

## **MANUEL, HIS FAMILY AND THE SCHOOL**

### ***Asociación Timoneda***

At 12:55, when the bell rang announcing the end of recess, my one-hour hall watch began and I left the classroom where I had been. While I waited for the students to enter, I headed towards the main office, that is, a few minutes went by from the time the bell rang to the moment that I witnessed the incident which I am going to relate here. When I arrived, I saw the following: Manuel, beside himself, leaving the school; a teacher pursuing him and trying to calm him down; a student, a classmate of Manuel, also following him, trying to reason with him and calm him down; and another classmate inciting him to “make an example of...” because “that’s not right” and “no one has the right to touch us” and if “they touch me, I’ll let the whole neighborhood know so that justice is done”. I heard the first classmate shouting “come back inside and we’ll talk about it”, “don’t tell your father or you’ll mess everything up”, “don’t be like that”. Since Manuel didn’t want to go back inside, and considering that these students should be in class, I told them to go back inside the school. They were already at the entrance when I heard something strike the iron door. I turned around and I saw Manuel, looking incredibly angry, enter the building. I went towards him and he avoided me, saying “get out of the way, teach”. He threw a rock the size of a fist at the door. The teacher, the office staff person, the social worker, and the other two students – students from the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Special Education program- were in front of the door. After throwing the rock, Manuel took off, running away from the school.

I sent the students to their Physical Education class and I remained in front of the door where the teacher and the social worker gave me their version of the story.

The social worker told me that, after the recess bell sounded, since Manuel remained seated on a bench, he told him that he had to go to class. At first, as often happens, Manuel said politely – “just a bit more, then I’ll go” - but at that moment, two 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were walking by and stopped to watch the situation (these students had had an incident with the social worker before, not long after he first started, when he reprimanded them for making a racket in the stairway where they were waiting for another teacher. They told him that they weren’t kids anymore and that he had no business saying anything to them.

When Manuel saw his older classmates, his attitude changed from calm and relaxed to challenging and provoking. Then, the social worker grabbed him by the wrist and told him “now you are coming to see the Principal”. This infuriated Manuel who took it as an attack and turned towards the Social Worker, trying to hit him. However, the social worker immobilized him, which infuriated Manuel even more.

After talking the incident over, and once calm had returned to the main entrance of the school, I saw four women carrying sticks screaming at the top of their lungs and yelling phrases like “where is the son of a bitch?” “we have to kill him” “nobody touches my child” “come out, faggot” “don’t you have any balls”. We

could continue to list the threats, insults, curses, and four-letter words which, of course, should never have been heard at a school

I intercepted the mother, managed to grab the stick she was carrying, and tried to calm her down. I told her that it would be better to deal with this incident in another way, without sticks being involved. She screamed at me "I just had a baby and if something happens to me, I'll kill everyone". I suggested that for that very reason she must calm down. I told her to have a seat in my office and calm down. Since she couldn't take the stick away from me, she let go of it and headed for the other stairs, the ones on the opposite side of the building from the entrance. I saw that, following instructions from Manuel and other classmates, the group climbs the stairway, all of them carrying sticks, saying "he's on the upper floor". I climbed the stairway near the entrance and I ran into the social worker who said that he wanted to tell them that he didn't hit Manuel. Ignoring his request, I opened a classroom and told him to remain inside, whatever happened.

When I went back the way I had come and headed for the other hallway, Manuel's father appeared, screaming and yelling phrases of the same, or worse, kind as we had heard before from his wife. Another teacher came into the hallway where all the hubbub was and he tried to attack him. He stopped when the students said that he was not the one. Then a pair of police officers arrived and from there on the situation went back and forth in the hallway, with screams, insults, and threats: the students coming into the hallway, the teachers trying to calm everyone, Manuel's father trying to assault every teacher he sees in the hallway – thinking that each one was the social worker. And Manuel, telling his father where to find the social worker.

I don't know how long this went on; it seemed interminable. I remember the dean of students begging the police to please arrest the man because we were in a school and this was a sorry spectacle. I remember the police, behind Manuel's father, saying that if he wasn't satisfied he should file a complaint, and Manuel's father replying that that was his idea of justice. I remember the last words that Manuel's father said to me: "Lady, that guy had better not set foot in this school for a month". And I recall, with great sadness, the satisfied faces of a group of students watching the spectacle. Finally, they went downstairs to the entrance and they managed to get the group to leave the school, at the exact moment that the rest of the students were leaving school for the day, at 13.45.

### **What can we learn from this incident?**

According to our experts, we should view conflicts as learning opportunities; with these words I'm trying to reflect on the serious incident that happened at the school and what could have been avoided if we had had more tools to do so. That is, if we had had more wisdom to channel the conflict in a positive way without permitting it to reach the degree of violence that it did.

Conflicts which are not resolved lie dormant (the social worker and the two high school students had an unresolved power conflict). Could this violent incident have been avoided? Yes. After the incident, I went to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade to explain to the group this person's role in the school and why he had asked them to

explain their behavior in the hallway. But, I should have sat the three of them down and attempted an informal mediation since I sensed that these two students hadn't forgotten the incident.

Violence can occur at any time, therefore we have to know how to channel conflicts to avoid its eruption. Could this violent incident have been avoided? Yes, though I think it would have been difficult given the number of relationship variables that were in play. This is why I'm becoming more and more convinced that this is a job requiring teamwork, and, even though we may agree only on one rule, that rule should be followed to the letter.

We are defenseless against violence from a family clan external to the school. It's impossible for us to change the culture of an ethnic group, but we can certainly set limits. Could the violent incident have been avoided? I don't know; I think the doors could have been locked, and then we could have tried to resolve the conflict calmly and so have avoided what happened in the first floor hallways of the school. If I had sensed the reaction of Manuel's family, I could have closed the doors manually and we could have taken refuge in the school until the police arrived. However, all of the doors were open and the only person they encountered on entering the school was me. I never imagined that an entire clan would come armed with sticks.

Besides physical limits, I think that students should also be taught that, when you are sharing a school, there are limits that must always be respected, no matter what the circumstances. I think this is our duty since we assume that our students know what these limits are because they learn them at home. However, given the events of the other day, we can affirm that not everyone learns this at home.

We can try to educate a student when he comes to school regularly, but it is impossible to do so if he does not come. Could the violent incident have been avoided. I don't know; Manuel and several of his classmates hadn't come to school in several days; it was a complicated day as the municipal government was having some of "their" stores torn down, and the neighborhood was full of police officers. I don't know if they should notify us when these things happen, and I don't know what can be done when students who miss class systematically suddenly appear for a day. Sometimes imagination is more useful than wisdom.

How was it possible that so many students were in the hallways? The teachers must know that they are responsible for their students during class time, and, therefore, should avoid, whenever possible, allowing them to leave the classroom. Could we have avoided having the students witness this violent spectacle? Yes, the students shouldn't have left their classrooms under any circumstances (think about what might happen if someone armed and desperate entered the school). I think we will have to be quite rigorous in locking the doors and making sure that they stay locked, for the good of everyone.

To what point must we respect the beliefs of a specific culture or ethnic group? Manuel's mother and father justified their desire to beat the social worker with

the following phrases: “nobody touches a gypsy” and “I don’t give a ... about the justice of non-gypsies...”

Could the violent incident have been avoided? I don’t know. How do we respond to that belief while at the same time making the students understand that a person only has the right to use force, never violence, if by doing so he stops a violent act? Should we treat the students differently, according to their culture, even when it clashes with ours? Should any specific belief, value, or norm from a culture come before the established rules of a school?

Celia Sales

*This is a delicate situation, for two reasons.*

*First, we have two separate groups. Both feel that one of their members has been attacked. The school is seen as a group of people attacking a gypsy. The gypsies are seen as a group of people attacking a member of the school.*

*The groups are isolated because there is no communication between them. We have a conflict between two groups who do not see each other. Under these circumstances, prejudice unleashes action. Prejudice prevails as people don’t have time to evaluate the situation. We have prejudice in the school towards the gypsy ethnic group, and we have prejudice on the part of the gypsies about what the school thinks of them.*

*Secondly, we are at a confluence of conflicts in space & time. Buildings which form part of the gypsy community are being torn down, and they feel under attack. The exterior conflict involves people who are present in the academic sphere: “They attack us outside and inside the school”. The conflicts cross paths.*

*The situation is, then, extremely tense: Two groups at a confluence point between two conflicts, in the school space. There is an increased risk of an uncontrolled and violent conflict.*

*In these circumstances it is essential to avoid confrontation. Given that at that moment, it wasn’t possible to dialogue with the aggressors, the decision to avoid direct contact with the social worker, combined with the locking of the school doors, were key factors in avoiding a more serious conflict.*

*When there are two groups in confrontation, the intervention of a third party is necessary to separate the groups. In this case, it was the police.*

*The school can also anticipate risk and establish safety procedures which will protect the physical safety of everyone at the school. The procedures may be permanent; for example, the doors locked and the monitoring of everyone who enters or leaves.*

*This is especially important in those communities where there is a risk of inappropriate use of the school grounds, or physical risk in cases of drug trafficking, or assaults on students or teachers, for example.*

*At the same time, these precautions may be temporary, in response to tension in the school environment which affects the families of the students, as in the case of the destruction of the buildings in the gypsy community, for example. A pro-active attitude on the part of the school requires a permanent sensitivity to the context, using information about exterior systems when making decisions at the school.*

*Getting back to the case: Could the conflict have been avoided? It must be pointed out that the conflict did not spread (become generalized). It was a conflict in the school, not of the school. The gypsy community attacked the social worker specifically and the confrontation didn't degenerate into an indiscriminate assault on the whole school. Both parties contributed to keeping the conflict from becoming generalized: Manuel, who asked a teacher to step aside "get out of the way, teach", avoided having other teachers assaulted when he identified one teacher as not being the social worker. The school, as we've already seen, decided to lock the doors, isolate the social worker, and call the police. In short, given the circumstances, everything possible was done.*

*The school has to protect itself and guarantee the safety of those who work & study there. This implies that the doors be locked for a time, while the conflict begins to fade and a new relationship of coexistence is created. Later, we'll have to open them once again...*