

Objective Violence and Symbolic Violence in Schools. Studies on the Perception of High-school Students

Elena Bujorean

Stefan cel Mare University Suceava, Romania

E-mail: elena.bujorean@usv.ro

Received 05.01.2016; Accepted 25.01. 2016

Abstract

The data of our research examined the possibility of establishing some inter-conditioning between the symbolic violence and the level of objective violence found in schools. The indicators through which I have examined the level of symbolic violence (inequity, non-inclusive school environment, marginalization, authority in knowledge building) vary depending on the level of objective violence, which supports the hypothesis that symbolic violence enables physical (objective) violence among the groups of students.

Keywords: school violence, symbolic violence, objective violence, school climate

1. Introduction

Educational research has tackled most often the direct (visible) violence which affects the quality of the school environment and, lastly, the development potential of the students in the special context dedicated to character-forming. However, researchers have also mentioned “more subtle forms of violence, masked as violence of a symbolic type, situated at the level of promoted values, of the type of relations in the school space and of imposing certain behavioral models.” (Jigău, M. et al., 2006, p.55). Actually, as Y. Michaud (1978), observes, “violence exists when, during a situation of interaction, one or more actors act directly or indirectly, in a hidden or overt manner, bringing biases over others to various extents, either in their physical or moral integrity, or in their possessions or in their symbolic and cultural undertakings.”(apud. Dascalu, D.I., p.67).

In this definition, we can easily identify that violence cannot be produced without the involvement of one or more actors bringing direct or indirect biases. Regarding the relation between objective and symbolic violence, it is notable that this definition describes the manner in which an individual can be affected, both from the perspective of his physical integrity, as well as that of his mental integrity (affecting the self-esteem). Suffering can be caused by neglecting the cultural needs or, as R. Amirou (2001, pp.42-44), mentioned, by failure to acknowledge the identity and the cultural particularities of an individual or a group.

2. Theoretical framework

Analysis of specialist literature makes us affirm that the theme of symbolic violence within the context of schools has been rarely tackled in Romania. The concept of symbolic violence was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in order to explain the relationship between dominators and dominated with a form of violence defined as light or invisible (Bourdieu, 2001). Symbolic violence is caused without any perceived physical constraints, being a process based on acknowledging ideas and values of those in the dominating class by the dominated and *failure to acknowledge* the essence of this process. The entire work of Pierre Bourdieu can be seen as an attempt to explain the specificity of the *symbolic power*, that ability of the systems of meanings to hide, thus consolidating relationships of oppression and exploitation under the guise of naturalness, well-meaning and meritocracies (Wacquant, L. J. D. ,1993, pp1-17).

Analysis of symbolic violence in the broader context of institutional (systemic) violence belonging to the school environment has drawn attention to a potential cause for direct violence whose protagonists are the students. Thus, É. Debarbieux (2011, p. 236) claims it has been proven that the objective, visible violence appears in answer to the subjective one. However, school violence is a phenomenon determined by multiple factors (personal, familial, educational and societal factors). Although there is inter-conditioning it could not have been proven with the arguments at hand that symbolic violence determines material (physical) violence. Cristina Neamțu (2003, p. 236), however, claims that institutional and symbolic violence can trigger non-institutional violence (physical and verbal violence among student) by lowering the threshold for resistance to frustration, psychologically enabling the manifestation of aggressive behavior.

The effects of symbolic violence can materialize and become visible, as Pierre Bourdieu shows in *Masculine Domination* (1998), and physical violence almost always carries meanings: “symbolic violence corresponds nowadays to a moment from the processes and social relations from where afterwards physical forms of violence can appear, which, in turn, will feed, intensify, renew other manifestations of violence, some symbolic, other material.” M. Wieworka (1999) exemplifies this dynamic with the case of young people who are excluded or who find themselves in various situations of disadvantage or social discrimination. These categories resort to rebellion or are filled with resentments due to contempt and denial of their personal identities (situations of symbolic violence). Other theoreticians have also conceptualized the term of symbolic violence. In his contemporaneous speech on social progress, L. Șoitu (2001, p.16) remarks that people avoid acknowledging processes such as: the intensification of the polarization of society, the influence of technology on the increase in cultural discrepancies between people, the artificial growth of consumer needs and offers through advertising and economic strategies. Renouncing the rules of solidarity means, in the point of view of the same author, yet another example of the aggressiveness of indifference which could explain the increase in violent manifestations in children and young people.

3. Research methodology

We have decided, with the help of research based on the method of investigation, to verify the hypothesis of the existence of significant differences between the perception of symbolic violence by students, depending on the *level of objective violence*.

The research took place in the months of April-June 2014 and included a sample of 652 highschool students from the county of Suceava (Romania). The research methodology involved the designing and application of a questionnaire regarding the evaluation of the school environment. The items of the questionnaire have focused on the operationalization of the symbolic violence variable, according to the following plan:

1. **Inequity in the educational system** – with the following indicators:
 - Mistrust in the meritocratic ideology
 - Unequal opportunities depending on social categories, ethnic background, learning potential
2. **Non-inclusive climate** – indicators:
 - Uncertain environment, not accessible to *all* students
 - Failure to involve *all* students in the decision making process
 - Lack of support for high aspirations regarding the academic achievement of *all* categories of students
 - Lack of gratification for the efforts of *all* students
 - Labelling of those with bad results
 - Negative attitudes towards students from disadvantaged backgrounds
 - Mocking of students who use regional accents
 - Failure to acknowledge and ignoring of students from atypical families
3. **Marginalization in the relationships between students** – indicators:
 - Marginalization of students with precarious material/financial status
 - Marginalization of ethnic minorities
 - Marginalization due to religious beliefs
 - Marginalization of students with different opinions or lifestyles.
4. **Authority in knowledge building** – indicators:
 - Taking for granted the authority of the textbook in the classroom
 - Imposing ideas during teaching
 - Failure to encourage critical attitudes towards the teacher's ideas
 - Reduced use of interactive strategies during lessons
 - Using mainly the argument for the authority status when proving ideas or theories
 - Using the status of authority to impose political ideas

The study has also included a *semi-structured interview* with 27 form teachers from the classes of student respondents in order to evaluate the global level of objective (direct) violence. The interview took place immediately after the application of the questionnaire addressed to the students and had in mind the normalization by the form teachers of certain forms of violence identified at the level of the classroom based on a sheet for monitoring violence in the school. In this way, we have classified the school groups of respondents into three categories: classes with a low level of objective (direct)

violence, classes with a medium level of objective violence and classes with a high level of objective violence.

4. Results

In order to verify the study hypothesis we have applied the Anova One-Way method with the level of objective violence as an independent variable and as dependent variables the dimensions of symbolic violence: inequity, marginalization, non-inclusive environment and authority, overall and then at the level of each item from each dimension.

4.1. The influence of the objective violence variable on the level of perception of inequity within the educational system

It has been noted that, overall, the level of objective violence influences the way inequity is perceived [F (2, 651) = 19. 974, p<0. 001]. The Post Hoc Bonferroni test signals that there are significant statistic differences between the three groups. The bigger the level of objective violence inside the group of students, the more unfavorable the perception of the students on inequity inside the educational system. Regarding the items subscribing to the inequity dimension, the following results have been recorded:

Table 1. Results of the Anova One-Way regarding the effect of the objective violence variable over the perception of inequity within the educational system

Variable	F	p
1.1. How much do you think academic results can help a person obtain the desired social and professional standing?	F (2, 649) = 11. 956	p = 0. 000
1.2.Does school offer <i>all</i> students the opportunity for success, regardless of their social background?	F (2, 649) = 9. 421	p = 0. 000
1.3.Does the school offer <i>all</i> students the possibility for success regardless of learning abilities?	F (2, 649) = 5. 601	p = 0. 004
1.4.Does the school offer <i>all</i> students the possibility of success regardless of ethnic background?	F (2, 649) = 12. 804	p = 0. 000

4.2. The influence of the objective violence variable on the level of perception of the non-inclusive character of the school environment

With the help of the statistical analysis, we were able to notice that, overall, the level of objective violence influences the way students perceive the inclusive character of the school environment [F (2, 649) = 51. 188, p <0. 001].

The bigger the level of objective violence among the groups of students, the bigger the level of the perceived non-inclusive character within the school environment.

Regarding the items, the Anova application confirms the variance of the perceived level for the non-inclusive character of the school environment, depending on the level of objective violence at the level of the first 7 items, as shown in the following table.

Table 2. Results for Anova One-Way regarding the effect of the objective violence variable on the perception of the non-inclusive character of the school environment

Variable	F	p
Item 2.1. Your school offers a secure and comfortable environment for all students	F (2, 649) = 33. 906	p = 0. 000
Item 2.2. All students in your school can take part in taking decisions that concern them.	F(2, 649) = 41. 459	p = 0. 000
Item 2.3. All students are encouraged to strive for the best possible results	F (2, 649) = 26. 501	p = 0. 000
Item 2.4. Teachers offer all students the chance to be proud of their results	F (2, 649) =11. 702	p = 0. 000
Item 2.5. Teachers discourage the labeling of those with por academic results	F (2, 649) = 7. 753	p = 0. 000
Item 2.6. The teaching staff discourages the negative attitudes towards students from disadvantaged backgrounds	F(2, 649) = 17. 855	p = 0. 000
Item 2.7. The teaching staff discourages the mocking of students who express themselves using regional accents	F(2, 649) = 7. 492	p = 0. 000
Item 2.8. The differences in the familiy structures	F (2, 649) = 1. 631	p = 0. 197

4.3. Influence of the objective violence variable on the level of perception of the marginalization in the relationship between students

With the help of the statistical analysis, we were able to remark that, overall, the level of objective violence influences the way students perceive marginalization in their relations with other students. [F (2, 651) =10. 223, p<0. 001]. The Bonferroni Post Hoc adjustment shows that the only groups in which there are significant statistical differences are between the means of the group with low level and medium level of objective violence and between the means of the group with low level and high level of objective violence.

4.4. The influence of the objective violence variable on the level of perception of authority

Statistical analyses show that, overall, students perceived differently the authority structure of the knowledge building process, depending on the level of objective violence in their school group [$F(2, 649) = 4.921, p < 0.05$]. The application of the Bonferroni Post Hoc test shows that the statistically significant differences are valid only in the case of the groups with a low level of violence – students with a medium level of objective violence. The means difference between the two groups at the authority variable shows that students from classes with a low direct violence see pedagogical authoritarian behaviors as more frequent than students from classes with a medium level of objective violence.

Taking into consideration the results of statistical workings of the data shown above, we can claim that the hypothesis of the variance of perception of symbolic violence depending on the recorded level of objective violence inside the school is confirmed.

5. Discussions

According to the obtained results, students from the classes with a higher level of objective (direct) violence better perceive the inequitable character of the education system, accord lower points to the quality of the educational environment regarding its inclusion. On the other hand, students from classes with a lower level of objective violence report more instances of marginalization of classmates depending their financial situation, their ethnic or religious background. The imposing of institutional authority affects more the students from classes with a higher level of violence. The data obtained show that students from classes with a lower level of objective violence tend to react mostly by conforming when the teachers impose their authority during the educational communication. We were able to deduce that, the higher the level of violence, the lower the level of conformity and acceptance of the teachers' ideas. Moreover, the tendency of the students to react with withdrawals, aggression and reduced involvement in the educational activity grows. These conclusions have been backed by other Romanian studies. Thus, in the article *Violence in Schools* (Jigău M., 2006, p.137), “*the imposition of the teacher's authority, regardless of consequences*” has been considered by more than 40% of the students as a source for violent reactions.

These results could indicate a link between symbolic and objective (physical) violence. The imposition of the teacher's power in the educational communication, ignoring the cultural references of some groups or labeling and marginalization could lower the resistance to frustration threshold, leading to protests and rebellious behavior and, generally, a reduced compliance to educational norms. The theory of resistance against the school (Alexander, K., Entwisle, apud. Booth, A., 1996: 68-69) could serve to further understand this complex dynamic. This theory claims that a relational conflict can be triggered between students from socially, ethnically and culturally disadvantaged groups and the school representatives (the school culture). A certain category of minorities perceive the school as an institution that imposes a value system that might alienate them from their community. Consequently, they develop a counterculture, rejecting the normative organization of the educational system as well as the value system imposed by it. This counterculture is encouraged by the family background, by the attitude of the “majority” students and sometimes of the teachers. Such reactions of resistance are reflected in school performance which are, deliberately or not, mediocre. The phenomenon gets even more complicated in the case of the descendants of those non-dominant groups who wish and search for the most adequate means

to succeed on an educational, professional and social level, assimilating the success model of the dominant class, contesting, however, the dominant culture. This cultural ambivalence described by the American sociologist Ogbu (apud.Țăranu, A. S., 2009, p. 134) often generates conflicts between the systems of interaction present in the community and those present between groups of children

6. Conclusions

The data of our research examined the possibility of establishing some inter-conditioning between the symbolic violence and the level of objective violence found in schools. The indicators through which I have examined the level of symbolic violence (inequity, non-inclusive school environment, marginalization, authority in knowledge building) vary depending on the level of objective violence, which supports the hypothesis that symbolic violence enables physical (objective) violence among the groups of students.

Basing the pedagogical relationship on subordination, obedience and repression has led to the perception of the educational institution as a continuous source of frustration. All students acknowledge the vital role of a harmonious pedagogical relationship and the reduction of tensions for efficient learning: all students who resist the normativity and the school culture attribute their behavior to the precarious quality of the school climate. The anxiety caused by labeling and exclusion, as well as the need for restoring the self-esteem, will lead many students to contest the educational authority. Such hierarchical relationships not only are fundamentally unequal, but are also dysfunctional from the perspective of educational organization, especially as the educational institutions have as primary function education and care, and not control. Acknowledging that the teacher's authority is an inter-relational act that is exercised and not owned, implying rights recognized by those under its influence as legitimate, we support the *negotiation of authority* as an ongoing communication process and the making of decisions preoccupied with solving of disputes when some interests are scattered, while others are of opposite characteristics.

The specificity of our research does not allow us to make affirmations that would lead to a diagnostic, the links between the variables mentioned in our study are not casual, as the data we have obtained can only give us the possibility of formulating certain assumptions regarding the mutual determinations at the level of the dimensions of violence in the analyzed schools.

The data we have obtained with our study reveals the existence of certain differences between the students when it comes to the perception of the level of symbolic violence, depending on the level of direct violence within the school groups. Further investigations could aim to elaborate and validate an instrument through which they can establish potential correlations between the two forms of violence in the educational context.

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