

## 4.2 VIOLENT BEHAVIOR AS DEFINED BY TEACHERS

### What does a teacher mean when he says a student is violent?

What secondary school teachers feel, think and do when a student is violent.

#### **Justification (Timoneda Association)**

The complexity of education reflects the changing and diverse world in which we live today.

We are currently faced with important social changes that in turn bring about changes in the educational system. When Beltran addressed the State School Board he said that *our society is immersed in a live-for-today culture; it is permissive and increasingly violent. The exaltation of violence generates more violence, producing victims in some cases and the disappearance of feelings of indignation in others, as well as a profound desensitization.*

Our educational system has undergone a paradigm change from one focused on the teacher to one focused totally on the student and on three principles of learning: the first is based on the belief that all of our students are unique and different. Therefore, we have to deal with this diversity by compensating for not only their needs (physical, mental or sensorial handicaps) but also educational needs derived from disadvantaged social situations (ethnic minorities, broken families, immigrants). In the second place, as teachers, we must address not only the mental ability of our students but also their emotional needs. Finally, our students will only learn if they are involved in positive interpersonal relationships and work in a good classroom atmosphere.

The Timoneda Association defends the idea that education involves the whole person and that quality and excellence are not based solely on the accumulation of knowledge, but also on the quest for personal growth for each of our students. Our efforts are focused on basing today's educational programs on dialogue and peaceful interaction, fully convinced that changing society is a task that must be shared by all of the members of the educational community. Why? So that our students can become productive and positive members of society, so that they can bring out positive change, so that they can deal with conflict. Why? Because when we allow any type of conflict to escalate, we are opening the door to violence.

Violence and destruction are not limited to wars and armed conflict. They can be found within our families and schools. Sadly, schools have become witnesses to social injustice and violence. (Boque, 2002).

But, how can we really define violence? It is true that there are violent places, violent schools, violent students, violent teachers and violent families. But do we all define violence in the same way?

Our goal when we started this research project, was to find a definition of violence that we could all agree upon, in other words, to come to some sort of consensus on what violence really is.

#### **Design**

In order to do this, we used a group consensus approach within the Timoneda Association to develop a questionnaire that was distributed to five schools in the province of Alicante that represented different socio-economic levels.

The questionnaire included 6 questions. The first three asked for personal and professional information. The fourth asked respondents to list and weight the kinds of actions that they would include in a definition of school violence. The fifth item was an open question that asked them to explain their feelings upon witnessing or being somehow involved in some type of violent behavior at school. Finally, the sixth question had to do with actions taken in response to violent acts.

We were able to collect a total of 156 valid questionnaires, filled out by secondary school teachers ranging from 20 to 60 years of age. Distribution by age and sex is included in the tables provided.



## Results

Results were obtained from different socio-economic areas. Most of the data was from teachers between 30 and 50 years of age, and just over half (54%) were female.



If we look at the items listed in terms of degree of severity of a violent situation, we see that "hitting" is in first position, followed by "threatening," "scaring," or "verbally sexually harrassing" someone.

The least important items were "frustrating or making someone angry" and "calling someone names."

### Otras... (con alta puntuación)

- Ensuciar
- Falta de valores
- Fumar
- Gritar
- Hacer perder el tiempo en clase
- Indiferencia
- Agresividad verbal y de hecho
- Lider negativo

Others, such as "making a mess," "lacking values," "smoking," "yelling," and "wasting class time," ... were added by the teachers themselves, and often ranked quite high on the list. Figure XX shows those that were given 8.5 points on a scale of 10.

When asked what their feelings when faced with violent behavior either as an observer or as an involved party, we see that in both cases, teachers most frequently answered "impotence."

Impotence, understood as a lack of ability, power or authority to deal with violence at school, is a generalized feeling among teachers. It is the emotional attitude that they take towards their students and colleagues when violent behavior occurs.

### Lo que los profesores sienten como observadores...



### Lo que los profesores sienten como implicados...



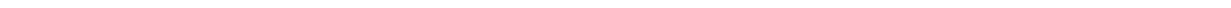
This generalized feeling is becoming more negatively ingrained in the perception that teachers have of students, of school ..., of society in general, and it is being internalizing to such an extent that it is affecting teachers' ability to carry out their professional activities with the necessary peace and harmony so that learning can take place.

Students are well aware of these feelings of impotence that virtually paralyze their teachers at the first sign of conflict. They don't know exactly what to call it, but on many occasions we have heard 14- to 16-year-old students in our classrooms complain about their teachers, saying they just don't care about anything, and this is simply a reflection of this feeling of not knowing what to do in certain situations. When this happens, the teacher prefers to ignore what he/she is seeing and hearing and do nothing. This creates a huge gap between teachers and students which is hard to overcome.

In recent years, direct violence has been rejected as a model. However, we have no alternatives with which to confront conflict and so we often revert to equally negative responses such as submission and/or avoidance, which in reality, only serve to increase these feelings of impotence.

When faced with this situation, we believe that secondary schools should implement programs, shorts courses and seminars to give teachers and students (and why not other school staff as well?) the tools they need to resolve conflict more creatively in order to avoid violent crisis situations that sometimes occur in schools because of this feeling of impotence on the part of the teachers, which is nothing more than not knowing how to deal with the new situations that arise in this rapidly changing world.

We must also recover our sense of responsibility as adults and educators. This can be achieved by accepting that continual adaptation to new challenges, no matter how difficult, will be needed. Inhibition is sometimes as pernicious as anything else. Although it may be true there is nothing we can do to solve all conflicts that erupt into violence, it is equally true that in the majority of cases, there is much we can do before that eruption takes place.



**Annex:**  
**Anonymous survey distributed to teachers.**

Dear teachers:

We are a group of colleagues from several secondary schools in the province who are participating in a European project on the prevention of violence in schools.

We would like to find out your opinions on certain issues related to this topic. In order to get this information, we are asking that you fill out the attached questionnaire.

1. Age:       20-30       30-40       40-50       50-60       over 60
2. Teaching experience..... years
3. Sex:    Male.....                      Female.....
4. Rank from 1 (least serious) to 10 (most serious) the following situations related to school violence

- Insulting a friend or classmate
- Insulting a teacher/s
- Calling other people names
- Discriminating against someone
- Taking someone's belongings
- Breaking things
- Threatening or scaring others
- Frustrating or making others angry
- Hitting
- Verbal sexual harrassment
- Others (explain)

5. What feelings do you associate with violence when:
  - You are simply an observer on the outside of the violent situation:  
.....
  - You are somehow involved, from the inside of the violent situation  
.....
6. In violent situations at school, (check those that apply)

- You feel inhibited
- You report the incident to the proper authorities
- You intervene
- Other