

The impact of violence in school

Violence is everywhere. It affects us in striking ways, through crime, wars, massacres, exterminations, in sinister succession, and through the pressure of daily harassment. Is it not best to admit that it therefore lies at the very root of human nature? Roger Dadoun.

That violence should be a fact of daily life in South Africa, Palestine, Brazil or the United States, does not surprise anyone. Considering the abundant press coverage, the public is well aware that endemic neighbourhood difficulties (such as apartheid, the intifada or gang warfare) bring violence right into the playground. When the problem affects countries like Norway or Japan, however, which are not thought to be exposed to antagonisms between different communities, the situation begins to appear less fatalistic than at first sight. And even more so, less simple. Is there such a thing as a scale of violence? What are the causes? How could it be reduced? How can violence

be incorporated in control? Over six studies in six countries, the June 1996 issue of PROSPECTS looks at six ways of experiencing violence in school and offers some thoughts about possible remedies.

Violence affects schools

Against a background of insecurity, unemployment, marginalized minorities and general depression, violence has entered schools as a result of the problems in present-day society, but its roots do not all grow from the same tree. Because it is impossible to eradicate a climate of constant humiliation, exclusion and segregation with three well chosen strokes, growing up in Johannesburg or in the Tokyo suburbs is not the same experience. In South Africa, the young democracy still suffering from the inequalities introduced under apartheid

is gradually finding ways out of the problem. Nevertheless, it often happens that South African children, who have been the witnesses and often the victims of ethnic or police violence in the past, often relive this climate of aggression in the classroom. Buildings set on fire, guns, attacks on teachers, murder and rape are only some of the injuries inflicted and suffered in the country's schools.

This direct form of brutal violence occurs in other formerly occupied territories. In Palestine, for instance, how can a Gaza child traumatized by a war in which he was willy nilly involved ever come out of it safe and sound? These children, who may have been murdered, tortured or imprisoned at an age when others are beginning to utter their first words, arrive in a situation of relative peace, burdened by many afteref-

fects (excitability, apathy). If in addition one considers that schools are often closed by belligerent authorities and in any case are inadequate for the number of pupils, the lack of motivation of underpaid teachers and the cultural violence of physical punishment inflicted at home and at school, it is easy to understand how children are, little motivated to go to school.

The schooling conditions experienced by pupils in the slums of Rio de Janeiro are not exactly ideal either. From one territorial war to another, the drug barons rule over the favelas in Brazil. Against a background of general poverty, they give a community which obeys them meekly a semblance of social comfort and bring the schools and hence education under their jurisdiction. The teachers, undermined by territorial battles

and threats of reprisals (attacks on children, vandalism) and weakened by the lack of resources and internal rivalries, allow the besieged schools to be ruled by the gang bosses.

In the United States, factors such as unemployment, poverty, social inequalities and the general depressed feeling of a population watching the American dream slowly fade, give rise to a climate of tension close to a breaking point. The minorities, pushed aside by an American society which glorifies personal success and unbridled consumption, constitute gangs and institute a system of terror. In the school, and even more so around the schools, the proliferation of dealer networks, fights, thefts and vandalism reflect the malaise of a generation driven by the fantasy of unlikely success.

In Japan, these attacks, which were ignored for a

long time because they could not be properly identified, were considered routine by a system which blamed them on youth searching for its own identity. It was only after a sharp rise in the suicide rate among young adolescents that the phenomenon in the last ten years was taken seriously and came to be considered as real social problem.

Solution, do exist

There is certainly no recipe to guarantee the complete eradication of violence in school. As a harmful tendency in every human being, violence, to recreate the words of the philosopher Roger Dadoun, lies "at the root of human behaviour." Thanks to increased awareness of the problem nowadays, both here and elsewhere, it is no longer considered as an isolated phenomenon which can be dismissed with a simple gesture. It is a symptom of the profound changes which have been affecting our modern societies