A permeable boundary: Violence, bullying, and schools in Latin America

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EDUC 892: Social Justice and Equity in International Education

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April 7, 2010
Introduction

All human beings have the right to be safe, but what happens when social institutions go unprotected? Schools around the world have been unable to shield themselves from external community violence and have become havens for aggression, intimidation, and harassment. This violence is detrimental for individuals and the communities in which they live. Violence can be seen in the unjust actions committed by an individual or group of individuals to promote fear and maintain power over the marginalized. The use of violence and bullying continue to plague schools. In the United States and Europe, this issue has received a lot of attention, but little attention has been shown to the violence and bullying that occurs every day in Latin American schools.

This geographic issue paper will look at violence, bullying, and schools through a general overview of the issue, the issue in geographic context, current policies, programs, and practices, and creative solutions. The issue of violence in schools is an important social justice issue because it is an issue about power, access, equity, and education. When schools are unsafe access to quality education is denied to all. When schools are unsafe, the equity provided by education cannot be attained. When schools are unsafe students cannot learn. All of these issues must be examined because they affect the individual and larger global community. Through a complete examination of violence in societies and in schools, researchers, policy makers, educators, parents, and students (1) become aware of the injustices, (2) act to remedy the situation by taking ownership, and (3) then make efforts to implement programs and initiatives to defend all of the members of the particular society and in turn humanity.
Violence and bullying

Violence hinders an individual’s right to a safe environment and it also limits access to knowledge. Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) stated that “School bullying has been identified as a problematic behavior among adolescents, affecting school achievement, prosocial skills, and psychological wellbeing for both victims and perpetrators. Violence and bullying in school become acts of aggression to attain power and victimize others. In the United States, “School violence is a top public health concern affecting the physical and emotional well-being of children” (Felix, 2009, p. 1673). This concern is much more than a public health concern; it is also a social justice issue because violence and fear deny equal access and the equitable distribution of resources to all members of a society. In the case of education, violence victimizes individuals and limits their access to a quality learning environment.

Bullying can take many forms in school environments. The most common forms of harassment in schools are physical, verbal, and social (Wang et al., 2009). All forms of direct and indirect bullying leave lasting impressions on victims and perpetrators. Research shows that some forms of aggression are gender specific. Hitting, pushing, and kicking are considered to be forms of physical bullying, which most commonly involve boys. Girls, on the other hand are involved in indirect forms of bullying such as exclusion from social activities (Wang et al., 2009). Race and ethnicity have also been examined and “Compared with Caucasian adolescents, African-American adolescents were more involved in bullying perpetration (physical, verbal, and cyber), but less involved in victimization (verbal and relational). Hispanic adolescents were
more likely to be physical bullies or cyber bully-victims than Caucasian adolescents” (Wang et al., 2009, p.372).

Bullying is not going away. In a study conducted by Wang et al. (2009) “Findings indicate high prevalence rates of having bullied others or having been bullied at school at least once in the last two months: 20.8% physically, 53.6% verbally, 51.4% socially, or 13.6% electronically” (p. 372). The alarming incidence of those being bullied or bullying others is not declining. Violence in schools and bullying is an issue affecting children, schools, and communities that must be addressed by examining the factors that contribute to the problem.

Violence in schools can be caused by many factors, the majority stem from the community and societal norms established within an environment. Futrell (1996) stated that “…teachers perceive that the major factors contributing to student violence are lack of parental supervision at home (71 percent), lack of family involvement with the school (66 percent), and exposure to violence in mass media (55 percent)” (p. 9). Although these factors are not exclusive, they begin to unmask larger problems that may be caused by modernization and globalization. The socioeconomic reality many households face perpetuates high levels of parent absenteeism. Parents who must work several jobs are more likely to absent and unaware of problems of violence that are occurring at school. Futrell (1996) continued stating that “Children often receive mixed messages from parents and other adults about what is right and what is wrong” causing the child to respond only to material goods for adequate behavior (p.9). This construct reinforces the need to study the issue of violence and bullying in schools. As wealth disparity, access, and equity continue to be global issues which affect humanity, it is essential that schools remain safe social institutions where learning can take place.
Violence, bullying, and schools in Latin America

Violence and bullying in schools is not limited to the United States or western nations. Latin American schools face the same problems of violence as other schools do, but surprisingly limited research has been done to study this phenomenon in a geographic context. This paper will look at the societal factors that communities in the region face, research conducted in schools, and initiatives that universities are attempting to put in place to combat violence in schools.

Latin America is a region of the world that is suffering from escalating levels of violence. Considered to part of the emerging world, Latin America has a wealth of natural and human resources at its fingertips. These resources become assets for the neo-liberal forces of globalization. Globalization has changed the face of the region, relocating many habitants both temporarily and permanently to urban areas. The migration trend began in the 1980s and continues today. Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002) stated that “The new violence in Latin America is a consequence of the convergence of global transformations and local transformations in urban society… a process of global mutation which fosters changes and interacts with local trends in countries having dependent economies” (p.21). The forces of change damaged the viability of the nation-state as they debilitated the material and human resources of the region. The newly impoverished communities where then bombarded by images of consumption. These images fueled “cultural patterns of consumption” centered around new products and symbols of wealth and urban lifestyles (Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002, p.22). The region itself becomes more violent due to the drug economy, guns, general fear, and new urban youth, all factors of globalization. This violence becomes cyclical affecting each part of the community and finally affecting the safety of schools.
A cycle of violence is a large part of the issue of violence and bullying in Latin American schools. The government can no longer protect its citizens and “...a feeling of insecurity among the population stimulate people’s desire to acquire and own weapons” (Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002, p. 26). Schools fail to be safe havens for learning; their permeable boundaries allow violence to flow in and out of its walls. In Rio de Janeiro a school in a favela neighborhood was forced to install bulletproof windows to protect its students (Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002, p. 26) from bullets and violent peers.

In the region, young men are the agents that engage in acts of violence and bullying within schools and the community. Normally, these agents have experienced harassment or intimidation by older peers. Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002) stated that “..these youths now practice personal and family defense, and believe their only resource is the ‘respect’ they inspire, as the only way to ensure a certain personal immunity to the insecurity that prevails in the neighborhood” (p. 29). Cyclical fear is one reason that forces young agents to continue to perpetuate acts of violence individually or in gangs. Societal norms and practices also play a role in the continued violence.

Young individuals are product of their environments, in the case of Latin America “a violent macho ethos” is common within schools (DeSouza, 2005, p.1021). In a Brazilian high schools examined, 60 percent of students have experienced at least one act of bullying (DeSouza, 2005). Bullies, victims, and educators accept traditional gender roles and social norms and become accepting of the violence. “When teachers do not intervene in cases of bullying and/or sexual harassment, it is often interpreted by students as an expression of the school norms and values, which appear to condone or tolerate inappropriate social behavior among students”
This is not the goal of an educator interested in promoting concepts of social justice, democracy, and citizenship.

If violence persists the perception students have the school change. Violence permeates the learning space and converts the school into a place of violence. Abramovay (2005) stated that “Apart from having an effect on the quality of teaching and the academic development [of students], the violent atmosphere of a school affects the professional work of the team.” Schools are converted into jails. “The idea that schools is a site that should offer protection and that is also a place that is preserved for the society, does not correspond with the reality of most educational establishments” (Abramovay, 2005). The conversion of social establishments into places that facilitate the violent acts of children against their peers has many consequences. Bullying and violence cause students to drop out, begin using drugs, and damage their self esteem (Mayorga Salas, 1997).

It is imperative that actions be taken to help children affected by violence and bullying. Schools must become safe learning environments again. In order to achieve this initiative, policies, programs, and practices must change.

**Current Policies, programs, practices**

In Latin America, “children are perceived as being affected by violence at three levels: individual, collective, and societal” (Mayorga Salas, 1997, p. 123). Therefore polices, programs,
and practices must be established to help students at each level. Unfortunately, in the case of Latin America, few programs have been established to work with children, violence, and schools. It is only now, that research addressing this problem is being conducted. Most of the literature reviewed highlights the demographics and causal factors of bullying and violence, but does not look beyond that. An exception occurred in Mexico, at the Universidad Iberoamericana. At this university students examined bullying and the social constructs surrounding violence in schools. They worked together to two create campaigns against bullying called ¿Qué haces? y ¡Duele! The campaigns forced children to reflect on violence and bullying in school settings. In the first campaign a figure of a popular student is drawn and students are ask to write comments around the drawing over a period of time. After a month comments appear such as "no solo los golpes duelen, esa actitud lastima, el dano es de por vida y las palabras también dejan cicatrices" “not only do punches hurt, that attitude hurts, the pain is life long, and words also leave scars”(http://uia.mx/prensa). Students become active participants, highlighting their own experiences and reflecting on violence and bullying in their schools. ¡Duele! was designed to help empower students, giving them a way to express themselves in the face of intimidation and bullying. Students learn what bullying and making fun of others brings to their peers and the community. Posters were created depicting scenes of intimidation and violence. They were then used to teach students to say "me estás lastimando, párale" “you are hurting me, stop” (http://uia.mx/prensa). Both of these initiatives were successful, but the reach was very small. Programs need to be created that impact larger communities and nation-states.

School systems and governments need to adopt new policies that make schools safer places. Only through team work, will the cycle of violence be broken. This issue is not going
way. Beane (2009) discussed the importance of creating school environments that are bully free by implementing large scale anti-bullying programs. These programs pull in all members of the community, expanding awareness and participation in the process. After students and community member become aware of violence in schools they are trained. Teachers receive professional development training on classroom management, curriculum, and strategies to use in the classroom that promote an environment that is bully free. This program would be ideal for many regions of the world, but in order for it or a similar program to be implemented it must be deemed necessary. In Latin America, such programs are not common place and societies have not yet determined that violence in schools is an issue worth investing in.

**Creative Solutions**

There is no best solution for violence in Latin American schools. The best place to begin is through awareness. The community must be made aware of the violence in schools and schools must regain their protected status. This work cannot be done by one individual alone. Bemak and Keys (2000) stated that “collaboration between schools, families, and communites offers and attractive and viable possibility” (p.78). The entire community must become positive agents and peace makers resolving the conflicts that are present in community schools. One way to get more community members involved would be to ask for parents and elder members of the community to volunteer their time patrolling schools and working on programs that make students and other community members aware of violence and bullying.

Another possible solution would be to create partnerships with companies in the region. The partnerships would not only create potential economic ties between the school and community, but it would also help youth learn about citizenship and responsibility in the
workplace. These initiatives and programs would teach students peace and citizenship, while exposing them to the world of work. The experience gained from these partnerships may give potential bullies the motivation needed to stay in school and become positive role models for the community with hopes of obtaining future employment with the partner companies.

Educators need to form partnerships with their schools and students, too. This will help ensure a socially just learning environment. In order for educators to protect and service academic communities, professional development must be provided. It is not acceptable to sit and facilitate the transfer of violence from outside to inside schools, action must be taken. Teachers need to know how to better serve learners and better address the problem of violence in schools. This push need not only take place in Latin America, but should be adopted worldwide.

**Conclusion**

Safety must return to social institutions. Schools are places where learning takes place and without safety, educational resources will not be equitably distributed. The right to an education is a human right. Safety is also a human right. Educators, policy makers, and students need to be made aware that violence and bullying in schools is a social justice problem. It is not okay to sit idly while violence permeates the walls of schools. In Latin America, violence has become a social norm and now that violence is spilling over into its schools. Action must be taken to save educational spaces and protect children from the violence. The first step is gaining awareness about the issue and the next is acting on the new knowledge. It is time for action, it is time to stand for safety in all schools, and it is time to promote peace, thus creating socially just and democratic citizens of the world.
References


