

The violence in the context: a systemic look

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In the first place I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to this Conference, and particularly Ms Helena Crenier who with patience has maintained postal contact in order to organise the concrete elements of this presentation. This link has been of great value.

I will begin then by presenting to you some anxieties that have troubled me while I wrote this presentation; anxieties related, amongst others, to the choice of the ideas I am going to develop. I have weighed the complexity of the phenomenon of violence in schools, the difficulty of outlining the multiple aspects of this problem, as well as the legal, organisation, and clinical aspects, for example, and the need to suggest to you some useful concrete clues of daily intervention.

As a social worker for many years the essential part of my work consists in supporting people in crisis (I consider a violent person as a person in crisis who puts the systems in crisis) in the search of their improvement by means of individual, family, couple, group, and network meetings. Recently my role has been to support those who intervene, transmitting them theoretical and practical knowledge by means of training and supervision.

These interventions of transmission of knowledge I think are close to your profession of teachers. I then asked myself how do you carry out a practice that at the same time is so close and far from your own without impairing what you already do very well nor making trivial the difficulties you encounter. I also did not want to detach myself from the educational world to slide into the world of the social and the therapeutical intervention.

I have also asked myself how to feed your reflexion from a knowledge coming from another place and that at the same time allows you to extract elements of reflexion in order to better face the inevitable changes the school environment is faced with, thanks to or because of, depending on the point of view you have, students who have particular ways of behaving.

Thus, I am a foreigner, both because I am from Quebec and because my profession differs from yours. We could then think that at certain moments of my presentation I will show a lack of cultural understanding together with the ignorance of the structures in which you teach and an ignorance of the cultural, ideological, and political challenges you are living.

In my practice of transmission of knowledge I work with a budget for my training and my theoretical support which I think makes my job easier. This experience together with a systemic understanding could be enunciated this way: a behaviour appears in a relational context and the relation is the gear stick. Also, for Gregory Bateson, a pioneer of the systemic thought, a behaviour can only be understood linked with the context it appears in. This calls us to reflect about

the meaning and the function of these behaviours and to consider the behaviour as an attempt of solution.

With the same logic we can affirm that every interaction is built thanks to a content in a relation game. It is the notion of relation that I would like to deepen in with you. I emphasize the relation because I believe that it is one of the important anchor points of the work with humans and most of all with people who manifest violence. To create a different link than that of control and exclusion with a person who acts with violence is the challenge we are faced with.

I allow myself a parenthesis that illustrates well my intentions: in the local community service centre I work at we receive people who express their difficulties by means of violence and we try to give them access, by means of the bond, to a place of word capable of offering them other means to express their difficulties. However, on the walls of the centre we find many posters saying "Tolerance zero with violence".

We cannot be against this programme of prevention nor against the preoccupation of the employees to protect themselves from the aggressions, but we are sceptical about this message, and most of all about the double coercion we set off. On the one hand we say: "Come to consult with us your difficulties", and on the other hand, "Avoid us if your difficulties imply acting with violence". Nevertheless, the great poet of Quebec, Gilles Vigneault, has already written about violence: "To be violent is a lack of vocabulary".

Many researches confirm the difficulty of men (men are the ones who most of all show violent behaviours) to consult and ask for help. Our offers of service impose contradictory requirements to the socialisation of the male sex. The therapy demands to reveal their private life, to show their weaknesses, to be vulnerable, when on the contrary the socialisation of men encourages them to hide their private life, to show their force, and to be invincible. In this sense it is more important to receive and approach the men in the moment of crisis.

On the other hand, to consider the intervention through the means of the relation does not mean that school violence should be attributed to the school and the practices of the professionals so as to excuse politics and to disguise the violence that affects many other sectors of life. It is one of the ways of entry, amongst others, that mobilises individuals as subjects of their lives. As you may foresee, my exposition has a practical character, centred in the daily relations. I hope that some of our peers who attend this conference can support with their knowledge the understanding of the phenomenon of violence. Because in intervention, we must blend reflexion and action.

In my context the step I propose is to approach the complexity of violence in schools by analysing the particular situations of each student or group of students with difficulties. From these singular situations is later revealed the need to place the gestures of violence in a relational context in order to elaborate hypothesis of understanding that do not disguise the multiple levels of

the problem. We also have to choose for each situation an intervention that takes into account this complexity and what is at stake.

In other terms our objective is to put forward hypothesis that allow us to look in a different way at the difficulties we are faced with in such a way that we may explore new ways with the persons involved, without repeating inefficient solutions of the past, but creating a context that gives access to network resources rather than their lack. As I see it, in the school environment the repetitive solutions are often related with control and exclusion.

To elaborate systemic hypothesis it is important to elaborate a charter of relations with the youth with difficulties and his/her nearby persons. The charter of relations represents significant persons that gravitate around the symptomatic youth. They are members of his/her primary network such as parents, friends, neighbours, leisure or study partners and those of the secondary network, that is, those that intervene in the situation that he/she mobilises. With this concept we often tend to relate the problems that appear in exterior systems to the family and to exclude our understanding of the members of the institutional network.

The elaboration of this charter may seem simple, but at the same time it establishes a means to put in movement a collective process around the youth in difficulty and clarifies the multiple levels and contradictory challenges of the situation. Here are some of the questions we are faced with: What place do we occupy in the life of this youth?, Which are the mandates we make about this youth?, What feelings are mobilised in us in our bond with the youth? It then consists in considering oneself as a part of the problem and of the solution.

To elaborate the charter also allows to decode some of the relational rules that are built around these problems. Let us think for example of the challenges of the teams of teachers. Frequently a child that acts with violence is a factor of cohesion in an atmosphere where relations are tense.

In this sense it is important to unite the symptom with what Robert Pauze and I have called: the state of organisation of the systems where difficulties are born. According to us, some symptoms can only be born in specific contexts, and similar symptoms have different meanings depending on the contexts in which they are placed. Furthermore, every behaviour has a value of communication, and every communication that is dysfunctional speaks of the context in which it appears.

To situate acts in relations allows also to give a meaning to the symptom and to reflect on its relational usefulness, that is, in what way is the behaviour an attempt of solution. To give a new meaning and to take into account the relational function allows to think of new forms of bonding and to give access to resources around the youth. Furthermore, this process forces us to consider the person as a person faced with a problem, rather than seeing him/her as a problematic person. To accept being included as an individual and as a system in the definition of the problem and in the search of a solution is to also accept questioning the rules of functioning of his/her own system. In his book Asylums,

Irving Goffman has evidenced one of the levels of violence when describing the rituals that inevitably are set off when the systems mechanise themselves progressively or they become rigid. The democratisation of the access to school, as I see it, has put an enormous pressure on the educational structures pushing them to become formalised with rigid rules.

It is possible that the attempt to give the families the single responsibility of the gestures that children make illustrates the difficulty of the educational system in believing in its capacities of bonds and adjustments to the pressures. However, numerous authors, amongst others Boris Cyrulnick, have illustrated vigorously the importance for people that live in unsustainable vital situations to come across in their paths with individuals who will become what he calls tutors of annulment.

Recently I have supervised a young woman whose mother had committed suicide and who with 13 years of age has had to take care of her brothers and sisters because her father worked at night. She attributes her capacity to get through this crisis to her encounter with teachers who have known how to understand her potential beyond her distraction and impertinence at school. Of course, this young student was weakened by her family experience, but she was not condemned to find herself in a situation of difficulty in the rest of systems she attended. On the contrary, the school was for her a place of hope that allowed her to open herself to different experiences.

I summarise the exposed ideas. Violent behaviours in school make clear weaknesses in the youths that are updated in the particular context of the school. We can think that it is in the encounter of these systems that the particular conditions are given that take us to the rigidity of the rules. Each subsystem stumbles and tries to establish rules in order to maintain the status quo. Without being guilty of the life of these youths it is possible to be responsible of the bonds that we create from our own context, as also says Antoine de St-Éxupéry in *The Little Prince*.

To conclude I make a proposal in order to sustain this process of reflection and action of which I have just spoken. As I believe in the difficulty for every human being to consider him/herself as a participant of the relation, I think it would be interesting to start for the teachers and the directing staff places of word and/or of supervision similar to the Balint groups that the doctors have created to reflect on the relation with their patients.

The models may vary, but as I see it these groups should have as an objective the support of those that intervene. The key words of the support to the intervening person are: neutral obligation, coexistence of the differences, relational availability, space of words, and space of supervision. I will define supervision as the bond of diminishing of action, a time or withdrawal, a critical view on the nature and the predisposition of its actions, the supervision also serves for preserving the broadness of views, flexibility, compromise, creativity, and the mobilisation of those that intervene.

The intense and prolonged immersion in a mesh of emotional overload, as may occur, and the isolation that flows from it create inevitably personal and professional dispositions that are more rigid and defensive, that are updated in repeated and amplified attempts of control. Such practices, beyond the individual situations of the intervening person, cause damage to the whole of the team's work. On the other hand, the rigidity of the bonds takes us to search together for the only and good solution, an exercise that mutilates reality and ends up often with the exclusion or the rejection, which in return maintains and amplifies violence.

Supervision not only is a support to the intervening person, but also a support of the organisation of the team. It involves that we must analyse its intervention and explore the difficulties and the demand taking into account the time and the context. To supervise is also to take into account the relational games that flow from the difficulties and to consider the place we are going to occupy in the life of the children. We are also involved with identifying well the mandates of which we are bearers and the limits of our interventions, as well as to propose hypothesis and clues of intervention.

Finally, I propose you the following question: How do we understand that the support that is offered in the school environment affects almost essentially the pedagogical difficulties when the teachers are also bond persons? The aspects of the relation seem to me to be swindled. However, to take into account the relation is also to take yourselves into account, your resources and your possibilities.