

IN-SCHOOL VIOLENCE REVISITED?

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses on the distinct characteristics of school violence from other antisocial/ criminal actions, focusing on the Greek reality and highlights the significance of mediation in changing the culture of violence in schools.

Key words: juvenile delinquency, school violence, antisocial concepts, mediation

A. Juvenile delinquency

The juvenile delinquency is something more than an intention and a result as well. Internal values and external symbols, the participation in a group with its own rules, the sense of ‘being lost ‘in an anonymous society, the adventure of escaping from adult’s supervision, are projected as ‘a revolution’. On the other hand, ‘criminal stereotypes’

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provoke or satisfy a climate of hostility vis -à-vis these particular or different behavior and they identify young mentalities with violent stigmatizing process (Panousis, 1990a).

B. School Violence

School violence involves a category of crimes committed on school premises and should not be confused with antisocial / criminal actions of students committed outside school premises (Panousis, 2006:75-85). Individually, collective, social, cultural, and economic characteristics are intertwined in the classroom based on the psychology of the game and of the challenge (Panousis, 1990:62). Family social capital, ecological factors, and internal school functions (Zarafonitou, 2015) can modulate a climate of calm or a climate of lawlessness (Lindström, 1993:2,15,26,121-122) (e.g., street gangs, school bullying). The connection between school violence, social exclusion, and the breakdown of the social web for most offenders is a given. The same applies to the conflict situation due to the general lack of trust in institutions and values (Floro, 1996:22,69.82, 116, 137).

The research (Panousis, 2006:76-77) does not always agree on definitions (violence, intimidation, aggression, school abuse), while the proposed policies rely on all levels of prevention (Artinopoulou, 2001). I am not sure that the (criminal) violence in schools is growing, despite the occasional existence of an excessive number of relevant articles in the Press. The Media - perhaps driven by contradictory and incomplete survey data - insist that violence is endemic in schools (dramatizing isolated incidents and inflating quantitative data). For many commentators bullying has become a high-risk phenomenon resulting in a (constructed?) moral panic (Cohen, 2006:244). For others the passage from vandalism, fleeing and alcohol use to theft and drug trafficking (Trump 2000;

Gottfredson, 2001) is just a matter of time. They don't (want to) distinguish between armed students, students-killers as symbols or "heroic avengers" and even organized bullying, bravados, and "thugs". School violence is approached by some criminologists as a neo-fascist phenomenon and by others as xenophobic "collateral damage" (Collective, 2009).

But even if the organized conflicts between groups of students have racist characteristics (especially against children of immigrants) or they are part of male masculinity, in the Greek School there are no armed attacks, killings, shootings and rapes. There is no gun culture or classmates killing because of revenge, obsession, or demonic possession. However, this does not imply the lack of a dominant, generalized feeling of insecurity.

C. Teens antisocial concepts

Adolescence as the age of paradoxes and as a bridge to adulthood raises difficult questions for both young people themselves and others as well (Yotopoulos-Marangopoulos, 2010). The limits and margins of learning from childhood to adulthood, from home to school, from parental overprotection to school compliance often result in lawlessness ruptures. The road from *game* to *challenge* is often not that long (Panousis, 1990:62; Depardieu, 1990).

Anger *in* school *and* against everyone combined and amplified by boredom and frustration does not eliminate student's need for belonging in a group and holding his individuality at the same time (Lorrain, 2001). The integration into a community of (even aggressive) peers (Bouka, 2018) and the individual or collective verbal aggression among

students, move between game, humor and insult but could hardly express authoritarian attitudes (at least in the Greek cultural context). They're rather collective social representations or for behaviors seeking vital space (where competition, adjustment, compromise, and cooperation coexist) (Mavrogiorgos, 1995:76).

The inclusion of school violence in the overall juvenile crime (Thanos, 2010:13; Beze, 1998:72) is often associated with normalizing shapes, with a stricter social control and deterministic approaches (Panagiotopoulos, 2010:51).

The discrepancy between research findings and confusion about terminology should prevent univariate approaches (Themeli, 2010:125). The dynamic and changing nature of youth violence cannot be enclosed within standard shapes of individual differences (especially when the environment is perceived as hostile) (Kourkoutas, 2010:148 ff., 155, 162 ff). The evolution of youth vitality to hostility, namely the transubstantiation of benign aggression to violence, hides inner *meanings* that we should rapidly decode. The eruptions of rage, anger, and re-action (Lesser Atkin, 1979:10,24,31) maybe are associated with the *violence of school-ization* (Kaila, Polemikos & Xanthakou, 1994:7) or maybe not (having their roots in the family or among friends) (Walgrave & Vettenburg, 1985:42). Active aggression as a drive or as a reaction to deprivation (Kourkoutas, 2011) may conceal anger and fear, but its school manifestation certainly is connected to horizontal and vertical relations of control (O'Toole, 2000).

D. Fears

Many choose to approach the phenomenon from a psychological perspective pointing out the correlation between adolescence and aggression (Kourkoutas, 2011) or the psycho-

emotional development of young people and the particularities of each student. Others choose to point out the collective expression of such behaviors, based on the *companionship of peers* and the comparison between different school types and different offending subcultures (Milesi, 2009:194). Often, they have considered demographic/social characteristics pertaining to gender, socio-economic status of the family, parents' occupation etc. (Courakis, Zagoura & Galanou, 2004:461,464,474). Attack and defense, intimidation and fear, victim and offender alter positions and take different forms (e.g, insults, threats, use of force, etc.) behind of which, however, lurks the erosion of inter-personal relationships (relational aggression, Belogianni, 2011:80) and the devaluation of the "other"(Kourkoutas, 2008:305-310).

The signs of psychological identification of *child-perpetrator* and *child-victim*, the profile of the bully and the frightened, the concepts of imposition (perpetrators) or self-defense (victim-victims) appearing to all students' justifications for the in-school violence phenomenon, have been outflanked by the fear of armed attacks.

Armed attacks in school premises (Spyropoulos, 2011:22; De Venanzi, 2012:264) in Greece are not associated with bullying (as individual bullying or as team mobbing - Spyropoulos op. cit. p. 34). Further, the "bravado" of the student does not necessarily lead to a pre-infringing minor (Spyropoulos, op.cit, 41, generally Georgoulas, 2000) and the systematic abuse of power does not automatically convert to gang formation (Spyropoulos, op.cit PS 49). Nevertheless, bullying (Olweus, 2009:28-29, 34, 49-51) is often associated with in-school competitions and students' diversities (power gaining or provocative victims) and than does create patterns of *antisocial behavior*.

E. Punishment and Discipline or Management and Mediation?

Although the fear remains the final reason of punishment (Zarafonitou,2023), when a young boy/girl violates the law, the systemic model for changing the culture of violence in schools must include the *student conflict resolution system* (where intermediaries are selected by their peers and not by the school administration), the *education/learning system* (consolidation of communication and understanding terms) and the system for *shaping social consciousness* (life lessons). Mediation sometimes can be a crisis management technique and others a pedagogical process. Under no circumstances, however, should it serve as a disciplinary model (Bonafé-Schmitt, 2000:181). Mediators-students bring the two parties together and try to find common ground and a mutually acceptable solution (Bonafé-Schmitt, op.cit. p.183) that will restore the balance (Fouillen, 2000:189).

The symbolic mediation allows the student to establish a new “reconciliation space” with the school system without the stigmatizing penal intervention (Selosse, 1998:88-89). This process is even more useful and effective in today's multicultural school where teen students “do not share common social codes (expectations, values, language)”. The tranquil atmosphere, the mild management of conflict, the debate around the problem (and not the "problematic" student – Fortin, 1998:101- 102), even the just punishment that leads to reconciliation rather than rejection the correct decoding of adolescents' insecurity messages, the non-discrimination and non-marginalization of weaker students and the encouragement of the team (Fortin op.cit,106, 112), reinforces the pedagogical (and not the repressive) content of School, demonstrates the endurance of institutions and

avoids the temptation of establishing of a penal-discipline model (Tsiganou, Daskalakis & Tsamparli, 2004:241-242).

Even if the school director gets involved in the management of conflicts himself, this should be done on the basis of embedding an “ethos of school life”, in which students’ participation in the diffusion of tensions plays a crucial role. Adolescence as a “society of youths” and the school as a “quasi - overall social situation” should come together in order to respect the rights and the terms of cohabitation and not on the basis of authoritarian rule (Pain, 1998:54-57,59). The negotiation strategy, without neglecting the "asymmetrical power relationship between the participants” and the social control context, is bound (and determined) by cultural elements (Solomon & Makrynioti, 1995:41). The negotiation of school life moves in a fragile framework of ceasefire, which breaks when school is under a legitimacy crisis (from inside or outside). The symbolic - social interaction as to the meaning given to "school events" often results in self-refutes and in the release of emotional tensions.

When space becomes hostile and the *other* is perceived as a threat to autonomy or image then no matter who is in charge for the management of the crisis -the psychological counselor, teachers and other school staff, parents, peers, and the media- (on the media-mania see Trump, 2000:5-9,7,13,27), cannot stop the ruptures. Teachers’ ability to manage the heterogeneity of the class and to anticipate crises is associated with their threshold of tolerance and acceptance. All are boundary issues. The antidote to violence is justice and respect (even when there is a need to impose fair sanctions - but not vindictive punishments) (Auduc, 2000:168-171; Fouillen, 2000:186-187). *Restorative justice*, where the "violent" student undertakes to repair the damage, he caused

(Artinopoulou, 2001:662) can work only if all parties believe in mediation (Chatzichristou, 2012).

The restoration of the offender-victim relationship in the school environment, not in a peace-making criminology framework (Artinopoulou, 2010), but in a mutual respect and observance of rules framework, even during conflicts (Panousis, 2011:32-33, 35), should become integrated into a culture of dialogue and prevention (Artinopoulou, 2011:43) and not so much in the school regulatory framework (which seems to be rejected by everyone) (Thanos, Kolofotia & Hatzaki, 2011:48). When students themselves find necessary the punishment of certain behaviors, this means that the representations of violence and the negotiating nature of interventions should be systematically studied separately (away from generalizations and aphorisms).

Understanding and awareness improve relations with (potential) benefit the restoration of mutual trust (Thanos, Kolofotia & Hatzaki, op.cit ,50-52, 68). The mild and peaceful way of management/resolution of in-school conflict is associated with negotiations, smoothing and compromise. Primarily, though, we should encourage student mediation (see Children's Ombudsman proposals 2010:124). Crisis management in school, communication as a psychosocial function and as a role-play game allows students-mediators to develop skills of managing disputes and conflicts and thus earn the trust of their peers.

Any dispute and conflict, any sense of denial and humiliation, insult, and injustice, does not necessarily reveal sick personalities but children with respected opinions. The often-indifferent school does not have mechanisms and teachers are not prepared to handle difficult (or violent) situations. The neighborhood and the local community usually stand

amazed every time (hiding under the carpet the “ecology of fear and failure”). The school atmosphere (of understanding and conciliation) may generate positive emotions, feelings of safety and security, and can utilize communication as a tool for social integration and psychological support.

F. Suggestions

The problem is not going to be solved through a “school criminology” but through an approach of understanding. Focusing on the potential causes is not sufficient and usually leads to methodological errors due to strong ideology (Walgrave & Vettenburg, 1985:50-52). We must 'reinvent' school (Fischer, 2003:7.), which means new structure, new format, new relationships, new aesthetics, new functionality, new roles. We should disengage school from the process of legalization of the predominant social class so that it is not condemned (the school and ourselves) to replicate or expand the existing inequalities (Fischer, op.cit,45-47, 50). Social advancement and mobility –through school qualifications– should not become a sham and a form of "school trap" because we all deny our roles and responsibilities. What kind of "teachers" we are, if we teach only "class hostility" in the class (and by the class)?

The extreme cases of student behavior (les cas ultimes) whatever their causes and whichever their result (violence, drugs, prostitution, etc. – Lebon & Jost, 1985:314) must find within the school a "living space" (milieu de vie) and a “code of life” (Lebon & Jost, 1985:314,321) which would overturn the negative conditions (social, cultural, family) who led the youngster to extremities. Besides, forgiveness or the ability to forgive are interwoven with tolerance and empathy and related to interpersonal disputes.

Thus, there is a need to draw limits in all social activities. But also, there is a need to change the living context of young people (Panousis, 2009). The passage from *children at risk* to *dangerous children* (Panousis, 2008: 10 ff.) is that easy or that hard as we –the adult key holders– manage to do it.

An open school (both as a system and as a function), with participatory, group communication of all parties involved, eco-model relationships with the family and community environment, and collaborative learning (with positive interdependences and sense of individual responsibility) may be an effective and preferred model of educational consensus and not a source of intra-class conflict (Fischer, 2003).

PS. The crucial question concerns the ability of the teachers to handle the criminal (and not only the violent) behavior of some students. In-school violence is connected until now with minor violations of the Law or of the school Regulations, but I believe that in the future, the happy slapping generation, will adopt the school shooting as a quasi-power game or as a mass murders blood experience. The violent school crime will be incorporated in the subculture of organized crime or in the social/religious terrorism.

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