Violence in Institutions

Strength in Vulnerability: Lessons from Bulgarian children

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'No', says the biggest boy, who is clearly the leader in this group, 'violence is not common here, in other institutions it happens a lot, but here, no. We are friendly with each other, and we can easily talk about disagreements. In bigger institutions there's a lot of aggression and fighting, but in our institution there are not many children and that's why we do well. There are also always staff around who can watch us. And when we have a problem or a child is unpleasant, then we go to a teacher or the director. If it happens outside, on the streets, we can go to the police who help to resolve the problem. Yes, the middle group, 11-14-year-olds, are more given to fighting but we can manage this.' The other children nod in agreement, or put in a few words: 'things happen, but we are pretty safe here', 'here we have a chance to experience our childhood', 'the teachers take care of us', 'we are protected from our families', 'here we feel trusted', 'they respect you more here', 'teachers tell you how to take care of younger children.'

We have our first 'focus group' meeting with nine children, boys and girls ranging from twelve to seventeen years[1]. We are surprised, if not stunned, by the positive comments we hear. We had expected to be bombarded with complaints about them being roughly and unfairly treated, of brutality if not raw cruelty.

The purpose of our meetings with the focus groups is to seek the children's view on how outsiders could gain an understanding of what forms and degrees of violence exist in institutions and what sort of 'indicators' can be identified in detecting these. Our strategy is to take the outcomes of the first group conversations for review by the next group while adding new dimensions to the debate and then share these with the following group and so forth. We have learned that this method generates momentous and powerful insights. Now, that violence in the family, in school and on the streets seems to be on the increase everywhere, we suspect that this would certainly be an important issue in institutions, where most children carry histories of severe violence, and, as we thought, would for this reason alone be prone to violent behaviour among and against them. The underlying idea was that it would be difficult for outsiders, who could be social workers, child advocates, police officers, municipal inspectors, guardians or parents to get a reliable insight into how children were cared for. Institutions are even more closed than schools or families and it would be relatively easy for the director and staff, we reasoned, to keep most expressions of violence, abuse or neglect out of sight as they would make sure that none of untoward information would leak out and that they had all the means to make this sufficiently plain to the children under their care. We hope, then, that children could give us clues as to how to circumvent

1 'Children' refer to all young people under the age of 18 years.

the possible obstruction and self-protection by the staff. As violence is, apparently, not in issue in this group, we ask them nonetheless what plausible signals could be picked up when things were not all right in an institution. Most of them had lived in other houses before and they feel not threatened by this question as they could point out to an experience that was not relevant to their present situation.

Again, the big boy, who seemed to have moved from home to home, speaks. 'In institutions were violence and abuse are rife', he sums up:
- o 'the hygienic conditions are poor, toilets stink, the bathrooms are filthy
- o the furniture is broken, in pieces
- o the children wear "smudgy" clothes
- o the bedrooms are in a mess or dirty
- o all the rooms are locked
- o toys, videos, games are locked away
- o the children behave not friendly', and as they had pointed out before
- o 'harbour large numbers of children'

Once more, the other children pitch in and agree with the big boy. They all seem to draw on a wide experience, despite there young ages. We review these 'indicators' with the children in other groups and they are confirmed, convincing us of their value in assessing the child-friendliness of institutions. These pointers are, of course, not 'measurable' as they cannot be readily quantified or calculated, but they are sufficiently observable, as any visitor to children's homes can attest. This is the more so when houses are compared to one and other and a certain rank order can be established They are also 'derived' indicators, as they don't tell anything about violence directly but –if we believe these children, and we do- inform us about the likelihood of it. They make sense, though, as these indicators are not expressions of lack of resources, but rather of a mind set or an attitude towards children, coloured by indifference if not by contempt.

We talk about children with handicaps and how they fare in their groups like theirs. They produce a profound insight: 'if they are small in number, then we can integrate them easily in the group', 'if there are many, then they will form a special group and separate from us, then we can't give them special attention. We pursue for a moment the previous comment about children with special needs with another group. 'Sure', says a 17-year-old boy in this group, 'it's much better to have a few than many handicapped children around, we can then give them special care; if they come in large numbers than they band together and we start ignoring them.' The others make similar comments: 'we can play with one or two, but not with many.' So, they concur that in 'bad institutions':
- o the number of children with handicaps too large compared to those without handicaps

It is tempting to accept that the approach they apply to children with handicaps, may also apply to them, as they too form a special group. We take up this matter with the director whose 'home' is situated in a neighbourhood with regular streets, houses and shops, unlike the first one, which sat at the outskirts of town. She tells us that her policy is, indeed, to spread 'her' children over a number of schools. 'This', she claims, 'minimizes the effect of stigmatization, although this is not enough, we also have to talk to the teachers so that they understand these children better.'

Earlier, in talking to the children, we realized that another, more stealthy type of violence haunted them. This was not about physical or verbal abuse or severe punishment, but all things to with stigmatization. The director told us that 'her' children found it difficult to relate to 'other' children on the streets, but particularly so in the regular primary schools. 'Their classmates avoid them and the teachers tend to place them in the back rows.'

She notes, however, that some children do have friends from the neighbourhood, participate in sport clubs and that many entertain good relationships with shopkeepers. She encourages that all children have at least access to one trustworthy with an adult outside the institution; this may be a shopkeeper, or a football coach or anybody whom they like to confide in and who is interested in them. This brings us to the importance of the 'significant adult', which is, as is widely recognized, the crucial factor in keeping children sound. The director's views give hope as it shows that stigmatization may indeed be countered by relatively simple means:
  o See to it that children from institutions are spread over a number of schools and not grouped together into one;
  o Locate a 'home' in a regular neighbourhood where interaction with other children, adults and participation in clubs is easily possible;
  o Arrange that all children have access to a trustworthy predictable adult.

The director's approach forms steps into the right direction, but the children's responses imply that there's still a long way to go. This becomes evident when we take these findings to the next focus groups and we turn to the subject of stigmatization again. The manner in which they react suggests that stigmatization cuts deep and leaves festering wounds. 'Stigmatization is the worst form of violence', they say, 'they [teachers and classmates] say we are stealing money from the state,' 'a teacher asked us to write about our parents and asked me "is your mother is a prostitute?"', 'we are treated like stray cats and dogs', 'they blame us automatically for things other children do.' To them, stigmatization works as an invisible hand conducting a comprehensive movement that steers the media, the teachers, the shopkeepers, the other children –they name also the local and international philanthropists; and suspect that they all contribute to making them feel substandard and low-grade, eroding their sense of their self-worth and undermining their abilities.

We put the issue of stigmatization also before a group of eight girls with regular family backgrounds and who attend an elite high-school. They are aware that children living in institutions are generally looked down upon, but they also say that they have little to do with them. The main reason, to them, is that there is no clear basis for getting in touch. They are all busy with their studies, hobbies and sports. They assume that institutionalized children won't take the initiative as they may fear being rejected, while, on their side, they are also rather apprehensive about making the first move as they seem to fear them! 'We live by different rules', 'when they see us they insult us.', but also 'we have grown used to see them as inferior'. Their conclusion is that somebody –the leadership of the school and institution?- should organize meetings between them so that they could get to know each other better. 'We could share extra-curricular activities.' One girl butts in: 'One of my friends lives in an institution and she is a really great girl'. Taking their insights on board, we can now add another recommendation to the list of the above-mentioned director:

o Community leaders, especially those working with children in school and youth clubs, should establish bridges between children 'from families' and children 'from homes'.

It hits us that all these high-schools girls are confident, goal driven and above all that they mention the strong support they receive from their parents, without which, they emphasize, they would not be where they are now.

Without exception, the children living in the institutions say that their current situation is much better than the ones they experienced before in other houses. They barely complain: 'the teachers are friendly', 'wrongdoings are corrected by withholding privileges rather than punishments', 'we are nice to each other'. They make us almost believe that they live in paradise. We wonder about this and put this observation before a group of children who live, ostensibly, in a well-appointed, nice-looking residential setting, but an institution nonetheless. These children feel privileged and think that they live in the best of possible 'homes'. 'Yes', they say, 'everybody has to say that they are happy and content, they can't say otherwise, even if they felt miserable, as many do, we know this , as we spent time there as well' They provide the following explanations why children may paint such rosy pictures:
o 'they will not say how they really feel because they are ashamed of themselves
o they don't want to speak up in the group
o it's difficult for them to face the reality, they rather live in a dream world
o that's the only way to preserve your self respect
o they have learned to become passive and won't speak out
o many, if most of them are traumatized and are don't speak about their feelings
o they have a tremendous need to please
o they witness a lot of violence, but they prefer to keep it silent, they have learned to leave it alone and not to meddle with it'

We are intimidated by their analytical power as well as saddened by these revelations, but not completely surprised as this sounds all too familiar and sensible.

Many of these children's negative experiences are played out at the local level, and the solutions they suggest are also local: 'we would like to have friends outside', 'we wished the media would stop saying nasty things about us', 'we wished that shopkeepers were friendly to us', 'it would be good to have friends outside', 'we would like to know adults whom we could trust.' If this observation is correct, or even partly correct, then the fight against stigmatization can indeed be won, or at least win a few major battles. This is a doable assignment and does not take inordinate amounts of energy or managerial skills as it is largely up to the teachers, the community leaders, youth club leaders, local politicians, media people, the business community –including the shopkeepers in the neighbourhood- to get together and take action.

With each group we experience how good it feels to talk with these young people, to exchange ideas and feelings and to jointly explore difficult and, at times, unchartered terrains. It strikes us how strong, articulate and confident, interesting and, yes, good looking, the children appear. It feels as if we are drawn into a magic circle. We also see that, once the group has been dissolved and the girls and boys go their own way, they suddenly look different, even more so when we meet them alone in the corridors or on the yard or in the streets. Suddenly they look like if they are slouching about, diminished, shrunk, much less

heroic, and more dejected, forlorn and vulnerable. In contrast, the girls of the elite school seem to grow rather taller and more purposeful after their group breaks up.

Why is this? The children in the institutions are aware of the sustenance their group offers them. 'In this place we are good to each other', says one teenage girl. Another girl: 'no bad things can happen to us as we are well protected here.' Noteworthy is what the two seventeen-year-old boys have to say about their future. They are nervous to leave the institution. One intends to join the army: 'it's safe there, and they will protect me from society', the other's top priority is to find an apartment where he can 'feel secure'.

We talk this over with a leading Bulgarian psychoanalyst: 'These children's only positive reference is the group', she explains, 'children who grow up in their families, carry so much more from their environment, from their father and mother, their siblings, the other members of the family. They have internalized their values, their support, their encouragement and assurances. And they take these images, imprints, feelings with them wherever they are; they have become part of their mental make up. Children, who not enjoyed such nurturing family histories, can only be sustained by the immediacy of the group they are part of. If the group is not there, they literally lose their bearings'.

We would have liked to seek the views of the children and the young people on this issue, especially how they saw a possible way of lessening their dependency on the group, without destroying the multiple benefits their membership offers to them; however, we had run out of focus groups and of time, or rather thought too late about consulting them on this. As we continue to feel astonished by their insights and remarks, we present them with the well-known given that parents who abuse or neglect their children were often damaged themselves by their parents when they were young. 'In this way, their children –those are you- may likely behave in a similar fashion, and so it may go on and on', we tell them. How do they see themselves as future parents? They are not taken aback by this question as they appear full well to understand the importance of loving and nurturing families. They all say that they are looking forward to becoming good parents, finding true and lasting partners and having a caring relationship with their children. 'We will love our children' they say, almost in one voice. 'All children need love, we need love too,' 'when we felt neglected we would do anything to attract attention and love: steal, rob, curse, hurt others and ourselves', 'we know what happens to kids when you're beat them up, we will do things differently.' 'How come that you think you will be different from your parents', we push further. 'It is very difficult to understand why our parents failed, and we need support to understand them,' they admit. 'The staff know us, they know our personalities and explain what love means and how to express it', 'we feel safe here.', 'the teachers and staff love us, they are an example to us.' When listening to them, they may indeed stand, for once, a fair chance to break the vicious circle; we can only wish them all the luck in the world; they deserve this, without exception.