

Violence and Conflicts in Schools

Empowering students to help themselves with the help of Mythodrama

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In this chapter a method of crises intervention is explained, which is being employed in Switzerland, Sweden und Germany in schools in crisis. The key element of this approach to school violence and conflicts is Mythodrama (Guggenbühl 1998) Myths and stories are used in order to alleviate the problem of violence. Originally Mythodrama was developed as a method for group therapy with children and adolescents with behavioral problems, from bereaved families or who's parents are going through divorce. In this chapter the main focus is on a seven step intervention approach, which includes Mythodrama sessions with the students.

Violence among children and adolescents has become a public concern, in Europe as well as the U.S. (Price & Everett 1997) Especially after the horrific incident in Erfurt, Germany, when the student Robert Steinhäuser shoot dead 17 teachers and fellow students (29th April 2002), and the Collumbine massacre the media is full of stories of bullying, shootings, bomb threats and harassment. Remedies are being discussed and causes debated on television and in the press, and many books dealing with violence among children and in schools have been published (Howard, Flora & Griffin 1999). This public debate has to taken into consideration, when dealing with the topic violence in schools. The way one discusses the issues of violence influences us. Often we quote the arguments and cite the images, which we hear in the public debate. Even people involved in schools begin to see the problems of violence according to the conceptions in the public debate. This debate follows its own rules and often does not reflect the reality of schools (Guggenbühl 1998). It is part of the social discourse. For instance: in the public debate the argument is repeatedly voiced, that too much spare time is at the root of the problem. Violence is caused by students not knowing what to do with themselves. Control students more, keep them busy and you can alleviate the problem of violence. Scientifically this argument is not proven (Krumm, V., 1997, Funk W. 1995) The explanations, that dominate the public debate should not be confused with analysis of violence in schools. It is our duty as professional to observe closely what really happens, before implementing a prevention or intervention program (Holtappels, H.G., Heitmeyer, W. Melzer, W.& Tillmann 1997). Accurate diagnosis is crucial, something that is customary in the medical and psychotherapeutic professions, but

unfortunately often lacks in conflict prevention and intervention work. Because the specific patterns of violence differ from school to school, each case has to be dealt with separately and we should relinquish preconceived ideas.

A pragmatic approach is to distinguish between manifest incidences and concealed violence or aggression (Guggenbühl 1997). Manifest incidences attract everyone's attention. They shock teachers, parents and students alike. When a gang engages openly in a fight using weapons and leaving someone injured on the premises of a school, we react with anger and fear. The lack of sound information may escalate the situation. Often television crews arrive quicker on the scene, than the officials. This can create further problems, especially when false or imprecise information is being disseminated. Concealed violence is also widespread. These aggressions follow different dynamics and different patterns. From an outsiders view everything seems in order. It could be though, that a student is being severely bullied or mobbed, as we say in Europe. A spell might be put on him. The order is out, that no one is allowed to talk or even look him into the eyes. If he takes a seat, it will have to be cleaned immediately, because it has been 'contaminated' by him. To be ostracized in school is an absolutely horrific, traumatic experience. Often it leads to immense personal despair or even suicide. In other cases students pursue clandestinely a hideous plan. Nobody takes notice. Klebold and Harris, the two students guilty of the horrifying shooting in the high school in Colorado, meticulously prepared their attack under the unsuspecting eyes of their parents and teachers. While they were surreptitiously amassing ammunition and compiling guns, they attended a course in "Anger control" at their school. They even got excellent reports and were perceived by the teachers as eager students. Nobody realized, what was going on in their heads. During the program they adapted to the wishes and demands of their teachers, without divulging their intentions.

As a conflict manager I repeatedly experience, that perpetrators don't seem to exist. If you talk face to face to the bullying students and inquire about their views on violence, their spontaneous responses often are: "Of course I am against violence!" and maybe even add: "we have to solve our conflicts peacefully." I remember exchanging positions on violent behavior with a twelve-year-old boy. He declared solemnly: "How can we ever hope, that peace reigns on earth, when we cannot deal with the aggression blocked up inside of ourselves." Two hours later I observed the same student on the schoolyard. He ferociously attacked a group of schoolmates. If I could have asked him the same moment, how he explains to himself his aggressive behavior, he would have certainly replied: "I didn't bully! It is the others who looked at me indignantly. I had to

defend myself!” The reality is, that the bullies or the perpetrators nearly always view themselves as innocent victims. In their perception they had to retaliate. The same happens in wars: when you study the rhetoric during wars, it is always the enemy who is to blame (Sofsky 2002). The Second World War soared when Germany attacked Poland. The Nazis stated fervently, that they justifiably stroke back, after they had been assaulted by Poland! The fact is: according to our perception, we are always merely defending ourselves. Likewise the students assert that the others violated, harassed, bullied or insulted them. They are innocent. The deeper reason for this mechanism is our need to protect a positive self-concept (Staub 1993). We develop an identity, which attributes certain features to ourselves, our kin, our peer and the nation we belong too. The purpose of this image is to make it possible to live with ourselves. It helps us to keep our emotional-psychological equilibrium. This self-concept is not objective, but biased. It only encompasses features of our personality, which are presentable. Abysmal, appalling, hideous facets of our personality are ignored. Generally we fail to identify the shadow of our personality, because it would irritate us. This mechanism is perfectly sane. Our cognition or rational ego functions have the duty to retain a more or less positive self-image. We create stories and explanations, which enable us to live with ourselves. This is why people involved in a conflict situation generally emphasize, that they abhor violence and hate conflicts. Consciously or unconsciously they adapt to what is expressible.

A second fact that one has to take into consideration is peer-orientation. Adolescents distance themselves from parents and teachers. In their struggle to obtain a distinct identity in society, the peers become important (Gronemeyer 1989). What the colleagues think, what goes on among them and the trends they follow is of prime interest. Adolescents lean on peers, in order to get some empowerment. Among their peers they learn about themselves and life. Often peer influence is problematic. The peers might sidetrack adolescents and instigate bad behavior or addictions (Schäfer, M.& Frey, D. 1999). Among some peer groups violence is considered an acceptable behavior or is even admired (Sturzbecher, D. 1997). We should not look at peers as merely problematical though. In many situations, peers hold the key to violence prevention (Cowie, H. & Olafsson, R., 2000). With the help of the ideas of peer group, violence can be alleviated.

Crisis intervention and violence prevention

Our intervention and violence prevention program consists of 7 steps. These steps are not the magical solution, but where violence occurs there is also a lot of confusion and anger. People need to know what to do next. The seven steps offer a perspective. A process starts, which assures everyone, that one is not just a victim of the events.

Teachers talk

The first step is the Teacher's talk. We confer with the teacher or teachers of the school. This talk follows a standard routine and should not be confused with a chat or a counseling session. We ask him, her or them to inform us on the incidents, the students personalities, the gossip and the schools efforts to stop violence. We also want them to tell us, why they personally chose the teacher profession and maybe to add some words about their personal situations. We then inform the teachers of our specific approach. We explain to them, that we see ourselves as the devils advocate. During the intervention we will confront them with the information we obtain from the students. They might hear some unpleasant details about their work. They have to be prepared to hear some criticism. We don't intend to discriminate the teachers or give them advice though. They have to decide for themselves, what conclusions they want to draw from the material we present them. Our sole condition is, that they are willing to implement a concrete change in the classroom. The teacher can decide to alter his teaching style, his approach to the students, his agenda or the school setting. They change has to be visible or obvious. If a teacher intends to be friendlier, that does not suffice. Can the students detect an improvement in his affability? We want to initiate change beyond rhetoric or sweet talk. Also it is vital, that the students and parents are convinced, that it is not just them, who need to contemplate change. They know, that the teachers are challenged too. If the school is left out of the process, the other participants will fail to understand, why they have to work on themselves.

Parents meeting

If the teacher agrees with this procedure, we move on to the second step: The parents meeting. Parents' cooperation is essential, if we want to tackle the problem of violence among children and adolescents. If the parents back up the work of the teachers and the children, interventions are more likely to succeed.

We try to get the consent of the parents at a special meeting. With the help of the teacher we try to get a high attendance.¹ The gathering starts with a statement by the teacher or teachers. He or they declare that they endorse the intervention and are ready to engage themselves actively. The teachers also point out that their work will be evaluated during the process. Everyone participates in the intervention. We don't put the blame on a particular student or group for what happened and don't distinguish between victims and perpetrators. Our message is: let's not permit violence to expand and let's do something against it, unanimously. After giving a brief explanation about our work - putting emphasis on the group dimension - we ask the parents in groups to relate to us their view of the situation at school. We are interested to hear from them how they feel and what they have heard of the happenings in the school. Often they draw a completely different picture than the teachers. Although this information might be biased, parents are able to give us valuable information on what is going on and how their child perceives the troubles.

After the group discussions, the parents gather again and exchange their views. They discuss the situation in school and get the chance to hear the teacher's opinion. Again: we don't look for culprits. Our goal is to understand the dynamics of the class, which led to the troubles and enabled violent students to dominate. The psychologist in charge of the intervention explains, that in order to begin the work with the students, the parents have to reach an unanimous decision to support the intervention. If there is one parent who opposes the intervention, we stop right there. Often the parents suspect we are bluffing or that actually it is our responsibility to take care of the problem. "You can't do that!" they might shout. We respond by telling them: "Of course, we can. All we do is offer you a program, which has proven to be effective. You have to decide, if you want to implement it." We clearly communicate, that the well-being of the children is their responsibility and not ours. They can backup the intervention by refraining from negative actions against the school during our work and by encouraging their son or daughter to participate in Mythodrama. We promise to organize a second parents meeting after the intervention is completed. At that meeting, criticism is allowed and an evaluation of the work is done. In the vast majority of parents meetings, we have managed to reach a mutual consent.

¹ In the interventions we conducted in the U.S. (Sonora, CA and Thompson, CT) we had to leave out this step, because there was no tradition of parents meetings in the particular schools

Visit of the school

The next step of the program is to get an impression of the school culture and the atmosphere in the class. A member of the intervention team visits the school to gain some insights on teaching styles, set up of the class room, decoration, general mood among students and maybe something which attracts the eye.

One teacher complained that his students were ungrateful. They had asked him to adorn the classroom with plants. He agreed and spent a whole afternoon buying and transporting the plants into the rooms. The students were still disgruntled. When we visited the classroom we realized why: he had purchased cactuses!

Mythodrama session

After obtaining an impression of the school, we proceed to the core of the program: The Mythodrama sessions. The students assemble in a large room or a gym hall, so they can move, run around or enact a play. We convene with the students on three to four occasions during a time span of three to four months. The teachers are not present and the students meet on neutral territory, not in their classroom. They need to relax and unwind. The way we manage the initial contact is decisive for the further work. We don't want to appear as an extension of the teachers or the parents, neither do we want to be seen as good doers or self-righteous educators. It is important to sense the quality of the encounter; maybe we are feared, maybe we discern distance or curiosity. We advance gradually, without letting anything predetermine the next step. We need to catch the momentum. Of course we have already gathered a lot of information about the students, so we might know what to expect and adjust our behavior accordingly. We might be informed about specific hierarchies, the cool guys or students which are being bullied. In some schools we might present ourselves as super-gang leaders, in other maybe as buddies, depending what we feel is appropriate. Often students cling on to preconceived ideas about psychology. Psychologists burst with empathy and fervently seek clients in order to provide their services. We destroy this image, by indicating, that psychologists can also be aloof and wait for the other side to establish contact. We want the students to avoid the victim trap. It is them, who have to become active. We are only facilitators. They have to approach us, if they want something. After contact is established, we reiterate the problem that started the intervention. We use blunt language and don't dodge by using sweet talk or psychological jargon. "We hear in your class students are being beaten up, bullied. We disagree with that kind of behavior. Now,

you can prove that these accusations are false or if they are true. It is your choice!” At this moment we are not interested in the views of the students. We engage them in exercises instead, which are chosen according to the age-range of the students. Small children are invited to engage in some classical warm-up exercises, older students are offered interactive exercises. The exercises are followed by the key element of the intervention: the story. We relate the students a story, legend, myth or real event. The story is carefully selected according to the problem, challenges or difficulties the group of students is facing. The narrative mirrors the events they encounter in a concealed way. Unconsciously the students might grasp though, that the story might have something to do with them. With the help of the story, we try to galvanize their emotions. If we detect fear among them, the story depicts a frightening situation. The narrative is seldom a “Goody-goody” story and never carries an educative or a moral message. The stories should stimulate mentally. They might be outrageous, provocative, extreme and politically incorrect. Some students need to be shocked, in order to open up. We use the story as a mind opener and not as an entertainment. Our goal is to tear down their psychological defenses, invite them to drop their masks, which they wear in school.

A gang specialized on attacks on people in wheel chairs. The handicapped are pushed out of their chairs and left helplessly on the pavement, while the gang member are having fun playing with the chairs. When narrating a story like that without moral condemnation, you are bound to get strong counter-reactions. While of course some may find it “cool”, the majority is repulsed. Their disgust is an indication that they reflect morally. We try to stop them being cynical, detached or aloof. We do not relate the narrative to the end though, but stop just before a drama or climax is suggested by the story line. We invite the students to fantasize the end themselves. They imagine individually how the story might continue. In order to help them to express their versions we employ different techniques. The students might draw a picture and then present it to a sub-group led by a psychologist. Often he interprets the picture, before hearing the end of the story. He tries to read the picture on a symbolic level, see it as an expression of emotions, complexes, fantasies, problems or events. This of course needs some understanding and psychological knowledge in picture interpretation. Another possibility is to divide the students into sub groups and then let them invent an end together, without the help of a grown up. We ask them to dramatize their version and then rehearse it in front of their colleagues. The ending is played out or drawn in order to get a new perspective on possible solutions or steps in order to alleviate the problems they are struggling with. As the story was a reflection of their difficulties, the chance is, that it might present an answer to their difficulties. It might contain precious

information about the resources and perspectives of the students group. By using this indirect method, we get connected with their social competence and creativity.

At this point of the process we change the focus. The endings are connected with the troubles the school is confronted with. We return to the actual problems affirmed at the beginning of the intervention and try to relate them to their endings. The psychologists help the students to do the transferences themselves. This is the moment, when we might detect what the students really experience in their schools. During Mythodrama, they unconsciously divulge their emotions, experiences and anxieties. Often the paintings and plays reveal what is going on inside of them. It needs a trained eye though to see through and uncover what their worries and thoughts might be. The crisis interventionist has to be acquainted with interpretation philosophies and techniques. When a group of students tries to reach a consensus in a story, their specific group dynamic feeds in also. Consequently we not only distinguish individual problems, but also the difficulties, potentials and challenges of the group.

Now the interventionist suggests a concrete change. The change has to be connected to the problems of the students or school. The students know, that their parents, as well as their teachers are committed to the program and will decide on a concrete change. We don't distinguish between perpetrators, culprits or victims. Everyone does his share. The involved parties decide themselves on their contribution though. The interventionist only facilitates the process. The change cannot be something vague or fuzzy: 'from now on we will be good'. People from the outside have to be able to detect the alteration. The student group has to decide on the change unanimously. This might take some time. The psychologist or interventionist has to monitor the discussions among the students, gather suggestions, supervise and define the rules for the decision making process. He might have to react to disturbances and finally has to formulate clearly to what the group decided. Often the students voice more than one good idea. The art is to focus on suggestions, which are sound and at the same time acceptable to the students and teachers. We don't want them to brood over proposals like "build a swimming pool on the play ground", but perhaps a suggestion to change the arrangement of the desks in the class room or form a club. When the change is initiated by the group, resiliency is higher. The chances are, that the students identify with the change and are eager to implement it, because after all they have born the idea.

The interventionist insists, that the students decide when to start implementing the change and how to inform the teachers. Finally the interventionist invites the students to propose a celebration or prize, which they would get, when they succeed in

implementing the change.

Teachers training

The three to four sessions with the students are followed by a time period of three to four months, during which we concentrate solely on the teachers. The interventionist help them to devise changes, which will impress the parents and students as substantial improvements. Everyone should be convinced of the efforts the teachers are making. The changes in teaching, performance or the attitude to the students are implemented on the basis of the information presented to the teachers by the interventionist.

This period is concluded by a final session with the students. The interventionist need to find out, if violence alleviated and the students and teachers managed to make a difference.

Parents meeting

The intervention concludes with a parents meeting. The teachers are present, the school board, the parents and sometimes the students. The present situation in school is discussed and compared with original problems, written down on an overhead sheet. According to an evaluation of the university of Bern the majority of the interventions are successful (Kohli A.& Lauener, H. 1995). Some interventions reveal difficulties, which were concealed up until now, so further steps might be taken. The reason for the success of this method is its radical group orientation, the no blame approach, the technique of Mythodrama and the fact that students are not infantilized or victimized. We convey to them, that it is them who will have to deal with the problem of violence. Currently this intervention and violence prevention approach is being evaluated in a research project by the Swedish Johnson Foundation.

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