Tackling Violence in Schools: the impact of psychological violence

In their extensive 2012 report, UNICEF, working in partnership with the Council of Europe and the Norwegian government, highlighted the importance of eradicating all forms of violence from educational systems. Violence in schools can manifest in an array of forms (physical, psychological, and sexual) and can be perpetrated by peers and staff alike. The report recommends a range of holistic strategies for tackling violence in schools. This report argues that psychological violence can be just as detrimental to children's development and academic achievement as other forms of violence. Accordingly, steps must be taken to ensure that in working towards violence-free schools, physical violence is not merely replaced with psychological violence for this can be equally insidious yet is sometimes harder to detect.

Psychological violence is often multifaceted. It can take the form of peer-to-peer bullying but can also be evinced in teacher-pupil relationships. Regrettably, psychological violence is frequently found to be a precursor of other forms of violence too. For example, research suggests that pupils belonging to ethnic groups/ communities habitually discriminated against or marginalized by the wider society are also more likely to fall victim to psychological violence from their teachers. For example, Roma children may experience humiliation in class on an altogether different scale from their peers. This is reflected in the fact that teachers have been found to grossly underestimate the academic potential of children from minority backgrounds and have also been found to use corporal punishment more regularly with such children. All the available evidence indicates that environments fostering fear of humiliation or ridicule are incommensurate with learning. A child's academic potential is therefore dramatically hindered by (psychologically) violent educational settings.

Psychological violence in schools is a serious problem in European contexts, perhaps where other forms of violence are less prominent. In France a UNICEF survey found that, of a sample of 12,326 students, 4.6% had experienced verbal abuse from school staff because of their racial identity. In the majority of these cases, the perpetrators were not teachers but other staff working at the school. For this reason, the report recommends that anything less than a 'whole school' strategy will be insufficient to tackle psychological violence in schools. Wherever schools fail to tackle racial abuse and psychological violence, they implicitly condone discrimination and 'scapegoating' of whole communities. This has implications for the cohesiveness of the society in which the school itself is embedded.

This report celebrates and welcomes recent trends away from the use of corporal punishment in schools. However, it also notes with some trepidation the dangers implicit in failing to support teachers as they implement effective alternative means of discipline. The worry is that teachers untrained in positive/ constructive discipline "may resort to psychological punishment in the classroom" (p.21). Such punishments are often intended to denigrate the human dignity of the child and can have long lasting repercussions on their self-esteem, self-confidence and mental wellbeing.

The most common type of peer-to-peer bullying in schools is verbal abuse. A 2005 study staggeringly revealed that as many as 90% of LGBT teenagers reported suffering from physical or psychological violence. This is especially concerning given the heightened connection between bullying and suicide in the LGBT community. While victims of such violence naturally command researcher's attention, evidence also shows that perpetrators are at greater risk of mental ill-health. Moreover, ½ of children involved in bullying are both perpetrators and victims. These are some of the most psychologically troubled children whose inter-personal relationships may be permanently damaged and whose academic attainment can be seriously blighted. As our understanding of the consequences of psychological violence grows, this report echoes the Council of Europe's call for all schools to take the necessary preventative and supportive steps. A specialized counsellor among school staff, qualified to respond to victims of emotional violence, is also recommended.