Social representations of the impacts of school violence on the teachers’ work

Representações sociais dos impactos da violência escolar no trabalho docente

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Objective: to understand the social representations that high school teachers in a public school have about the impacts of school violence on their practices. Methods: qualitative descriptive-exploratory study, carried out through a semi-structured interview from February to May 2019, with teachers from a public school in the interior of the state of São Paulo, with interpretation by content analysis. Results: 10 teachers participated, five men and five women, aged between 30 and 56 years, with an average of 16.5 years of experience as teachers, with higher education and seven of them had postgraduate degrees (five specialization and two master’s). Three thematic categories emerged: “Educational policy: isn’t it time to change?”; “Unstructured families: reflections on school violence”; and “Beliefs and difficulties in managing school violence: available strategies”. Conclusion: legislative interventions are proposed to implement health programs in the workplace, training and capacitation of professionals on the subject of violence, intersectorial articulation of schools to support students, families and the community.

Descriptors: Violence; Education; Workplace; School teachers.


Descritores: Violência; Educação; Local de trabalho; Professores escolares.

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INTRODUCTION

School plays an important role in people's lives. Its purpose is to transmit knowledge, develop students' emotional, social and cognitive skills, and invest in the formation of ethical and moral values, essential for the exercise of citizenship\(^1\). As a space for social interaction, the school environment influences and is influenced by the behaviors of those who attend it. Different perceptions about the functioning of the school and divergences can emerge to manage conflicting situations, compromising learning and interpersonal relationships between teachers, students and staff. Disrespectful attitudes, non-compliance with rules, incivilities, aggression and property depredation are behaviors that can generate conflicts and even violence\(^2-3\).

School violence is a problem identified in at least 50 countries, which since the 1990s have been producing research in search of explanations about this phenomenon\(^4\). In Brazil, the first works on the subject pointed to changes in the ways of practicing violence in public schools, which began with acts of vandalism, unfolding to physical and verbal aggression\(^5\).

Research on school violence has a tendency to focus on students. However, teachers are also likely to be victims of insidious or chronic violence from their students in the workplace or through digital media. Its typology includes verbal, physical, sexual, psychological (neglect, disrespect, discrimination regarding gender identity or sexual orientation) and property harassment\(^6-13\).

There is a field of investigation on school violence that seeks to understand the problem from the social representations\(^14\) of the subjects involved. Results of these investigations generally demonstrate that the phenomenon of violence is represented by physical and verbal aggression, with students and teachers being the main protagonists of violent actions.

The causes of this problem seem to be related to external and internal factors of educational institutions. Among the external factors are family breakdown, violent behavior learned at home, the use of licit or illicit drugs, the presence of armed people, bars and drug trafficking around the school. As internal factors, behaviors of disrespect and incivility appear (improper language, noise, shouting, destruction of equipment and property), threats and verbal and physical aggression and sexual harassment with colleagues, employees and teachers. Regarding the coping actions used by schools, research with teachers reveals the use of dialogue to resolve conflicts, adoption of disciplinary measures of suspension, expulsion and transfer of students, and the partnership with the police. Other strategies expressed by teachers to minimize the occurrence of violence include establishing links with the external community and families, and developing extracurricular educational activities\(^3,13,15\).
Despite the existence and scope of studies on violence in the school environment, there are still aspects to be investigated. Knowing the impact of violence on the mental and professional health of teachers who experience the situation both directly and indirectly is relevant. It can bring contributions to its identification and to develop and implement strategies for its prevention, detection and coping.

Thus, this study aims to understand the social representations that high school teachers in a public school have about the impacts of school violence on their practices.

METHODS

This is a descriptive-exploratory study, with a qualitative approach, in which we sought to answer the following question: how does school violence affect teachers' work?

It was considered a state school in the interior of the state of São Paulo, which served high school students, with a teaching staff composed of permanent and temporary teachers.

The inclusion criteria in the study were: (1) to be part of the school’s effective teaching staff, (2) to be present in the Collective Pedagogical Work Classes (CPWC).

For the selection of participants, the school’s time book was used, which contained the names of effective teachers and their respective positions. The researcher made individual approaches before the beginning of each CPWC and if the teacher listed in the register book was not present, the next teacher on the list was selected. At the time of the approach, the Free and Informed Consent Term was presented and the study propositions, the method, the guarantee of confidentiality and the non-mandatory participation were explained.

Data collection took place from February to May 2019, through a semi-structured interview that was previously submitted to three expert judges on the subject of the study.

The interviews were recorded and carried out at the school, in the final 30 minutes of each CPWC, so as not to interfere with the teachers' work routine. Data collection was suspended when there were no more new elements for theorizing (saturation).

The collected material was fully transcribed and submitted to content analysis, through systematic procedures: pre-analysis; material exploration; treatment; inference and interpretation of data and analyzed in the light of the Theory of Social Representations.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under opinion No. 295/2018. In the presentation of the results, the speech excerpts were identified with the letter “P” followed by a number for each participant, in order to guarantee their anonymity.
RESULTS

The school listed served about 420 students, and had a faculty of 30 permanent teachers and 20 temporary ones, being selected only permanent teachers.

Ten teachers participated in the study, five men and five women, aged between 30 and 56 years, with an average of 16.5 years of experience as teachers. The 10 had higher education and seven of them had postgraduate degrees (five specializations and two master’s degrees).

Three thematic categories emerged: “Educational policy: isn’t it time to change?”; “Unstructured families: reflections on school violence”; and “Beliefs and difficulties in managing school violence: available strategies”.

Educational policy: isn’t it time to change?

In the teachers’ perception, the standardized contents do not match the reality of the students. They consider that they are oblivious to the teaching-learning process, idle and disinterested in the classroom. They question whether there is a need to promote changes in pedagogical practice to make teaching attractive. In their opinion, working with standardized material that does not meet students’ daily lives is a form of violence and can interfere with the occurrence of school violence:

*The teacher fills the board with something for the student to copy. Isn't it time for a change?* (P1)

_We can speak of structural violence in relation to the State, educational policy [...] is violence against the student what we do. It is violent to address content that is sometimes not part of their daily life. This lack of instrumentalization interferes with the issue of school violence. The student is idle and sees no need to learn._ (P2)

_We have no room to work with reality. The teacher needs to give standardized content. I had a way of working, a didactic. Here comes a material to work in the classroom that I need to follow, to know the content, but that does not meet the reality of the students. Sometimes I find myself practicing violence against them._ (P3)

_You arrive in the classroom, it's just content thrown on the blackboard. It's Portuguese, it's mathematics. It's not attractive, it's not interesting._ (P5)

_All this lack of interest can be a factor that interferes with their posture, with violence._ (P7)

Unstructured families: reflections on school violence

In the teachers’ opinion, students’ families are unstructured, anchored in representations of an absent father or mother, imprisoned fathers or mothers, often families formed by grandparents or uncles, who do not transmit moral values and do not impose rules.

They perceive the family absent from the student’s school life, especially when they are involved in situations of violence. They believe that students reproduce at school the aggressive behaviors they experience in their homes and that they use violence at school to get their parents’ attention, because they feel abandoned by them. Teachers feel hostage, powerless and
frustrated when they have to interrupt classes to intervene in violent episodes, failing to comply with the planned activities:

*Families are broken, many have a father in prison, a mother in prison, they arrive at school without stipulated moral values.* (P4)

*They have broken families. The student who has had three stepfathers, who doesn't know their father, sometimes they don’t live with their mother.* (P8)

*Generally, many cases of violence happen because the student does not have a good family structure. They are raised by their aunt, by the grandmother, the father left, the mother left, the father is in prison, the mother is in prison. The school is the place where there are rules, and the student does not have rules at home, this reflects in school violence.* (P10)

*We were unable to bring the family to school.* (P1)

*Parents are very absent. Students involved in school violence problems, the family does not attend meetings.* (P2)

*When we look at the story of the child and adolescent who generated the violence, you understand why they acted like that looking inside their house. An insult is a compliment to them. Grabbing someone by the neck, attacking is normal. They have it with their siblings, they have it inside the house.* (P4)

*An aggression that the father does at home, the student reproduces here, slapping the other on the head. If they didn’t have it at home, they wouldn’t do it at school. They learn what the environment teaches. The environment teaches the wrong thing, the student comes to reproduce at school.* (P5)

*The teenager is abandoned. They want to somehow be seen by their parents.* (P1)

*The student does something wrong to get the family’s attention.* (P2)

*People feel tied down, powerless, they become a hostage.* (P8)

*When situations of violence occur, there is no way to surrender. The class doesn’t go as planned, I get very frustrated.* (P10)

**Beliefs and difficulties in managing school violence: available strategies**

The interviewees expressed their beliefs and difficulties about the forms of intervention in the management of the students' violent behavior. They believe in dialogue as a way to resolve situations of violence. However, when they are unable to mediate the conflict, they resort to punishments such as suspension and expulsion of the student. They recognize that they are not qualified and trained, and that other professionals such as psychologists and social workers could help in dealing with school violence. They resort to “discipline”, a member of the local traffic and responsible for ensuring respect for the rules of coexistence of a community. They do this anchored in the social representations of common sense that he is a mediator who has the power to resolve conflicts:

*I try on the basis of friendship, trust. I try to teach them that it is through dialogue that things work out.* (P1)

*When the dialogue comes to an end, you can no longer have that mediation through dialogue, then you have to go to punishment. If there’s no punishment, it doesn’t solve. It is a method of strong intervention, suspension, expulsion.* (P5)

*I’m not prepared for this, I didn’t study psychology. I believe that colleagues have the same difficulty.* (P1)
We, within schools, do not know how to deal with this type of situation, we do not receive adequate training. (P9)

We tried all possible pedagogies. But where is the psychologist, where is the social worker? We do not have. (P5)

Community violence was greater before drug trafficking. With the arrival of drug trafficking, violence became organized. You realize that the community cannot do as it pleases. That's why this contract that can't have police. Depending on what the resident does, he will not answer to the police. He will answer to the neighborhood vigilante, the "discipline". (P3)

"Discipline" instructs students not to cause problems at school. They explained to me that "discipline" is like a mediator. I said to the students, cool, let's work together. (P1)

If the student gives work at school, and we discover that he does something illegal, we call "discipline", a drug dealer, who imposes respect on him. (P5)

A student made up that she was pregnant by a teacher. So, for him not to be killed, I got in touch with a student who knew "discipline". We went there to resolve this situation, and the girl later said that it was a lie. (P3)

DISCUSSION

Over the years, political reforms were implemented that significantly changed the development of the teachers’ work in the state education network in the state of São Paulo, of which the investigated school is part. As part of these reforms, a standardized curriculum and the application of school performance assessment exams were adopted. Schools began to transmit the standardized content required for this type of assessment, directing the work of teachers to obtain good results in order to receive bonuses.\(^{18}\)

In this perspective, it is understood that a scenario of pressure for performance goals and transmission of standardized content, sometimes far from the students’ daily lives, can bring to teachers the representation that they are experiencing symbolic violence. Disinterested students, oblivious to the teaching-learning process of such contents, and consequently idle, can engage in disrespectful, incivil and even violent behaviors in the school environment.

The teachers expressed their knowledge about the traditional/nuclear family model composed of parents and children anchored in the social representations of structured families. What they cite as unstructured families is identified as different family arrangements, that is, when other family members or third parties are added to the nuclear composition, as a result of separations, new unions, through which the family is being recomposed. What needs to be considered is that it is not whether or not they are “structured”, but whether families are fulfilling their role as an environment of protection, care and affection in the lives of adolescents.\(^{19}\)

For those surveyed, there is a naturalization of violence in the domestic environment, which ends up causing the student to reproduce it in the school environment. The occurrences
of violence can cause interruptions in classes, producing a negative impact on learning and putting even more burden on teachers. These, in turn, when they are unable to perform their work as expected, feel hostages, powerless and frustrated. Violence therefore causes a feeling of insecurity and vulnerability in the school environment.

Regarding contact with families, professors complained that they are absent and do not attend meetings. Research has shown that the development of extracurricular activities integrating families, students and school, enables a partnership that tends to bring about improvements in school performance, reduction of school withdrawal, punitive measures and violence.

The considered school does not have a plan to combat school violence, the measures applied are punctual and controversial. Teachers believe in dialogue as a way of mediating conflicts. However, when there is no result, they choose to apply punitive actions, anchored in the meanings of social representations of cultural values that conceive punishment as an educational strategy.

The adoption of punitive measures can provoke conflicts and violent behavior and compromise the construction of healthy relationships, considered an important factor in facing school violence. Intervention strategies that involve the family, school and community have a positive impact on students' behavior and reduce their involvement in episodes of violence.

Participants recognize the existence of a gap in training actions on school violence that impacts on coping with this phenomenon, as they cannot adequately deal with aggressors. In this perspective, it is essential to include the theme school violence in the curriculum of higher education courses, so that the contents allow future teachers to recognize and act effectively in the fight against school violence, especially in the prevention of these episodes.

The teachers suggested that, in order to face school violence, it is important to carry out work with the participation of other professionals, such as psychologists and social workers. In this sense, it is suggested that schools invest in partnerships with interdisciplinary teams from the basic and intersectoral network (education, health, culture, sport, social assistance, public security), to work with families, students and the community. Seeking in these partnerships to invest in the strengthening of bonds, affections and, above all, in encouraging dialogue as a resource for a healthy coexistence. Schools are privileged spaces for debates on human rights and the fight against violence and not just for teaching academic content.

The level of social vulnerability in the school surroundings can interfere with the school environment. The quality of teaching tends to be more limited; there is a higher incidence of
teacher turnover or the presence of substitutes; there is an increase in risk of negative behaviors such as disrespect, incivility, conflict and violence; and students tend to have low school performance as a consequence\(^2\text{-}3,22,29\). In the present research, on the other hand, teachers reported the search for support from a member of drug trafficking in the community, known as “discipline”. They do this based on the representation of common sense that it is a mediator who has the strength and power to resolve conflicts, who is responsible for respecting the norms of living in the community.

As a consequence of experiencing violence in the school context, of different types and forms, teachers can suffer impacts on their motivation, professional performance and quality of life. The teachers mentioned feelings of impotence and frustration in their practice in the face of situations of violence. Such perceptions and experiences can cause them to present mental and professional health problems. They often develop common mental disorders, show impairments in the performance of their activities as educators and suffer from burnout syndrome\(^6\text{-}9,11\text{-}13\).

When the possibility of participatory school management is offered, with a partnership between teachers, students, family members and the community, associated with the adequacy of the teacher-student relationship, the negative impact of school violence can be significantly alleviated. Joint decision-making by these sectors, combined with the implementation of recreational, extracurricular and recreational activities, brings positive contributions to the school environment\(^2,10\).

**CONCLUSION**

Researching the impacts of school violence on teaching work from the teachers’ perspective proved to be important for understanding the social representations of the phenomenon. The professionals cited the educational policy not consistent with the reality of the students, the reproduction of violent behaviors learned at home, the absence of family participation and the influences of the school environment. They also identified difficulties in managing occurrences, lack of training and teacher education to deal with conflicts, the need to work with other professionals and support from the community.

The results allow us to propose legislative interventions in order to implement mandatory and voluntary occupational health and health promotion programs in the workplace. Another suggested investment is the training of professionals, in their undergraduate and capacitation courses on the topic of violence. These solutions can protect and promote mental well-being and emotional support for teachers. The articulation of schools
with sectors such as health, culture, sports, social assistance and public security in the form of partnerships to provide support to students, families and the community is also relevant.

Also, the support of a community mediator identified as “discipline” drew attention. Despite the importance of valuing the social and cultural reality of the environment where the school is located, this scenario needs to be better understood.

As a limitation of this study, there is the fact that it was carried out in a single school. It is suggested, for future research, the expansion of the number of educational institutions, without neglecting to consider their specificities and the community where they are inserted. Other research methods, such as focus groups and longitudinal studies, can contribute to providing more evidence on the forms of manifestation, coping and prevention of violence in schools.

REFERENCES


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CONTRIBUTIONS
Natalia Alves de Camargo and Zeyne Alves Pires Scherer collaborated in the design, collection and analysis of data, writing and review. Igor de Oliveira Reis, Larissa Sales Martins Baquião and Edson Arthur Scherer contributed to the writing and revision.

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