

## Introduction

**Systemic violence:** Any institutionalized practice or procedure that adversely impacts on disadvantaged individuals or groups by burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, or physically. It includes practices and procedures that prevent students from learning, thus harming them. This may take the form of conventional policies and practices that foster a climate of violence, or policies and practices that appear to be neutral but result in discriminatory effects.

We spend a great deal of time in schools. In many schools there is a feeling of harmony, but in others there is a disturbing sense of contained anger and authorities seem unaware of the submerged bitterness. Was it our own experiences with abuse of authority that made us angry at smiling concerned officials in staff rooms and in principals' offices? What was it about so many schools that was so disturbing?

Part of the answer was to be found in the liberation pedagogy of critical theory. In abstract forms, Freire (1970), Miller (1990a,b,c), and others explained our problems of dissonance. Miller, in particular, helped us understand how well-meaning people could do abusive things and how school systems could apply "correction" and fail to recognize its cruelties.

We were not alone in our dissonance. At a 1994 conference on violence in schools, many of the papers focused on "zero tolerance" policies as a means to reduce playground battles. But in the women's caucus, the papers took a different turn. Suddenly we were hearing others articulate our dissonance. And they were giving it a name: "systemic violence."

Once we knew its name, we also knew its interconnectedness—in our lives and in the lives of our children. The stories were varied but the themes were constant. In session after session we brought back learnings from the previous hours and pieced together an enveloping picture. In that picture, we found our own stories, observations, impressions, and interpretations. And we knew that unless we spoke out, a similar heritage would be the sentence for our children.

So we set about collecting our experiences and trying to make sense of what we knew. The result is this book. The contributors are a strange collection in that we represent the fusion of theory and practice. Many of us were teachers before we became academics. Some of us are still students or have returned as students after years as teachers. Many of us are mothers reexperiencing education by watching our children from a distance.

Similar to Friedan's "problem with no name" (Friedan, 1993), once we had named our dissonance as systemic violence, we knew its symptoms. The identification became personal as people applied the term to their own experiences: Was it systemic violence when the coach left me sitting on the bench? (Not necessarily). Do you mean like when I wasn't allowed to play ball because I was a girl? (Yes). What about when the teacher embarrassed me in front of the class? (Perhaps). Was it systemic violence when the women portrayed in the English curriculum were exclusively "sex kittens," submissive mothers, or "whores"? (Yes). Was it systemic violence when the principal strapped me? (Yes). How about when the teacher made me stay in to do my homework? (Probably not). Everyone had a story. To determine whether or not a school practice was a form of systemic violence, it was assessed using these questions:

1. Was it violence? That is, did it hurt you or diminish your dignity?
2. Did it prevent you from learning?

These questions are sometimes difficult to answer, perhaps because the systemic nature of the violence makes it seem "normal." In the writings which follow, we will return often to Gramsci's idea of "common sense" (Ng, 1993) in which violent practice seems right and normal because it is so common and so universally accepted.

Our book did not grow in the usual chronological sense. It grew from a convergence of studies and interpretations. While

some of us had been collecting thoughts on pedagogy and violence (Epp, chapter 2), others had been reflecting on administrative complicity (Watkinson, chapter 1). Students were learning first hand about discrimination (Ndunda, chapter 6), teachers were reflecting on harassment (Richards, chapter 9; Warren, chapter 10) and confronting misogyny (Whitty, chapter 4; Jadwin, chapter 8; Ho, Webb, and Hughson, chapter 11). Meanwhile, Wason-Ellam (chapter 5) was studying video game violence, Tite was confronting child abuse (chapter 3) and Monteath, Cooper, and Rossler were all wrestling with the labeling of students (chapter 7). It was through coming together at the conference that we realized the connectedness of our topics and our stories.

### Defining Systemic Violence

The term *systemic violence* can be deconstructed by seeking to understand each word separately. To begin at the end, *violence* is defined as follows:

Violence has the effect or potential effect of hurting the health and welfare of an individual. It can be physical, verbal (oral or written), emotional, sexual, or racial, and can be directed against one individual or a group of individuals. Violence can also be expressed as acts of vandalism and damage to property. At the far end of the continuum of violence are criminal acts. However, if we are to reduce violence in schools and in society, incidents at all points along the continuum, even bullying, or continual verbal harassment (e.g., in reference to an individual's disability) can be as debilitating to the victim as a physical attack. If ignored, these incidents can escalate in severity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 12).

Violence is an important issue in schools today, and administrators and policy makers are taking steps to curb what they see as an escalating problem of student defiance and student-to-student violence. *Zero tolerance* has become the watchword of the classrooms, playgrounds, and hallways of our schools.

The original use of the term zero tolerance appeared in a study in response to patient abuse by doctors (McPhedran and Johnson, 1991). It was intended to apply to acts of violence by those who are in positions of authority. The term has since been appropriated by the educational community and the power issues have been reversed. Students who persist in violent actions are barred from schools. Educational applications of zero tolerance do not invite educational decision makers to reflect on the abuse of power against those with less power, which was the term's original intent.

On the surface, the educational application of zero tolerance seems like a positive step. Certainly, few would wish to encourage playground violence, and children who act in violent ways must not be allowed to inflict injury on other children. But such policies do not address the sources of violence. In their summary dismissal of student perpetrators, school authorities do not question causes of violence or the role of the school system in engendering violence. An examination of *systemic* violence shifts the emphasis from the individual student to the system.

Systemic violence is any institutionalized practice or procedure that adversely impacts on disadvantaged individuals or groups. The adverse affects can be seen in psychological, mental, cultural, spiritual, economic, or physical burdens. Thus, institutional or systemic violence can happen in any institution (Government of Canada, 1993). Systemic violence in schools includes those practices and procedures that *prevent students from learning*. The learning environment can be impeded in two ways. It can be impeded by conventional policies and practices that foster a climate of violence (large impersonal schools, the use of corporal punishment) or by those policies and practices that appear neutral on their face but which result in discriminatory effects (Eurocentric bias in curricula, school building design that impedes access).

One of the causes of systemic violence is the assumption of a "norm" that is white, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, intelligent, thin, middle-class, English-speaking, and male (Ellsworth, 1994, p. 321). Children who do not fit the norm are adversely affected. Cummins (1989) has noted that students who tend to have the most difficulty in schools are those who have experienced a long history of discrimination, subjugation, and prejudice. But students who fit the "norm" are also harmed by pervasive stereotypical

assumptions, and exclusive subject matter and classroom practices that reinforce sexist, racist, elitist, ablist, and heterosexist attitudes (Ellsworth, 1994, p. 306).

The majority of the contributors to this book are Canadians, but the issues raised are international. The list of references, emanating from a wide international collage, is evidence of this. Americans, for example, have debated the issue of school prayer since it was first declared unconstitutional in 1948 (*McCollum v. Board of Education of School District No 71*, 333 U.S. 203, 1948), and presidential candidates still campaign on the issue. Likewise, the use of corporal punishment in schools has been challenged unsuccessfully, all the way to the American Supreme Court (*Ingram v. Wright*, 430 U.S. 651, 1977). Over the past ten years, the number of states prohibiting corporal punishment has increased from four states (Paquet, 1982) to twenty states (Fischer et al., 1991). The *Education of the Handicapped Act*, 1995, and Section 504, *The Rehabilitation Act*, 1973, combine to make the issues surrounding mainstreaming and the misclassification of students some of the most litigated issues in American education. Equality rights are protected in the United States through the *American Bill of Rights* and other federal and state legislation, and in Canada through the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The issue of inequality in educational results is high on the agenda of educational reformers in many countries (see Kozol, 1991). Inequality is an important aspect of systemic violence in schools.

Systemic violence in education may not be immediately noticeable but can be found woven into the educational fabric. We have attempted to identify and examine obvious and subtle forms of violence from a variety of educational perspectives: the organization of education, educational leadership, educational labeling, classroom interaction, childhood games, exclusive subject matter, and exclusive classroom practices.

This book is intended to illuminate some of the issues surrounding systemic violence. In part 1, we frame our work by providing an assessment of the overreaching structures and processes which are the schools themselves—the ways in which they are administered and the patterns and expectations of learning. In part 2, we examine the effects of these structures on children in the classroom. In part 3, we focus on a completely different aspect of sys-

temic violence—its effect on teachers, especially women teachers who are attempting to operate within the existing structures. Finally, in part 4, we combine our thoughts and reflections to identify glimmers of hope and to recommend possible changes.

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