

INTRODUCTION

SCHOOL AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY

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If we tried to divide social exclusion into different categories, we could use as a criterion the degree to which people's lives are threatened due to causes related to social organization, and therefore, avoidable. Although the general trend in recent centuries has managed to reduce infant mortality rates strongly, that does not mean that dramatic social exclusion has disappeared. Something similar happens with violence, the other great trend by which the progress of humanity could be judged. Homicide rates in Europe today have nothing to do with those of the Middle Ages. However, there are regions in the world where they remain at those levels.

These contrasts are especially pressing in a global context, where responsibility is inexcusably shared. 8500 children die daily in the world due to malnutrition related causes. The latest report from FAO, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, corresponding to 2019, offers a worrying fact. The number of undernourished people in the world has been increasing since 2015, reversing the positive trend that had begun in 2000. The most affected areas are in West Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, West Asia and South America. Food insecurity increases infant mortality rates, as does obesity, the other side of the coin. From these simple data we can deduce three discouraging ideas: childhood is vulnerable throughout the world – even if it is for opposite reasons –, its life is especially threatened in large areas of the planet,

and where evolution has shown improvements, the trend could be reversed anytime.

In recent years, international reports have made use of the term vulnerability. In the 2014 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program, the concept of “human vulnerability” attempts to go beyond the typical risk management to look at “the possibility of deterioration of the capacities and options of the people”.

Childhood, *latu sensu*, would be part, together with women and people with different abilities, of one of the main groups defined by experts as especially vulnerable, due to natural disasters, climate change and industrial hazards. But the truth is that they would also be affected by sources that create discomfort in other vulnerable groups, such as civil conflicts in the case of forced displaced persons, or economic crises in the case of the poor and informal workers. In fact, if the number of displaced persons currently exceeds 25 million, it is estimated that approximately half are minors. More than seven million are of school age. Of these, more than half do not have access to education.

In this issue, we are fortunate to have an article on displaced children in Colombian schools, one of the hottest points of global child vulnerability, very difficult to observe. As their problem is usually linked to trauma, the denial of its condition, for fear of stigma, is one of the most logical

psychological mechanisms, a strategy that will have the agreement of parents. This complicity shows the link of social relationships of education with its social environment. In this way, we have that silence not only covers relationships of abuse between equals but can fulfill opposite social functions, shielding potential victims.

On the other hand, vulnerability to economic crises is so clear that it places the discussion, in fact, on a higher level. The case of Spain is clear in this regard. The latest FOESSA report, published in 2019, notes the entrenchment of social exclusion compared to the start of the 2007 crisis. 21% of households with children are in a situation of social exclusion, a few points above the average, which means that children are more likely than adults to have their rights hurt. At the heart of this vulnerable region are large families and single-parent households – normally female –, with exclusion rates of 33 and 28 percent respectively.

Therefore, childhood is vulnerable, at least at the height we are in the century, and in most of the world, not only in the poorest countries. That justifies the emergence of research teams dedicated to observing, analyzing and proposing measures to prevent vulnerability from degenerating into social exclusion. Such is the case of SEVIN (Society, Education, Violence and Children), a Recognized Research Group by the University of Salamanca that has had the honor to share the results of their work in this issue of the Social Pedagogy Review. In our group, we put special care in spistemological care. The house – the construction of socio-pedagogical theories – should be built up from below. The first challenge that both, researchers and managers related to childhood problems, must assume, is the epistemological vigilance that they should exercise on the underlying assumptions that condition their work, and that refer to ideologies about the social and educational relationships that are alive in the cultural context in which they work. In his posthumous work, *Factfulness*, published in 2018, Hans Rosling asks thousands of people what percentage of girls finish Primary Education in the poorest countries, if 20%, 40% or 60%. The majority of responses are wrong. Also ask what percentage of one-year-old boys and girls do receive a vaccine, whether 20%, 50% or 80% percent. Only 13% of the answers are right. But the most curious thing is that some Nobel laureates and health sciences researchers get worse than average. It is as if awareness of social problems increases pessimism producing a professional deformation that could have negative effects.

The issue is opened by a paper, *Mythologies of Bullying*, that insist in this caution. Some of the

most admitted beliefs among researchers, provide the association of variables that come from poor statistical correlations. Its exaggeration, however, fulfills a function: it offers simple explanations – which, by their nature, can be passed more easily to the public –, about complex problems, such as violence in general, and school violence and bullying in particular. Simple causal chains generate beliefs that then accommodate political ideologies and can have discriminatory effects. We can think, for instance, that poverty favors abuse, and bullied children become bullies. There may be parents who change their child from the center if they consider that there are immigrant children whose company could be dangerous. Or someone may dismiss as a possible sentimental partner someone who has a victim background. Meanwhile, factors such as school organization, teaching laws that establish certain curricula and evaluation systems, or social power relations between school actors, are far from being suspected of bullying and, in general, of the dissatisfaction of the students with the education received. Only a “philosophy of suspicion” could regard those subjects worthy of research, such as the one that emerges from the critical sociology education or the social pedagogy in a Freirian way – that also insists on fostering critical thinking by exceeding the most shared opinions that explain our problems.

If the education system works on affectivity and compassion, if it promotes solidarity by instilling direct contact with the environment and the problems studied, investigating the suffering of other children or other people, and when possible, through direct testimonies, there would probably be fewer episodes of peer violence.

The initial comparison between infant mortality rates and homicide rates serves more than a general reflection on the deficiencies of humanity's progress. Child welfare is limited mainly by basic rights but also by violence. Both axes configure the central plane on which the map of social vulnerability is drawn. And one of the points of intersection is bullying. Bullying reflects, on the one hand, the lacks of the education system, but on the other, the lacks of the social system into which it is inserted. The problems of living together in the school refer to the problems of living out of school. That connection take part of the objective of both, the sociology of education and social pedagogy. The cooperation between both disciplines, which can also be traced, as the reading of this issue suggests, at the epistemological level, is the only way to improve intervention instruments and strategies based on accurate and complex diagnoses.

Bullying is less investigated in some fields and in some methodologies. Also in some groups that are especially interesting in multiethnic modern societies. In Spain there is little research on ethnic bullying, and within them, there is even less about groups that are increasingly important, such as Chinese children. The paper by David et alia, in this sense, has an important role, despite its small sample, as a pioneering study on the subject. Researchers have been able to reveal the speeches of adopted Chinese girls and boys, students of Secondary Education. Family support networks, mainly due to the high status of adopters, keep the threat of harassment. This begins as a light fire, taking the form of wounding words and insults throughout the school career, especially at the beginning, which sometimes destabilizes potential victims. Chinese children are aware of their vulnerability at all times. The results allow us to conclude that ethnic differences, especially those that have to do with the phenotype or language, can act as activators of bullying. Where support networks fail – family overall, but also the peer group, especially in the last stages of compulsory education – vulnerability could increase until the doors of exclusion are opened. A family breakdown or serious economic problems, would increase the chances of these children to suffer bullying.

Learning that generates satisfaction in students can be done through playful pedagogies, but the game itself can also be used as a material in the specific prevention of bullying. In fact, many of the Basic Education teachers and the so-called Childhood Educators interviewed in Portugal by Cátia Vaz, agree with its use. By the way, the author has patented, in Portuguese and English, the game *Playing and Smiling The Bulling: Let's Prevent*.

In the article on children in the city of Zamora, minors interviewed, despite recognizing the relatively privileged local context, in terms of security and rights, are also able to demand an education for leisure, better coordination of municipal services, and an attention to the most vulnerable groups, such as the gypsy ethnic group or children and adolescents in special centers, including the problematic transition after coming of age.

Also the article by David Urchuaga and colleagues, which records 21% of bullying confessed by first-year students in high schools of Salamanca city, proposes to improve the school climate as well as working on emotional intelligence.

I believe that the present monographic has achieved the challenge we face in the research group in order to disseminate especially original works on the main vulnerabilities of children.

