The Spectrum of Violence

Introduction

Little things and big things. A sparkly little girl proudly showcases how she can count to ten in Spanish and is shot down, deflated, by indifference or ridicule. Another is gang-raped by soldiers with machetes.

Violence occurs on a continuum of severity. We experience disrespect on cold city streets; we are silenced or ignored by decision makers; we are screamed at and kicked; we are hunted in ethnic cleansing campaigns; we are left to starve. Violence hurts all over the world, in all our households, in all our hearts. We are all teaching and learning in the wake of interpersonal violence.

In order to consider how the impacts of violence might play out in learning environments, we need to analyse what counts as violence. Possible frames for analysing violence are based on where it happens (both privately and publicly), what happens (sexual, physical, emotional violence) or who it happens to (and where they are located socially). People of all backgrounds and lifestyles experience violence, but those who are marginalized by systemic and institutionalised forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism and homo- and Transphobia are disproportionately affected. Current violence may be compounded by legacies of violence such as slavery, colonization or genocide. Historical oppressions are interwoven with current economic poverty, in itself a form of violence.

We all experience violence differently, in different settings, because we have different vulnerabilities (for example, a disabled person to caregivers, an immigrant to sponsor, the homeless to threats on the street, or girl children in a climate where virgins are believed to cure HIV). We also have different perceptions of violence and assumptions about its meanings. Our responses to violence are also framed by cultural definitions of what is normal and what constitutes aberration. One person’s reaction is viewed as a normal or reasonable response to stimulus, while another’s is an overreaction that finds them accused of hysteria or hypersensitivity.

For example, a student in a college class totally breaks down upon being spoken to sharply (say, for lateness) by a teacher. If, however, this feels like the millionth time she’s getting the message that she’s a screw-up in school (perhaps she failed as a child and her parent called her stupid and beat her every time she brought a report card home); and if she is coping with other exacerbating factors (maybe she is late because she was terrorized by her husband all night, her husband who frequently tells her she is worthless and mocks her attempt to go to school), the scolding may just be the final straw.

She may drop out, unable to cope with it all, even as, sadly, the institution subsequently judges her as “lacking motivation.” In any event, if her freakout is perceived as “imbalanced,” it will only further transgress her integrity and dignity, and her chances of learning successfully in the future.

What’s more, an individual may be impacted by a broad range of violences. Experiences set each other up and build on each other; for example, when a person has been abused, this may lead to mental health problems, then to hospitalization, which in turn may lead to more violence against them, then maybe to self-harm.

As far as learning goes, these experiences affect what people need for successful learning, whether it’s more time, different modes of instruction, a certain type of encouragement, more empathy, etc. Learning is supported when everyone involved makes a profound and thorough commitment to non-violence—in tone and action. A greater understanding of violence, and a deeper awareness of how its impacts fit together, will help us make that commitment.

To that end, here is a discussion of many forms of violence, by environment. Pervasive, systemic and interlocked problems can be neither defined too precisely nor divided up too neatly into categories; nevertheless, naming forms of violence in a straightforward way will help us recognize and acknowledge it.