

## Student Violence against Teachers in Secondary Schools, Colima, Mexico

### La violencia de alumnos hacia maestros en escuelas secundarias de Colima, México

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#### Abstract

This article discusses the experiences of secondary school teachers who have suffered any kind of violence from their students during their teaching career. Through 25 in-depth interviews, carried out in various municipalities of the state of Colima, it was possible to gather evidence on the ways in which teachers from public and private schools experienced physical and verbal violence against them, as well as other attitudes and acts such as: harassment, defiance of authority, aggression against their person or property, and questioning when enforcing discipline and of institutional rules. Teachers say that aggressive acts have risen considerably in the last few years. Verbal violence is the most common kind, but there were also documented cases of a physical nature, and as time has gone on they have suffered from a larger number of criminal acts. The situations they described included daily discomfort in their jobs, problems while teaching and keeping control of the classroom, difficulties in understanding the attitudes of the teenagers, incapability of reaction during conflictive situations, and a lack of strategies, as well as a lack of pedagogical resources and institutional support to deal with this situation.

**Keywords:** secondary education, school violence, educational practice, students, conflictive situations

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## Resumen

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El presente artículo analiza la experiencia de docentes de educación secundaria que han sufrido algún tipo de violencia por parte los alumnos a lo largo de su trayectoria. A través de 25 entrevistas en profundidad realizadas en diferentes municipios de Colima, se logró recuperar la forma en que los docentes de escuelas públicas y privadas experimentaron la violencia física y verbal en su contra, así como distintas actitudes y acciones como: acoso, desafío a la autoridad, agresiones personales o a sus bienes y cuestionamientos al momento de aplicar la disciplina y las normas que marca la institución. Los docentes señalan que las agresiones han aumentado considerablemente en los últimos años; la violencia más frecuente es de tipo verbal —aunque también se han mencionado casos de violencia física— y cada vez se presentan más actos delictivos en su contra. Las situaciones que identifican son un malestar cotidiano en su trabajo, problemas para ejercer su práctica y mantener el control en el aula, dificultades para comprender las actitudes de los adolescentes, no saber cómo manejar los conflictos y carecer de estrategias, así como de recursos pedagógicos y de apoyo institucional para poder afrontar esta situación.

**Palabras clave:** educación secundaria, violencia escolar, práctica docente, alumnos, conflictos

The analysis of school violence is a current issue that requires the attention of different actors: teachers, students, parents, education authorities, academics and the general public. It is a social phenomenon whose complexity cannot be resolved via a single perspective, methodology, discipline or approach. It requires a collective, interdisciplinary reflection on different issues relating to coexistence and daily interactions between students and teachers, which goes beyond educational content.

In secondary schools in Mexico, violence is no longer a series of dramatic incidents. Rather, it is a multiform, shifting, silent reality with diverse angles that is present in many of the interactions that occur between students and teachers. Therefore, it must be analyzed as both a collective phenomenon and a private experience, that is, as part of a process that is integrated into daily relationships as well as social conditions.

While putting the issue on the table for discussion is, of course, the first step, it must go further than that: the issue needs to be confronted with new analytical tools, information retrieval tools and, of course, different approaches and positions, either from the perspective of students, principals and staff, or of teachers (which is the aim of this text), in order to understand what school violence is, identify it and avoid it.

### Violence towards teachers

The issue of school violence has been on the national agenda for some time now. Different laws have been enacted in some Mexican states, for example in Tamaulipas, Sonora, Nayarit, Puebla, Veracruz and the Federal District (Zurita, 2012). Also, several programs have been launched at the national, state and municipal level, such as *Escuela Segura* (Safe School), *Sendero Seguro* (Safe Path), *Mochila Segura* (Safe Backpack) and, more recently, the *Programa Nacional para la Prevención Social de la Violencia y la Delincuencia* (National Program for Social Prevention of Violence and Crime).

The internal guidelines of elementary schools<sup>1</sup> also promote proposals to eradicate violent practices as an educational policy line of action: "...via the 191,000 social participation school boards, violence and crime prevention models will be addressed," education authorities reported last year (Entorno Político, 2013, p. 1).

Numerous reports, statistics and figures provide information on the number of actions, programs and initiatives promoted, but there is very little about the way these proposals are experienced and adapted to everyday life. There are comparatively few qualitative studies compared to quantitative studies on

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<sup>1</sup> Elementary education in Mexico has three levels: preschool, which has three grades and serves children between 5 and 6 years old; primary, which lasts six years and where children enter between 6 and 7; and finally secondary education, which lasts three years and the children enter between the age of 11 and 12.

these types of issues (Gómez, 2012), which leaves aside a lot of information generated in educational institutions.

At the same time, tabloid news, easy reporting, unfounded judgments issued by radio and television programs and the sudden appearance of self-help books that offer prescriptions and quick solutions and emphasize unambiguous causes and general judgments to explain what happens in educational institutions is what has unfortunately prevailed.

A review of the scientific production in the field shows mainly studies where teachers are the axis around which violence towards students originates. There has also been a proliferation of studies addressing the violence that occurs between students, with an emphasis on one type of violence, such as bullying (Gómez, 2013).

However, a pending issue on the educational research agenda is violence towards teachers by their students. In accordance with a review of ten years of scientific production on school violence, conducted by researchers in the state of knowledge *Convivencia, disciplina y violencia en las escuelas (Coexistence, discipline and violence in schools)*, edited by the Mexican Council of Educational Research (COMIE), there is a need to foster research that considers the role of adults in schools into account:

Notably absent in research on the subject and in this report are adults, as models, victims and perpetrators. There is little data on adults in the school environment and in the family; this is very important as they play a major role in the problem (Furlan & Spitzer, 2013, p. 22).

Internationally, this phenomenon has been receiving attention for some years now, generating research studies and various types of initiatives to address what has been called a *silent epidemic among teachers*, present in different educational institutions in the United States, Spain, Thailand, Japan, Peru and Brazil, to name a few.

Studies in these countries indicate, among other things, that the phenomenon has increased in an alarming way, both in terms of the manifestation of authority-challenging behavior (Díaz and Rodríguez, 2010) and attacks on the physical integrity of teachers (Ji-Kang & Ron Avi, 2009) and their property (Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2011). Women are the most affected, both in cases of confrontation and in various other forms, including sexual harassment at some educational levels (Steffgen & Ewen, 2007).

In most of the cited works, there is a deterioration of the institutional climate (Michael & Philip, 2011), tension in the relationships between teachers and students produced in the classroom (Leff et al., 2011), teacher insecurity, fear and discomfort when teaching (Marchesi, 2010, p. 174), constant stress, which impacts their physical and emotional health, as a result of certain school events (Esteve, 1994; Travers & Cooper, 1997) as well as a long list of diseases suffered by teachers related to nervous tension built up over the years (Martínez, 1992; Travers & Cooper, 1997).

It is necessary to analyze the teachers' position on this issue, since it involves their personal and professional identity, which ultimately translates to a questioning and deterioration of the work of their profession. This text aims to emphasize the role of teachers and the way they react to certain situations that have put them in a disadvantaged position, to the extent of suffering violence.

Daily life in an institution is in no way an "autonomous" field, with clear and precise boundaries, or an already *constructed* object of analysis, but rather a complex web of relationships that is difficult to analyze at first sight, where the expectations, motives, intentions, values, beliefs and emotions of each subject intersect. Therefore, the study of what happens in classrooms changes; it becomes a way to monitor the changes in the school that moves beyond simply considering them radical and sudden changes.

### Research axes

The research axes guiding this article are: to give an account of school violence and describe the circumstances in which it is produced and reproduced, its function in different contexts, its specific dynamics and its effects on teachers.

The general objective of the research was to analyze how student violence toward teachers occurs in the school and how teachers cope with it. The secondary objectives were: a) to characterize the experience of secondary school teachers who during their career experienced some form of violence against them by students and b) to identify the main implications that this violence had on the teachers at the professional, work and emotional levels.

The base assumption is that the school and the culture that unfolds within the school produces and enables the reproduction of violence, which is capitalized on in different ways by its members, who are under unequal conditions and opportunities for using and/or facing it.

The theoretical and conceptual aspects that guided this research are presented below.

### **Power, conflict and violence**

We conceptualize power as an element that is present in almost all social relationships in which there is an active subject who guides the will of another person, whereby the first commands and the second obeys. In other words, we deal with the issue of violence in action, used by force and taking place when subjects locked in conflict are prevented from voluntarily acting as required by the power relationship. For this reason, they are forced to reciprocally exercise threats and respective counterthreats (Escobar, 1988, p. 25).

Given the close relationship between violence and conflict, it should be noted that the term *violence* applies in all situations where a conflict arises, although it is important to mention that not all conflict necessarily leads to a violent act (Redorta, 2005). Conflict is inherent to human relationships and a constituent part of the daily lives of individuals. Violence is not inherent to conflict, but it can become a central part to resolve a situation (Gómez, Zurita, & López, 2013, p. 27).

Among the different features of schools considered, we note that they produce, transmit, legitimize, promote, sanction, socialize and report a multiplicity of values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, knowledge and behavioral guidelines that, in response to specific worldviews, needs and interests -whether of the different groups in a society or the dominant group or groups-, affect different aspects that surround the educational activities of individuals (Gómez, 2005).

### **School violence and control**

In this paper, we conceptualize violence in school as a power resource used by different subjects in specific situations as follows:

- a) *By the teacher against the students*, as a power resource to assert his or her authority and maintain control in the classroom;
- b) *Among students*, as part of an open or hidden force, in order to obtain something from an individual or a group that does not wish to consent freely;
- c) *By the students against the teacher*, as a power resource that seeks to diminish his or her authority, questioning his or her work and rules, in order to destabilize the control in the classroom and gain legitimacy among their peers (Gómez, 2005, 2012).

The common denominator in all of these cases is that it is a process that violates the physical, social and/or psychological integrity of a person or group. School violence, therefore, may manifest in the institution as a result of a dynamic that involves physical, psychological or verbal force and may be exercised by any of the actors involved in response to dissimilar to unexpected situations, either explicitly or in a hidden manner.

In the case of teachers, their primary mission is to impart different contents and put them into practice, a central aspect that gives them power, legitimacy and institutional control, as Delamont (1985) points out. While the definition of identities is part of an ongoing process (Postic, 2000), so are the various negotiations that accompany this process, whether academic or extracurricular. There are aspects

pertaining to the organizational activity of the institution, in accordance with the micropolitics: «a) the interests of the actors ... b) maintaining control of the organization and c) conflicts concerning politics» (Ball, 1989, p. 34) and characterized by situations mediated by different power resources that each of the actors deploys throughout the educational act and in specific situations: «the concept of 'cellularism' dominates. Each member is assigned duties, and from his or her special area and discipline, intervenes in the addressee, making the globalizing conceptualization of the action problematic» (Santos-Guerra, 2000, p. 223).

Therefore, we can note the presence of conflict, leadership, threats, coercion, challenges, struggles for control in the context of the classroom and, of course, violence in its different types, since each subject pursues a different end, and through their different resources and strategies strives to achieve it.

The main aspects considered with regard to the teacher's role in the classroom are those associated with the control of students in different areas: knowledge (Apple & King, 1986; Bernstein, 1998; Delamont, 1985), behavior (Miller, 2001), discipline (Defrance, 2005), punishments, language and clothes (Delamont, 1985; Drebber, 1976), within a framework of autonomy and uncertainty in which the teacher implements his or her everyday practice (Jackson, 2001).

The tension between the control that teacher establishes as part of his or her institutional task and compliance with objectives, in the ways that students challenge and approach this control -negotiation, confrontation, rejection and subversion-, results in an uncertain, latent relationship that is present at all times in the classroom interaction linked to academic and extracurricular aspects.

### Teaching practice

Teaching is an activity that combines different levels of complexity and involves decision-making in response to both planned and unexpected situations in everyday interaction. Although it is associated, first, with imparting content, knowledge and skills (Mercado, 2002), many studies have recognized the multiplicity of aspects -beyond the strictly formal and academic- that come into play when class begins everyday as part of institutional functioning (Hargreaves, 1994; Jackson, 2001; Pérez, 1998; Stubbs & Delamont, 1978). The school, on the other hand, is considered: «...a *cultural construct* that is dynamic, full of expectations, imbued with values, subject to conflict, conditioned by the context» (Santos-Guerra, 2000, p. 222) that contains within its walls many negotiations, confrontations and struggles for positions and interests by the participating subjects (Fernández, 2001).

Studies by Postic (1999, 2000), Mercado and Rockwell (2003), Fierro, Fortul and Rosas (1999) and Clark and Peterson (1990) have presented evidence on the way teachers teach and the various relationships with students that arise in this process: negotiation, confrontation, rebellion, authoritarianism and aggression, among others. However, what is worth noting is their strong interest in knowing what happens inside the classroom as well as in the wider school context (García-Cabrero et al., 2008).

In the framework of this research, priority was given to what happens in the classroom, which is understood as teaching practice, outside of which there arises "a broader practice, exercised by teachers in the institutional context, called *educational practice*" (García-Cabrero et al., 2008, p. 164), and the need to know what happens to teachers who suffer violence from their students.

### The method used in this research

This study used ethnographic methods such as interviews, a field journal and on-site observation of events (Stubbs & Delamont, 1978). These are interpretive, i.e., the explanation was attained through what is expressed by the research subjects: theoretical references and attitudes, as well as personal considerations and the process of self-understanding, attained from the interaction with the place of the events, aspects that enable the narration, interpretation and production of a text (Bertely, 2000; De Certau, 2009; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994; Woods, 1988).

Secondary schools and secondary school teachers were selected from the municipalities with the highest population density and economic activity in Colima; the schools visited were chosen according to their characteristics: schools that were many years old with over 100 students.

The type of sample for this study was *non* probabilistic. The study sought deep and detailed information, not quantity and standardization.

The sample selection used a type of subject, i.e., their selection did not depend on having the same probability of being chosen, but was based on the characteristics of the research (Hernández, Fernández, & Baptista, 2006, p. 328): teachers who during their career had the experience of suffering violence from their students.

Twenty-five secondary school teachers were interviewed: 9 men and 16 women from 10 secondary schools, of which 6 were public and 4 private (Table 1).

Table 1  
Teachers by institution and sex

| Teachers | Secondary schools |         |       |
|----------|-------------------|---------|-------|
|          | Public            | Private | Total |
| Males    | 6                 | 3       | 9     |
| Females  | 7                 | 9       | 16    |
| Total    | 13                | 12      | 25    |

The teacher interview protocol consisted of explaining the objectives of the research project and requesting permission to record their testimonies for later publishing. They were also informed that their names would not appear in the work, since what mattered was the facts and narrative of the events. In all cases, the teachers accepted without imposing any restrictions; they were in agreement and willing to collaborate at all times.

The interviews were conducted in the respective institutions between January and April 2013 and conducted as a dialogue, with a semistructured part (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956) based on a script.

The issues discussed in the interviews included: a) aspects of their teaching careers: education, years of experience and specialty; b) problems faced on a daily basis in the institution with the students, principal or parents; c) solutions and strategies implemented to address these problems and e) specific instances of school violence and their positions on these events, among others.

The interviews were fully transcribed and subjected to the following analysis process: a conceptual map was designed for each interview, and in each map the keywords or phrases identified in the teacher narratives that were related to the subject of the investigation were identified with different colors. Based on the conceptual maps for each interview, a matrix was designed for the pre-categories with the greatest frequency in the teachers' speech -the most predominant colors-, where, based on the teachers' textual statements, the different points of view were contrasted. In other words, different segments of information were examined successively to see to which categories they could be related (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p. 197). The next step was triangulation, which involved comparing the accounts of different participants, and later, comparing them with the revised concepts in the theory linked to the object of the research. This is how the definitive categories for the research were obtained (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p. 216).

Thick description (Geertz, 2006, p. 19) was used as a methodological tool to help produce an in-depth account of what happened in an institution and of the subjects that comprise it, making it necessary to work with multiple episodes and accounts that go beyond a linear description, as the aim was to “give them life” and bring into play the various elements surrounding the subjects involved in the story. Narration, in this sense, served to organize the different arguments, interactions and judgments expressed by the subjects of the analysis and systematize them in a readable and reasoned manner (Ricoeur, 2007).

Table 2  
Analysis categories

| Pre-categories  | Categories        |
|---|-------------------|
| Physical:   | School violence   |
| Attacking with an object (pencil, pen, notebook, stick, etc.) |                   |
| Throwing an object  |                   |
| Destroying belongings   |                   |
| Spitting  |                   |
| Stealing belongings   |                   |
| Verbal:   |                   |
| Sexual innuendo (Double entendres with sexual connotations)   |                   |
| Insulting   |                   |
| Name-calling  |                   |
| Humiliating   |                   |
| Ridiculing  |                   |
| Caricaturizing  |                   |
| Psychological:  |                   |
| Calling the teacher “crazy”                                   |                   |
| Threatening to use violence                                   |                   |
| Making fun of socioeconomic origin                            |                   |
| Making fun of gender  |                   |
| Caricaturizing  |                   |
| Blackmailing  |                   |
| Controlling   |                   |
| Criticizing on a constant basis                               |                   |
| Humiliating   |                   |
| Ignoring  |                   |
| Insulting   |                   |
| Belittling  |                   |
| Problems in transmitting knowledge                            | Teaching practice |
| Adverse climate in the classroom                              |                   |
| Feelings of insecurity  |                   |
| Sadness   |                   |
| Embarrassment   |                   |
| Fear  |                   |
| Loneliness  |                   |
| Lack of support from peers                                    |                   |
| Problems managing conflict in the classroom                   |                   |
| Questioning his or her teaching                               |                   |
| Uncertainty   |                   |
| Questioning his or her identity                               |                   |
| On working conditions: public and private institutions        |                   |

|                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| Interactions         | School micropolitics |
| Negotiations         |                      |
| Threats              |                      |
| Counterthreats       |                      |
| Conflict             |                      |
| Leadership           |                      |
| Struggle for power   |                      |
| Formation of groups  |                      |
| Classroom            | Control              |
| Knowledge            |                      |
| Conduct              |                      |
| Clothing             |                      |
| Language             |                      |
| Discipline           |                      |
| Legitimacy           |                      |
| Authority            |                      |
| Punishments          |                      |
| Role                 |                      |
| Lack of control      |                      |
| Struggle for control |                      |
| Coercion             |                      |

Note: The left column contains the pre-categories most frequently stated in the teachers' speech and the right column contains the categories used in the study. It is important to note that an event can involve two or more actions simultaneously, for example, a fight can include both physical and psychological violence. This combination can contain a mix of various kinds of situations in different orders. The part of the framework on physical, verbal and psychological violence was derived from the ideas of Welzer-Lang (2007) and supplemented with our own records.

## Results

The main findings of the research are given below. The sections are organized according to the four categories of analysis.

In this section, we return to issues related to the teachers' role in the classroom and the contextual elements, actions, situations, feelings and issues they face every day, as well as the impact these elements have on their professional development.

### Teaching practice

Teachers say that, although school violence towards them has grown, many of their colleagues do not dare admit it out of embarrassment; they see it as indicating shortcomings in their work and how their work is carried out, and a way of showing weakness, as one interviewee indicates:

I'm sure, and I have over twenty-five years of service... if these problems happen, they've always happened... but the teacher thinks that if he says something they'll question him, it's like he's embarrassed and that's why he doesn't say anything, but whether there are... there are problems, and that I can assure you, many colleagues complain about it every day, but why don't they do it?, so they don't look weak in their job (3rd year teacher, 46 years old, public secondary school, interview no. 4, 03/25/13).

The teacher's denying that the problem is serious tends to hinder a solution. One of the characteristics of the victims is to hide information and contribute to the situation's aggravation. Moreover, we can see in the testimony that the teacher fears that the complaint will be taken as a sign of weakness by peers, and therefore does not share.



This situation affects how the teacher is valued within the institution, where one can also find differences and discriminations. The teacher's work, in some way, can be questioned, and so the teacher is afraid of the complaint being made known and does not take into account the negative impact that this can produce.

The fear of public ridicule becomes another factor that works against the teacher: not only does he or she expect it from students, but also from his/her coworkers.

**What happens in the classroom does not stay in the classroom.** The classroom is a space that is considered autonomous, yet much information about what happens in the classroom is communicated by students to other students in different groups, and this attitude has a decisive influence on the teacher's prestige and behavior. Teachers say that "prestige, reputation and status are decisive in their careers, and worthy of keeping unsullied within the institution" (Ball, 1989, p. 219). These are central aspects that, when lost, can be difficult to regain.

As one teacher indicates, "it seems like they focus on and only remember the negative things, and not the good ones" (1st year teacher, 30 years old, public secondary school, interview no. 2, 03/22/12), and in institutional memory, certain episodes become key moments around which a story or part of an individual's identity is built.

**(In)formation problems.** Some interviewees recognize that many of these problems with students stem from teachers not knowing how to handle the group, due to a lack of educational resources and training on issues related to adolescent and youth development. These aspects have on more than one occasion raised doubts in teachers as to whether they should continue teaching, as the following testimony indicates:

I think it's that many other teachers don't know how to teach the class; they start getting along great with students, one was even saying "*güey* (dude)" with his students, and then he didn't know what to do, because they were shouting at him in the street, and he didn't know how to stop them, because students are heartless and if you give them a little trust, they abuse it. The situation got so bad that he flat out said he didn't want to be a teacher anymore (1st year teacher, 25 years old, public school, interview no. 14, 04/08/13).

During the interviews, a common denominator was that none of the teachers reported having taken a course on conflict management to prevent violence, classroom management, how to establish communication with adolescents or strategies and resources to address violence in the classroom.

When problems with students arise, the teachers do not have many tools to address them. For example, one interviewee recounted an act of physical violence against her and the institution did little to support her:

Once, I told a student in civics class to start working, and I did this over and over again, until I went and stood in front of her, took her arm to lift her out of the desk, and she slaps me! That, and she began insulting me. It was the niece of a very political supervisor and no one did anything, they even made it clear to me -the principal- that if I said anything there could be more problems (1st year teacher, 56 years old, public secondary school, interview no. 20, 04/19/13).

The interviewees stated that, faced with new circumstances, they need more support in their daily work.

The teachers are in favor of the implementation of courses, workshops or talks to help them cope with students, given that they often feel overwhelmed by the requests and behaviors of young people, and report feeling downright helpless without the support of the institution:

I have had terrible groups, and what helps you with one group won't work for another; they don't always work the same way, and that's when you ask yourself «how do I do this», and if you have experience and years working at this level, yes... but as I say, there you should receive support, courses, workshops, advice, because young people today have other problems and you don't know what to do, that's where we've fallen behind (Teacher, 35 years old, private secondary school, interview no. 14, 3/22/13).

**Private and public schools.** Our research addressed an important aspect, the immediate context in which the teachers work, in order to observe the differences in the violence they experienced by taking into account the socioeconomic status of students in schools supported by the state and run privately.

What the interviewees emphasized was that, in private institutions, students are more rebellious and there were more confrontations with teachers. The aspects that stand out among those mentioned are that students feel entitled to «go head to head with teachers» saying that «their parents pay tuition» and «they have full permission to misbehave».

Of course, economic factors and social background are aspects that are closely linked to how students relate to teachers in these institutions. There are greater chances for a conflict to occur when the educational service is seen by some students as something that «belongs to them» because their parents pay tuition.

On this point, teachers say parents at these institutions delegate much of the responsibility to the school; sometimes, there are parents who believe that the tuition also covers student misconduct or lack of discipline.

Teachers working in private schools agreed that the conditions are very different and that the interaction with students also changes. It is in specific cases of indiscipline where one can see a major difference: students with problems or who led an act of violence against teachers said that at all times they felt supported by their parents and that they could change schools before changing their attitude.

### **Micropolitics**

In this section, we emphasize the diversity of goals, interests, strategies, struggles for power and control that each subject perceives and how daily interaction is established.

**The rumors surrounding teachers.** This study did not include student interviews; however, we gathered the information that teachers have on this issue.

The following narrative shows how a story handled and reported by students, based on a rumor, created a false image of a teacher. It involves an argument that seeks to humiliate the person, discredit her and attribute a crime, which resulted in a sensitive problem that threatened the prestige of the teacher in the school and in front of her peers:

They started slandering me, a lot. It was maybe three years ago. I don't know how they started saying that I had ended up in jail for running someone over, like I say. What happened -I remember, and it bothers me-, they say the police stopped me and took away my car for not having a license. That's what they said! But I don't know how or who. Ah now I know! They said I had hit a big lady! And then gossip broke out all over the school. It all changes you, really; even the principal and the supervisor asked me if it was true! The good news is that some coworkers helped me disprove it, but it was horrible! I didn't even hit anyone, much less end up in jail, I remember and it makes me feel so angry! (2nd year teacher, 40 years old, public secondary school, interview no. 22, 04/25/13).

Rumor in institutions is undoubtedly one of the main forms of communication among members. Beyond the information exchanged being true or not, it is a referent that can cause disruptions in the teachers' work, as Erickson (1980) notes; by creating a malicious identity for the individual victim, the intent is that any action can be applied to him or her, assigning the victim many negative characteristics, in order to justify the violence inflicted upon him or her.

**The role of families.** On the issue of school violence, teachers agree that the problems stem from family education and the lack of support they receive in the task of educating the children. As one interviewee says, «one adopts the students and also the parents». Teachers say that the school «puts a lot in their hands» and expect them to be responsible for the children's *entire* upbringing.

When a student has problems with a teacher, arguments that the teacher cannot handle the group or deal with young people arise almost immediately. Conflicts with students are associated with the lack of teaching experience, and while this may be a part of the problem, it is not valid in all cases.

Teachers ask for support from parents, saying that they offer little help and that when a behavioral problem occurs, they blame the school and its members, evading responsibility. A recurring argument regarding parents, according to interviewees, is that parents who have children with behavioral problems

find it hard or do not want to recognize the situation, which complicates the solution. It should also be added that the communication is neither very agile nor very frequent.

### Control

This section focuses on the struggle and negotiation for control in the classroom, the tension involved in maintaining it and the different resources that are put into play to conserve it.

**Group strength and defiance of authority.** Confrontation with teachers is divided into two areas: first, disorder and questioning when the teacher is carrying out his or her teaching work, and second, the informal level, the spaces where students are away from the teacher's gaze, where, through rumor and ridicule, the teacher is characterized and mocked for his or her work and person.

According to the teachers' testimonies, many of the problems in the classroom are created collectively when students agree to adopt a position in response to a direction given by the teacher; in contrast, the students' attitudes change dramatically when they act individually.

The group attitude acts as a spontaneous mass aiming to destabilize the teacher; in this way students form an entity that can confront authority, as the following testimony expresses:

They did it to me once. Recently, they did not want to work... I remember that they all agreed to duck down, like this, like they were glued to the desks [the teacher puts her hand on her forehead], they put their heads on the desk and no one listen to me. That day even the principal had to intervene, they stayed like that the whole class and the problem started because one of their classmates was expelled and I signed the report [...] and no one ever said whose idea it was (2nd year teacher, 30 years old, private secondary school, interview no. 3, 03/19/13).

Moreover, when one student or a group of students challenge a teacher, it becomes a sensitive issue and a latent threat that has several implications for students. The attitude of some students, in leading the confrontation with the teacher, is part of a strategy to achieve group cohesion against authority, implementing a number of mechanisms: "...phenomena of identification with one or more central people who embody an ideal of a projection of loving (and aggressive) impulses on the leader or his/her representatives of diverted aggression" (Enríquez, 1989, p. 113).

The teacher-challenging attitude assumed by the student is not strictly linked to the knowledge imparted by the teacher; they do not presume to *know* more than the teacher or challenge the subject matter or a given content, but rather attempt to impose upon him, sometimes through the way that he or she transmits the knowledge («no one understands you», «you're not explaining that well») and demonstrate their lack of control: «this class is a disaster», «no one pays attention to you».

Teachers have identified styles and ways to proceed in difficult situations, based on an attitude of «confronting» students with an ongoing strategy of «not getting into even the most minimal of situations». One teacher says that the students «know who they are dealing with, because they're not stupid», since the way they interact with the teachers is very different:

They don't get tough with the chemistry teacher; one shout and they're quiet, with her there is no «playing around», and I would even say they're afraid of her; she doesn't let anything go and she answers back to them, and I think that's what a lot of students here need. It's a way of being, confronting the students and talking to them clearly (3rd year teacher, 35 years old, private secondary school, interview no. 11, 03/13/13).

The testimonies include other variants used by the students, such as teacher defamation, that is, the «construction» of disparagement through a complaint, using, as a base, aspects of the teacher's personality, his or her way of teaching or attitudes unrelated to teaching, as in this case where a teacher is directly extorted:

A teacher, considered demanding and even «rude», who «gave a lot of homework and always left the class», was forced to pass almost all of his students with tens because he received threats that images and recordings of kisses and caresses exchanged with another teacher -married, like him- in a parking lot of a public secondary school would be uploaded to social networks (Becerril, 2013).

**(Lack of) control.** Traditional forms of teacher control are in many cases limited, as in the case of cell phone use, and in particular, texting in class. In this regard, a second year teacher said the following:

It's a real mess, because you can't have control anymore. Before, you knew what was going on because there would be noise; now, there are students messaging each other in the classroom or with other classrooms, and you can't be watching them all the time, despite their being told not to bring cell phones. They're just getting distracted, and the parents who let them bring these devices, and don't take them away, no no!, because they get so indignant and their parents even come and complain (Interview no. 19, 03/12/13).

The interviewees say that, sometimes, students do not pay attention in class and communicate with each other in the same classroom or with students located in other parts of the school. Students have even dialed the cell phone number of the teacher during class in order to disturb and distract him or her.

Moreover, there are several mechanisms to challenge the teaching role through all kinds of insults: «giving the finger», «mother insults» and the use of double entendres that seek to ridicule the teacher without openly confronting him or her. In this case the message's double interpretation or connotation, sometimes sexual, aims to confuse and damage an image, in this case, the teacher's:

The students can be terrible, some are really bold, I act like I don't realize it, like I don't know what they're saying to me, but they say things to you like «teacher, my friend here wants to give you... the homework», things like that, you see? And so on and so on, and you can't get distracted. Once the principal said: «*Yo cojo el lápiz así para que me salga derecho* (I hold the pencil like this so that it's straight)», and no sooner had he said it and the students started laughing hysterically because he said *cojo* (in Spanish: have sexual relations [vulgar]) (3rd year teacher, 42 years old, private secondary school, interview no. 6, 04/15/13).

Classroom control sometimes becomes a challenge for students, to the extent that the teacher's physical and spatial situation becomes an interesting bet, as told in the following testimony:

It really surprised me that a student grabbed my butt, just like I'm telling you, and it was because her friends bet five hundred pesos that she wouldn't do it, and she did it! And I didn't know what to do, I think it made me sorrier than it made them... (Teacher, 25 years old, private secondary school, interview no. 7, 04/19/13).

For high school students, sexual remarks about teachers are an ongoing behavior. How teachers dress, what kind of skirts they wear, the makeup they wear and their age are frequently discussed. Even their physical appearance determines many of the attitudes that students take into account when assessing their work: «The math teacher is very cute, so I even want to take the class» «the physics teacher is fat and old».

For the interviewees, the pressure they experience in their schools is due to a latent conflict among some students who seek to destabilize teaching, promote disorder in the classroom and challenge their authority. So says the following testimony from a second year teacher: «They do it because it's a way to get attention and because they want to get you involved and get you in trouble... they want everyone to know that they can manipulate you, that they can become important» (Interview no. 19, 04/18/13).

The unpredictable situations that arise in everyday teaching practice become even more problematic due to the constant pressure to which teachers are subjected. The testimonies agree in saying that students attempt to provoke disorder at all times, teasing, distracting their peers and contradicting the teachers to make them doubt themselves and expose them publicly.

## Discussion

Every day, acts of violence in educational institutions are exposed; however, it is necessary to move beyond a sensationalist and unreflective attitude and to seek an understanding of the events, submitting them to an interdisciplinary debate.

The issue of adults (teachers, principals, supervisors, parents) and their role in schools that must be more deeply investigated, in order to generate more information about the established dynamics.

In this study, we focus on violence by students towards teachers and characterize it as a resource of power that seeks to diminish the teachers' authority and challenge their work and the rules they adopt, for the purpose of destabilizing control in the classroom and gaining legitimacy among peers.

Manifestations of violence do not always represent the immediate disruption of the established order; they can also be gradual and progressively grow in intensity, taking on different forms and combinations. The challenges to teacher control are part of a process that involves negotiation, threats, counterthreats, coercion and sometimes, as the interviewees expressed, psychological and physical violence against them.

For the teachers interviewed who had suffered violence, it is precisely in the confrontation and challenges where students manifest their discontent and try to undermine the order that the teacher imposes in order to perform his or her job. However, each case is different; some testimonies give more weight to things like personality and experience in handling conflicts, as well as the type of problem and how the role is carried out in certain situations. This means that teachers suffer aggressions by students in different ways, whether sporadic or recurrent.

The teacher testimonies show that the violence exercised against them had a negative impact on their practice. The feelings they expressed in response to these situations were, among others, insecurity, fear, loneliness, anger and helplessness, which damaged their work.

During the workday, the teachers reported experiencing days with a lot of stress, discomfort and even insecurity regarding whether they should continue teaching. The pressure to which they are subjected by the students can turn into a very negative aspect of their work. It is a challenge to the profession and to their career, resulting in discomfort. It even becomes, in some cases, a constant source of suffering in the school, a disappointment, a «lack of institutional hope» (Käes, 1989).

In terms of context, teachers who work in private institutions mentioned that this context is a major challenge, both due to the socioeconomic conditions of the population they serve and to the erroneous conception, by some students and parents, of the rights and obligations that they must respect and fulfill. In this sense, teachers reported feeling insufficiently supported when faced with the aggressions of the students and even the parents, and reported lacking even minimal support from the institution.

While Mexico's Secretariat of Public Education has programs on prevention, such as those cited in this study, it is necessary to include specific courses and seminars related to conflict management, intervention programs consistent with local needs, research on teaching practice and the systematization and sharing of experiences, techniques and strategies so that teachers and students have learning resources and learn to settle conflicts in a peaceful and non-violent way.

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