Chapter 11

Stolen Voices: Critical Theoretical Perspective on School Violence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter posits a view that while adults’ freedom and liberty is much talked about and advanced in almost every sphere of life, particularly in America, freedom and social justice for the young has lagged behind especially in schools. Violence within schools continues to manifest in various forms including the denial of opportunity for students to meaningfully participate in decisions that affect them. The chapter explored some critical theoretical perspectives to shed light on the depth of the crisis through the lens of the child and those advocating children’s rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Theoretical narratives from Freire, Dahl, Foucault, Weber, Michels among others have been used to establish a deeper understanding. Despite being touted as the leader of the free world America still struggles to reconcile its liberal ideals with violence suffered in schools by some children.

INTRODUCTION

The grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, Arun Gandhi, drawing from his experiences as a child and learning about nonviolence with his grandfather, observed that, “We often don’t acknowledge our violence because we are ignorant about it; we assume we are not violent because our vision of violence is one of fighting, killing, beating, and wars – the types of things that average individuals don’t do” (Marshall, 2015).

In 2010 the Office for Civil Rights at the US Department of Education recorded that in the United States every 20 seconds of a school day a child is beaten by an educator and that every 4 minutes an educator beats a child so severely that the child seeks medical attention. It was also noted that 223,190 students were the victims of institutionalized violence during the 2006-2007 academic year, of which over 20,000 sought medical attention (US Department of Education, 2014). In the 2009/10 school year, the federal Department of Education (Office of Civil Rights), reported about 200,000 students who were paddled in public schools.

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Such statistics on school violence in the 21st century is shocking and an indictment on teacher authority. Despite being touted as the leader of the free world, the United States, at a federal level, remains one of the few countries that legalises such treatment of students, particularly in the Midwest and the South. The United States domestic law generally allows the use of corporal punishment at home and due to the ‘loco parentis’ rule, where teachers in schools act in place of parents, some districts and schools thus legitimately apply this practice. Furthermore, it is noted that in May 1977 the US Supreme Court judges voted 5-4 in favour of corporal punishment, stating that beatings administered by school authorities are not prohibited by the 8th Amendment’s ban against cruel and unusual punishment even if such resulted in serious injury, and this ruling has not changed since (Farrell, 2009).

At a global level, 102 countries in the world, including most western countries, have outlawed corporal punishment in schools (Molland, 2010), primarily in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19, which forbids all forms of violence against children (UNICEF, 2015). Most forms of violence in schools are often perpetrated by school staff, other students and an unfair institutional policy regime. It is noted that physical punishment is only an expressed fraction of other varied forms of violence and sometimes a masking of more perverse, passive but insidious forms of violence embedded within the school system. This chapter has therefore taken a broader view on the notion and meanings of violence, not necessarily bound by the immediate physical pain, insecurities and transgressions on the body and the mind, but also passive violence through forms of neglect, and other enforced structural and cultural positioning on social order (Robb, 1997; Ray, 2011), as evidenced in some school processes and systems. To establish better understanding, the discussion engaged in a critical review of varied forms of school violence based on notable educational thinkers and draws some links between theory and practice.

**BACKGROUND**

Perceptions on childhood and the application of disciplinary networks in raising children vary considerably from culture to culture. However, there are universal historical trends that have characterised the location of children and broader human understanding of childhood. Grier (2006: 7) notes that

> the notion that children are passive and subordinate grows out of a twentieth century and western reconstruction of childhood as a time of dependence upon, nurturing from and guidance (control) by adults. It also grows out of an understanding of pre-colonial and pre-capitalistic African societies as rigidly hierarchical, unchanging and without tension or conflict particularly between generations. In both constructions, children are to be seen not heard.

Such a paternalistic view of children and students in particular, marginalizes them and masks their location and influential role in societies. It silences their voices as they bear the brunt of oppressive regimes in some schools often causing some to pursue whatever action is necessary to emancipate themselves, or to ‘make a statement’, even violently.

It is noted that the culture of suppressing children’s rights including physical beatings by some parents and teachers dates back to time immemorial and in some cases associated with the treatment of prison offenders and slaves. In the 10th Century BC corporal punishment is recorded in the book of Proverbs 13: 24 as follows: ‘He that spareth the rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him correcteth him betimes’. In Proverbs 23; 13 it further states that: ‘withhold not correction from a child: for if thou ‘strike him with
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