not be on the young person, but rather on the violent acts as a form of communication, a relationship with another physical and social being. We believe that only through a safe and genuine relationship is it possible to change and internalize appropriate strategies for social interaction.

School, family and society in general are institutions that generate rules. These rules should be clear, logical and of benefit to every one involved. However, in the majority of cases, rules depend on how an individual defines and evaluates them and on the person who breaks them. On the other hand, a young person must feel a rule is pertinent in order to respect it, and when a rule is defined in a way that only benefits some of those involved, it is possible that when an adolescent breaks the rule, he is simply trying to defend his own rights. We don't want young people to be conformists and we don't want societies that develop diffuse and vicarious identities. We know that in today's society, the slogan we live by is "whatever you do, don't allow yourself to be controlled", which means functioning at a basic structural level, which is characteristic of children. How can we, then, elicit more complex behaviors from younger adolescents?

Within this analysis we cannot forget the symbolic value of space as a structural element which provides a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, our schools almost always offer inhospitable and dilapidated spaces where no one wants to be, let alone recognize as their own. School is still a place where young people can discharge all of their energy, whether it be through real physical activities or through artistic activities which promote creativity and the constructive expression of feelings and emotions, which both reinforce their sense of self and decrease the tension they feel as they are growing up.

But school is not isolated; it is an open system in spite of the fact that many times it is not very permeable. It exists in a community and in a society which directly or indirectly interfere with its functioning. And when we try to analyze issues of violence, it is easy to confuse what in reality is "intra-school interaction" with what happens in the macro-system in which the school exists.

The family and schools are the two main institutions of socialization and development for adolescents; therefore, it is essential that a healthy relationship between the two be promoted. In other words, parents must be encouraged to participate more fully in school life, not only because they are an important part of the school context, but also because their involvement is one way to reinforce what the school does. This cooperation will make it possible to avoid the inconsistencies that confuse young people, victims of adults who are not capable of communicating.

On the other hand, we cannot forget that the family also generates violence. We know that often times the most violent youth come from dysfunctional or broken families (parents in prison, negligent mothers, drug addicts, poverty and lack of education ...). We must ask ourselves what society does to give these students the affection and the love that they need to build their egos? We also know that the socio-cultural-economic status of an individual is not a clear and valid predictor of violence. We, of course, do not want to place all of the responsibility for violent behavior with the schools, but we do believe that the school can provide structure for adolescents either because it can serve as a safe haven or because it can be a model for young students and their families. Schools can offer the services of qualified professionals who give families the opportunity to benefit from support and development-oriented interventions with the goal of helping them find alternative ways to function and deal with the variable of the family context which contributes to the aggressive behavior exhibited by adolescents.

In many cases, families are not a source of affection and unconditional support, nor do they provide an atmosphere in which their children can experience healthy growth. This is why schools and community service agencies can contribute to the prevention of inappropriate behaviors by both families and adolescents. Nevertheless, it is almost always true that the person who is punished is "the actor", and ways to intervene with the family are not sought even though the family has the key role in helping adolescents rebuild a healthy lifestyle and appropriate forms of interaction. This vicious circle must be broken, first of all by taking the focus off of youth and then by looking for joint strategies which will allow adolescents to grow up constructively.

In order to better understand these issues, we must broaden our analysis to macro and chrono-systemic levels because we belong to a society, to a culture and to a specific moment in time that have specific characteristics that influence us positively and negatively.

We live in a society with values which are more technical than humanistic in nature and whose essence lies in consumerism and immediate pleasure. People are valued more for their image than for who they really are. These types of values produce uncontrolled competition in which anything is allowed if it helps us achieve certain goals and objectives.

The statement "life is difficult" demands the capacity to fight; "seek immediate pleasure" does not. The first requires the completion of certain "tasks" in life such as becoming independent, having a profession and a family, but divorce and unemployment lurk in the background. When faced with these conflicting statements, it is not uncommon for adolescents to stop trying and revert to violent behavior as a means of self-protection.

Social and political discourse is full of conflicting messages: politicians and social agents speak of peace but make war; they speak of professionalism, but create unemployment or instability in the job market; they speak of training, but that training is not accessible or is of very poor quality; they speak of solidarity but promote competition; they speak of respect and understanding, but insult one another publicly; they speak of equality between the sexes, but cling to very old-fashioned models given today's necessities; they speak of justice, but trials change from case to case according to the circumstances. These are some examples of patterns of reference that are currently offered to our young people as models to use when forging their own identities!

People generally live too fast in small spaces on vertical islands. Isolation in the middle of the immensity of the world has become a reality. In spite of the harshness and cruelty of this picture of life, this is the society in which we live and the one we are passing along to our youth. Nothing is left but the obsessive search for virtual relationships which accentuates isolation and a feeling of emptiness.

Thus, in order to confront the problem of violence in a constructive manner, we should accept our role as adults responsible for the growth and development of our youth. We should avoid classifying them and promote constructive changes in the family and in individuals themselves by identifying processes of self-determination within a context. In this way, young people will be able to understand the meaning of life and begin to define not only their own life, but also life in general.