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STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL: GLOBAL ISSUES AND INTERVENTIONS

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INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

Violence and aggression in the schools of Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru

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INTRODUCTION

The violence and aggression to which children and young people are exposed in countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru is a serious and widespread problem. In fact, in Latin America millions of children and youngsters are the victims of violent situations caused by the economic, political and socio-cultural conditions in which people live.

There is, indeed, a culture of violence that goes far beyond aggression to children and young people: it permeates society, including the family and at school, as a whole-and creates a reference model for children and young people.

The five countries mentioned have a combined population of about 85 million people. They all are marked by poverty: per capita income in Nicaragua is about US\$830, rising to US\$1,470 in Peru.

In Latin America, children and young people try to survive in the context of wars, guerrilla activities, inter-party struggles, criminality, the drug trade and the social exclusion of the native population (which, almost everywhere, is in the majority in nearly all of these countries).



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Despite this background, the topic of violence and aggression in schools has not been sufficiently analysed to identify its factors, causes and relationships. But, from studying reports and conclusions from seminars organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it is possible to notice some emerging trends.

THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION IN LATIN AMERICA

To obtain a proper understanding of the characteristics of violent conduct and aggression against children and youngsters-and to try and find solutions at the cultural, political and social levels-it is essential to examine their relationship with the environment, cultural standards, values, stereotypes and biases.

These behaviours are created and transmitted by society in itself, by relationships within families, and by the kinds of pedagogical relationships established and imposed by the schools.

The situation in Colombia

Colombia has a population of about 33 million: about 70% are concentrated in urban areas, a consequence of the need to escape from the war and other problems going on in the rural areas. This has led to an increase in the conditions of poverty and misery which thousands of families endure on the outskirts of the cities.

Violence arises directly out of this context of general poverty (Mojica, Quintero, 1993). Almost 13 million people live below the poverty level (UNICEF, 1992): 47.7% of those under 18 years live in poverty, and 23.6 % live in complete destitution. In 1991, 78 % of all children under the age of 5 were living in homes beset by some form of poverty.

Living in poverty means that a family lacks a minimum income to buy sufficient food, health care, education and public services like drinking water and electricity: living in destitution implies that the family income is not enough to satisfy even minimum consumption.

One of the factors that has led to worsening poverty in Colombia is the country's indebtedness: in 1991, servicing the foreign debt reached 43.5 % of the GNP, and attempts to adjust the economy, including privatizing of state-owned companies, have brought about a decrease in spending on public health, education and house-building.

The groups that are worst hit by these measures are women and poor children. This has led to a higher death rate among children and mothers, as well as an increase in health problems for schoolchildren-for example, 31.4% of children between 7 and 14 years of age are anaemic, with around 47 % suffering from iron deficiency and 50 % lacking enough vitamin A.

And while educational statistics do not show matriculation problems at the basic school level, they do confirm the scale of repeating and dropping out at that age. Secondary education



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is out of reach of 50% of the pupils. Economic considerations are one of the major factors for the high level of drop-outs from school.

The strong growth of the informal sector of the economy, the weight of financial adjustment problems, low productivity and the lack of social security, plus some historical features have turned Colombia into a country III

beset by armed struggle-and the militarization of the Colombian society. As such, violence is a part of the everyday situation for Colombian children and youngsters, and violence is today the reference point for conduct.

The situation in El Salvador

According to 1964 figures from CEPAL, the poorest 20% in El Salvador received only 2% of GNP, while the richest 20% received 60%. In 1992, CEPAL reported that the poorest 20 % received only 1.8 % of GNP. Some 65 % of the Salvadorian people are illiterate.

A study of young people, carried out through collective interviews in different classrooms, concluded that 25 % of the pupils work in order to finance their studies-and 90 % disapproved of various subjects, did not eat properly, and felt tired, bored and suffered from headaches. The lack of attention by these pupils contrasts with the interest shown by their parents, and has created tensions between them (Castillo, 1994).

The so called *maras* or gangs are a reaction against the adult world: it is the only way they have found to respond. Yet, this situation leads young people to drug addiction and violence, or to leaving school prematurely to find jobs.

El Salvador signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990; this is important, for it obliges the Salvadorian government to protect children at the social, economic, legal and humanitarian levels.

By analyzing the various institutions in charge of caring for children affected by violence, it is possible to observe that the rate is far below the level at which it should be considered a problem, although only six institutions carry statistical records regarding the dimension of maltreatment of children in El Salvador.

The situation in Guatemala

Guatemala also experiences high rates of child malnutrition, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and social marginalization. Social tensions arise from the conflict caused by the displacement of thousands of peasants from their land and the concentration of agricultural property in the hands of a few big landowners.

While the state is not unaware of the application of diverse forms of violence on the society, there is a growing frustration among the Guatemalan people (Sandoval, 1976). Frustration is the root of violent behaviour, as it is seen as the only alternative to the existing order, which is regarded as oppressive.



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The situation in Nicaragua

In the 1980s, Nicaragua experienced a deep change at the political, juridical and social levels, due to the serious economic problems and the lasting armed conflict, which brought about the death of thousands of people and the destruction of vital infrastructure in the country.

Although Nicaragua has made a series of efforts to overcome the negative results of the war, to tackle inflation and to direct resources towards production, the benefits of these measures have reached only 15 % of the urban population and 29 % of the peasants. On the other hand, unemployment among young people is escalating, because the state is incapable of absorbing the economically active population, and about 40,000 young people are excluded.

This situation undoubtedly imposes restrictions on the development of children and young people, and creates fertile conditions for the organization of gangs and the appeal of violence as a means to solve problems.

Many Nicaraguan children face an atypical familial ambience: for one reason or another, they are not living with their blood relations; their adopted parents or guardians play an important and influential role in their lives. As a result, children face very early problems of responsibility away from the home, and respond by dropping out of school and entering the labour market prematurely, skipping important stages in their development in the process.

Because Nicaragua is still a patriarchal society, women must shoulder all the responsibilities of running the household and caring for the children, and if they do not perform these tasks well, they risk punishment by their men.

Nicaragua is a post-war society, where violence has long been used to solve different conflicts. Democracy is a task which must be undertaken by everyone, and it must involve establishing permanent relationships between all social groups and entities. One challenge requiring immediate attention is the family: Nicaraguan society is characterized by the domination of males over females, and parents over children-which means that the wife always comes second, the son third and the daughter last.

Democracy in Nicaragua requires instilling tolerance, respect, knowledge of the other and equitable relations. But, many people ask how will it be possible to do this if children are seen as a problem and parents as a solution? The social reality reaffirms the concept of the child as a person with needs that should be satisfied. Communication, at home and in school, is vertical and authoritarian: yet, the religious institutions preach patience and promote resignation, which does not address the issue of violence, let alone solve the problem.

Families mostly abide by the following principles: (a) children shall respect adults; (b) the wife shall obey and yield to the husband; (c) the children shall obey their parents; (d) the father supports the home; (e) the father imposes the rules and discipline; and (f) disobedience and disrespect are severely punished.

Seen this way, the familial relations are a one-directional model: the underdog obeys the top dog; children obey their parents, never mind whether they understand or not.

The situation in Peru



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Peruvian society seems framed by political violence, which the family and school appear to survive, despite an escalation of very violent behaviour by subversive groups aimed at taking over the schools and subjecting them to the ideological and militant struggle.

Ten years of violence and war between terrorists and the armed forces have shown to Peruvian children that there is both 'good' and 'bad-but the permanent feeling of being shadowed by death naturally leads the people to be afraid.

THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION ON CHILDREN

The origins of violence

The principal causes of child and youth violence are social marginalization, problem families, limited educational opportunities, lack of recreational opportunities, and the absence of a true family environment and upbringing. Thus, among the factors that incite aggressive behaviour is the poor economic situation of their households, as well as the educational environment of the school, with its rigid discipline, rote learning and absence of proper training for teachers. The majority of the children who suffer from violence belong to broken families with very little resources and little education, most live in poverty, lack a balanced diet and many of them cannot study because they must work to survive. A major problem here is the so-called maras or gangs, which attack these youngsters, who are unable to defend themselves because they lack support from teachers or the police. Many youngsters associate with the maras because it is the only means they have left to rebel and express their opinion-even though this leads to many problems because the gangs resort to violent conduct. Sometimes the victims are arrested on suspicion that they are the offenders. This may lead to their expulsion from school for being guilty of misdemeanours-which is not always true. Most of them are afraid of speaking out for fear of hastening their expulsion from school by the teachers or directors. Their parents also feel that silence is the best policy.

Maltreatment of children has always existed: it is worse for those children who are economically and emotionally fragile, and it leads them directly into relationships that are based on violence. This behaviour is considered commonplace by parents, because they suffered the same violence when they were young.

The environment in which the children grow up is a serious handicap, affecting their learning, even their sleep, and provoking fear and insecurity. The family duties lead to frustration for the adults, contributing to intra- and extra-familial violence, because most of



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the mothers must work in order to feed the family, leaving them with only a minimum of time to dedicate to their children.

Another important influence is television, which extols violence and portrays the reality of life as a struggle between 'good' and 'bad'.

Schools work within the frame of a hierarchical and authoritarian system and although the Ministry of Education does not allow corporal punishment, it still happens and is not denounced--except when very severe injuries force parents to go to the police.

The principal causes of maltreatment of children in El Salvador can be divided into four groups:

- **Social:** poverty, unemployment, tensions, overcrowding, excessive workload, etc.
- **Cultural:** parents who believe that children are their property; others who believe that violence makes a child tough; or that punishment leads to improved discipline.
- **Emotional:** family or conjugal problems; drug abuse; unwanted children; parents and teachers who recall and pass on the violence that they suffered themselves.
- **Lack of legislation to protect children:** existing laws are ineffective; there is a lack of awareness about the rights of children.

In the case of Peru, children often communicate through aggression, because, for them, the limits are not always clearly defined, and often the parents themselves teach their children how to resort to violence.

The victims

Violence is often defined as a way of exerting power and of solving conflicts through force, aggression or threat, in order to make another person submit. The fact of using violence, be it at the interpersonal level or within groups, should be viewed as a simple abuse, rather than a way of resolving a conflict--for example, when the parents use violence to ensure the obedience of their children.

Children are affected when they witness kidnappings, rape and murder-, even whole families have been killed. It is no surprise that the children have been very much affected by these phenomena, physically as well as psychologically.

In the relationship between adults and children, the former look on the child as 'an incomplete or immature person', and therefore tend to see the child as someone unprepared for social participation. whose protests are not to be heeded because it may result in spoiling him/her, and whose thoughts are interpreted as mere fantasies. The child's individuality as a



person is ignored, and its capabilities are not given due recognition. This fact leads children to Obey Out of fear of the violence that may be exercised by their parents, which is part of their tradition and reflects social and Cultural reality. This situation gives rise to a feeling of suffering, fear and low self-esteem on the part of the child.

During the (I-OLIP work carried out on this topic of violence, some children told of their experiences:

- Because I failed to pass the course, they hanged me by the throat and lit a fire under my feet, in order to burn them. When they saw I had turned purple, they threw me on the bed. (My grandmother did it. because I am an orphan.)
- They hung us like hammocks to the ceiling. tied up by Our arms and feet.
- They beat me on the face and pierced my lips.
- They cut my hair off when I was naughty. (PDDH, El Salvador.)

Girls are prone to be victims of sexual abuse, and children are often used in activities related to pornography. Most of the people responsible for the sexual abuse of children are already known to the victim, and the abuse also takes place in a location with which they are familiar. In urban areas, most of the abusers are friends who take advantage of the absence of the parents, whereas in rural areas it is relatives. Street children are often abused by strangers.

In Nicaragua, maltreatment of children occurs most often in the family: it is physical as well as psychological. There is a growing., step-by-step awareness of the problem-due mainly to the increase in reported cases in recent years.

A child who has been the victim of violence almost never admits it. This is because of fear, because it felt obliged to obey the person who committed the offence, because it lacks the means for protesting, or does not know how to do so. Fear leads to a culture of silence and obedience-with the result that the juridical system is unable to work properly.

In Colombia, because young people and children are forced to subsist in poverty or destitution, they are completely stripped of any right of protection at an early age. For them, the street becomes a substitute for the family because it is in the various gangs that they discover their 'kinfolk' who give them a sense of belonging and identity, and provide them with values and stereotypes. This is one of the reasons why many children are members of criminal gangs or groups: by doing so, they create alternative *W~IYS* Of Surviving, even though the consequence is that they become ,juvenile offenders, beggars, prostitutes, etc.-persons rejected by the rest of society,

The Colombian tradition of education and relations between pupil and teacher is based on vertical authority maintained through force and punishment, which contributes to the very high murder rate-62.8 per 100.000 inhabitants in 1988 (Losada & Velez, 1989).

It is also important to remember that 88 % of the children under 5 do not go to a kindergarten-they begin school between 6 and 7; but only some 50% of youngsters stay on beyond 16 years of age, and 43% to 18. The primary school system does not reveal any details about the problems of repeating and dropping out, but at the secondary level only 50% of pupils go to school.



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The 1985 census showed that a very large number of the children between 12 and 17 years of age were illiterate, leading to the conclusion that 'the right to free primary education is to a large extent non-existent for many children. who were not taught at all or not taught well enough to reach a minimum level of reading and writing' (Yepes). The standard of teaching and teachers clearly needs improvement: many teachers refused to answer our questions, and many have no respect for the dignity of their pupils.

Although secondary schools are theoretically free, parents must pay for maintenance, teachers' salaries and other items. Many students have to work to finance their studies.

However, other schools-who do not enrol young people with scarce resources-dedicate hours to studies and research work, and teachers often sacrifice recreational time or the time that could be dedicated to their own family. The problem for the youngsters in these schools, unlike those in the public institutes, is not poverty or family problems, but the academic demands and pressures to which they are exposed.

The forms of violence

It is important to establish the difference between maltreatment and strong punishment-the latter involves beating children when they behave badly. This is a tradition in Nicaragua. Parents do not feel that such punishment demonstrates a lack of love, but is rather a necessary process in a child's education. Nevertheless, maltreatment is more than punishment, and a child is maltreated when punished unfairly for reasons alien to it. Frequent punishment may also be considered as maltreatment.

Violence has been associated with evil, with feelings of guilt and power. There are various types of violence, and they all allow one person to exert power over others.

It is necessary to distinguish between corporal and symbolic violence: but they are related and cannot be separated. Symbolic violence is exerted by the State, generally through its judiciary and political systems-physical violence is direct.

Children face various types of violence. They depend on the environment in which they grow up: therefore, children forced to work are exposed to economic, physical or sexual abuses, while within their families children are affected by the violence dealt out as 'punishment'. This situation endures due to the fact that no strong legal measures exist to protect children. Violence against children and youngsters involves:

Conflict: a situation in which two persons (a child and an adult) do not reach an understanding. The method of resolving the situation through power and authority is important here.

Aggression: conduct that may be verbal, psychological, even moral. The aggression is highlighted by the fact that it has an origin, a purpose and an intention (to harm).

Violence.- whatever form it takes, it is characterized by exerting power through the use of force (psychological, physical and economic). Violence may arise in the realm of interpersonal



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relationships, or through group 'institutional violence'. Using violence as a means to solve problems is increasingly acceptable.

Child maltreatment: violence against children is expressed through 'any action or non-accidental omission that will produce physical or bodily injuries to a child on the part of an adult person. The different kinds of maltreatment of children are: physical, emotional, physical and emotional abandonment, and sexual abuse.

In the case of El Salvador, the strongest violence is related to situations of physical maltreatment-defined as non-accidental injuries to children. Maltreatment has also been defined as punishment, as well as the use of force against a child.

Moreover, maltreatment is also neglect or carelessness on the part of adults in charge of children when they do not satisfy their material or emotional needs: leaving them alone for too long, always giving them the same food when there are opportunities to vary the diet, etc. Sometimes, it is difficult to distinguish between poverty and indolence.

The parts of the body where children are most often beaten are the backside, genitals, head and limbs. Most of the children covered by the research said that they had been beaten with sticks, rulers, electric cables, shoe heels, etc. The beatings were classified into: 'severe', including all kinds of broken bones, wounds, burns and swallowing of toxic material; 'strong' punishment that did not leave traces on the body; and 'moderate'. Half the children examined had received severe beatings.

At school, psychological punishment is more frequent than physical punishment, because the children said that they were told off by their teachers when they behaved badly, as confirmed by the study by the Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de El Salvador. Boys are punished more often than girls. But street boys are subject to greater physical and emotional punishment by the teachers. Punishment by teachers is the product of authoritarian concepts regarding education, and the lack of training on the part of teachers.

Children accept punishment as necessary for their education, that is, they feel guilty and deserving of punishment. However, the punishment has a negative impact on their learning capability, and their development (low self-esteem, sadness, lack of interest in education).

Pushing, insulting and name calling by children are commonplace. The school is a hostile and violent environment, where the power of the strongest over the rest predominates. In one sense, the violence is permitted, because Peru is a country where violence is used to extinguish the violence exerted by others. Movements like Sendero Luminoso are active in the educational arena, promoting their ideologies and recruiting adolescents and teachers. There is concern among the Peruvian institutions over the activities of such violent groups and drug dealers, who regard the school as a military and political stage, offering a violent alternative to children, young people and teachers in order to bring about social and political changes.

The perpetrators



The people who most often maltreat children are mothers (62.2 %), fathers (42.3 %) and other relatives (20.3 %). Stepmothers or stepfathers rarely beat the children. Mothers punish most often, because it is a machista culture in which the woman must take care of the household and the children. Boys are punished most frequently, in the belief that men must grow up to be strong

Parents harbour false ideas regarding parenthood. They maltreat their children, for example, because they believe that, as adults, they are allowed to educate them as they wish and can use any means to achieve their aims-so that if a child does not do as it is told, the only way of educating it is through punishment.

Important factors explaining such parental attitudes include: (a) many of these adults were themselves punished when small; (b) their own violent impulses which they are unable to control; (c) rejection towards an unwanted child; (d) ignorance about the developmental stages of children (e) problems between married Couples; and (f) a low cultural level.

There are different theories regarding, frustration, and some have suggested (Miller, in Gonzalez, 1985) that the relationship between frustration and aggression is not innate but learned. In the same way, inadequate familial environments can generate aggressive conduct by the child, because they feel rejected by their parents. This leads to a deformed and diminished self-perception by the child.

We should also bear in mind that the problem begins the moment the child is born, and is the legacy of a situation that has been handed down from generation to generation. within the family and in society as a whole. What is important is to establish that, from the moment it is born, a child needs gentle care-emotional and physical.

To determine the causes of child maltreatment, we gathered information from a group of fifty persons who had reported cases of violence against children. From these data, it is possible to deduce that 34.1%, of the aggressors were men and 65.9% women: while they lacked education and most were illiterate, 66.9% were considered to be normal, 16% alcoholic or drug addicts (all men), and 9.1 % suffered from mental disorders (women).

Sexual maltreatment is understood to have occurred when a person involves a minor in activity with sexual content, and in which the aggressor receives some kind of gratification. Data collected in El Salvador report an average of 230 such accusations a month. The people most involved in this kind of maltreatment are: fathers, 41 %; mothers, 25%; non-relatives, 16%; grandmothers or stepmothers, 6% (Procuraduria para la defensa de los Derechos Humanos). Between January and August 1993, there were 549 reported cases, of which 31 % correspond to physical maltreatment, 46 % to sexual abuse and 23 % to abandonment (Fiscalía General de la República). The Institute for Forensic Medicine reported 230 cases between January and July 1994.

There are some factors which make children susceptible to violence. They include:

- *Infant literature*, whereby the traditional fairy tales show a clear-cut division between good and evil, for example through the characters of an ogre and a fairy. This situation leads the child to take a position, one way or the other.
- From birth, the child may be called by a *nickname* because it 'looks like someone'. Therefore, violent behaviour by the child is interpreted as a ,violence from birth'.



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- Generally, teachers tend to categorize a child and its behaviour as having a certain *geographical origin*. For example, if it is from a backward region, it may be called by certain surnames, and very often this makes the child feel ashamed about its origins.

School is where children are taught obedience, as well as learning. In certain schools, there is a high degree of violence by the teachers towards their pupils. This situation may be explained by the despair of the teacher faced with the need to accomplish the curriculum. The children are aware that they may be subject to any kind of punishment.

In Guatemala, research into aggression by schoolchildren shows that such conduct is expressed by beating other students, challenging authority, screaming, breaking objects and a tendency to isolate themselves (Castro, 1993).

Such aggression is often a way of demanding more attention from parents. These same children exhibit a certain degree of passivity in their learning processes, and establish an unsatisfactory relationship with their teachers.

Another important point in the development of the young is the acquisition of a value system, which can only be transmitted by the family and the school working together-although, very often, the family has abdicated its role as a supportive and positive agent, and becomes a source of friction instead. The number of children and young people leaving school is also rising, not to mention those who never go to school. This poses a question about the schools' ability to provide a value system that can foster their future development.

The effects of violence

Violence towards children leads to dropping out of school, repeating classes, malnutrition and drug addiction-because the maltreated child discovers that drugs provide a way out. And, the child soon finds out that violence is the only way of relating with others, and therefore exacts it against other children, and against himself.

The immediate consequences of such violence for children and society as a whole are: the impairment of self-esteem; distortion of the personality; variable ethics (they have a different code of conduct depending on whom they are with); and the imitation of this authoritarian model in their own dealings with other people.

Some of the research into violence against children has focused on children who work (Gonzalez, 1996) because of the way these children subsequently behave at school: many of them show problems of concentration-falling asleep during class, boredom, becoming tense and behaving aggressively towards their schoolmates, or inciting others to misbehave in class. This situation requires the teachers to co-operate with the child's parents, and persuade them not to give, for example, the older children responsibility for taking care of their smaller brothers and sisters, but rather to allow them to go to school and develop in a normal way.

It has been observed that working children do not necessarily drop out of school, due to the fact that, for them, school is an escape from the hardships they face at home. In some cases, they show a good level of communication with their teachers, because they want to tell them what is happening in their lives.



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For adolescents to become integrated into Nicaraguan society, society as a whole must make it possible for them to develop an identity and reassert themselves as responsible and productive citizens. At present, these young people feel humiliated and diminished because many of them face unemployment.

For a considerable number of the young people in marginal urban regions, revolutionary movements and drug dealing are the only way of becoming someone in life-and they offer economic rewards too. The fact has to be faced that young people feel resentment towards, and want to exact revenge against, a society that otherwise offers them no future.

CURRENT MEASURES FOR DEALING WITH VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION AT THE SCHOOLS

Children are perceived as being affected by violence at three levels: individual, collective and societal. Therefore, efforts are being made to apply an integrated approach covering education, health, housing and other areas related to the quality of life.

Some of the strategies for improving the quality of life of poor children and youngsters, especially in Colombia, point to:

1. A balance between the individual and society, fostering the identity of children and young people through the establishment of emotional links with community goals.
2. Highlighting the formative character based on the educational potential of diverse activities inside the school.
3. Promotion of socially active subjects.
4. Focusing on the interests, needs and expectations of the child.

Most of the organizations try to change the political framework through community actions and social processes.

The infantile and juvenile populations of Colombia are affected by four different kinds of violence, and different measures are adopted to address their situation, viz.:

Children displaced by violence (most of them come from rural zones in conflict). One remedy is to offer boarding not only to children and young people, but also to their families. This is the first step towards organizing children and youngsters to receive education. To achieve this goal, agents need to be trained and research developed in this area.

Young people in violent urban sectors. These children need the support of, and to be involved in, existing and new groups, as well as to be able to participate in projects which will allow them to foster their self-esteem and socialization, etc.

Children and youngsters on the street. The objectives of measures are: (a) rehabilitation of the child through programmes covering educational, health and the productive capabilities; (b) improving the street environment and the quality of life there.

Child and adolescent prostitution. This phenomenon affects more girls than boys.



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Two action plans have been prepared: one with a preventive outlook, concentrated on the adolescent in crisis; and the other aimed at reintegrating adolescents into society and the family, including through educational actions.

The Hospital Benjamín Bloon conducted a study of child maltreatment during 1989, 1990 and 1991, covering a total of 770 cases, and concluded that most of the children suffering maltreatment were punished by their mother and other relatives, while 41 % of the fathers had problems of drug addiction, alcoholism and mental illness. It also concluded that there is a lack of institutions to provide treatment for such cases: those which do exist offer curative, not preventive treatment. With the exception of Benjamin Bloon, hospitals do not keep statistics on the children arriving there for treatment following violence. Only a few cases are ever taken to court. This points directly to the need for establishing programmes to reinforce the parental role, improve communication and dialogue between parents and children, and allow the community to deal more vigorously with the problem of violence against children.

To solve the problem of the maras, it has been necessary to train teachers so that youngsters will not see them as 'an enemy', and to motivate the young people to practice sports, as well as listen to and respect their opinions.

Other actions include: creating relationships between governmental and non-governmental institutions, the church and other organizations in order to provide an alternative that focuses more on prevention than cure, and improving the family situation so that adolescents may see the family as a source of support and safety.

In New York in 1990, at the first global meeting on childhood, El Salvador pledged to take measures to deal with its schooling and educational problems, including high levels of non-attendance and a high illiteracy rate.

The Minister for Education of El Salvador, the Policía Nacional and the Nacional Civil are supporting research on parents whose children display violent behaviour. It is being conducted in association with the directors of selected schools, examines the needs of the children and also plans for providing a different kind of education for youngsters relapsing into the cycle of violence.

During the 1980s, Nicaragua installed 310 child and youth centres, financed by private and public institutions, as well as by private companies. At the national level, some institutions have been set up to look after maltreated children, while others take care of abandoned children, or children considered at risk, as well as war orphans.

The programme 'Niño de la Calle' (street children) is aimed at reintegrating the child into its family. A new element is the 'Educadores de la Calle', which focuses on preventing children from leaving home by helping families to provide creative, cultural and educational activities.

It should be mentioned that 66 % of all the centres in Nicaragua are in the rural areas, and as part of the battle against malnutrition, they include children's canteens.

In 1988, the so-called 'Campana Nacional por la Defensa de la Vida del Niño', which aimed at adopting an integrated approach to childhood issues, began operating at various levels, such as health care, with working children, etc.



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Since 1979, five laws have been published covering matters directly related to children, their development and education: (a) the law on adoption; (b) the law on the relations between mother, father and child; (c) the law to promote breast feeding; (d) the reform of the guardianship law for children; and (e) sanitary nomenclature for the protection of infants' lives. There are other laws covering other areas of interest to children, for example guaranteeing that children will be educated in their mother-tongue and according to their traditions.

The present system fosters the abuse of authority, poverty, hunger, unemployment. There is a need to create a climate and culture for peace. To achieve this, everyone must support a process that leads to social change, and this requires that people are educated not only formally, but also through social experiences.

Children are raised in a world of 'chiefs' (father, brothers, adult teachers, etc.), both at home and in school-where the teacher instructs the child to do all what he (the teacher) considers to be right. This means that education is being confused with discipline, obeying orders with learning, and it ignores the point that to educate means to liberate each person's capabilities and potential, so that they can fully develop their own personality.

An important issue in the realm of education is cheating: this creates false values in the children, because those who copy someone else's work seem to obtain the same mark as the child who genuinely studied. While a child is punished for not doing his/her homework, a cheater is not punished. The danger is that this system can lead to future adult corruption, because people realize that it is a perfectly acceptable way of doing things.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SITUATION OF VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION AT SCHOOL

The first step is to identify the most urgent problems, and also to be clear about the conditions under which children and young people live. This may provide better solutions which also include diverse forms of participation and organization by the civil society.

Research projects are basically oriented towards prevention, and their action plans point to socialization and the possibility of personal development and growth, putting emphasis on family relations and relations with the community.

Other projects have a remedial focus, that is, they work with children who have already met violence. This approach, which includes the concept of 'children in risk', favours the generation of new action plans, both at governmental level as well as by NGOs.

An integrated intervention strategy could involve: (a) creating alternative spaces such as lodgings, open centres, etc.; (b) participatory methodologies to integrate children and youngsters into the programmes; (c) training the trainers, so those who are more advanced in their progress can draw on their experience to teach the rest; and (d) workshops on how to work with violent children and adolescents.



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One idea to improve the communication between children and their parents and teachers is to organize meetings involving all the parties, so that everyone can share views and express their opinions.

Other proposals include:

- Defining the rights of children and youngsters to make everyone aware of their responsibilities and tasks
- Encouraging and stimulating young people to form groups which do not commit violence.
- Creating activities of interest to young people, and giving each young person his/her own space.

To improve education, it is also essential to improve the quality of life, because it is a violation of human rights to keep people undernourished, ill-educated, badly housed, etc.

Violence provokes harmful consequences in the child-low self-esteem, psychological traumas, etc. If an adult person suffered the same experiences as a maltreated child, it would be classified as a violation of human rights. It is time to change the concept of 'child', and understand that the violence inflicted on children is a crime against human rights.

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