REVIEW ARTICLE

The Empirical Research on Violence in Mexican Schools from the Voices of Students: Critical Points

La indagación empírica en torno a la violencia en las escuelas mexicanas desde las voces del alumnado: Puntos críticos

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Summary

The growing visibility of violence in schools has caused multiple demands to know their condition in our societies. Given this, the conceptual, analytical and methodological challenges faced between those engaged in their empirical research are evident. However, many of those who face these challenges do not analyze the parallel processes that are configured as the research progresses. This is the case of changes about the role of students in this collective effort. The objective of this document is to analyze the advances and dilemmas of the empirical research on violence in Mexico, focusing on the implications derived from the *legitimization of the voices* of children and adolescents. This analysis based on the specialized literature on school violence and the voices of students, warns that although studies that conceive these populations as individuals capable of providing data on this phenomenon through the application of numerous research techniques have been generalized, the idea of assuming them as sources of information and as passive and subordinated recipients of decisions and actions taken by adults. This analysis is aimed at experts, authorities and social leaders who, when considering the students as interlocutors in the empirical research on school violence, are committed to the recognition of the right to participation of children and adolescents, and the promotion of its effective exercise in schools.

Keywords: Empirical Research; Voices of Children and Adolescents; School Violence, Mexico.

Resumen

La creciente visibilidad de la violencia en las escuelas ha propiciado múltiples demandas por conocer su estado en nuestras sociedades. Ante esto, son evidentes los retos conceptuales, analíticos y metodológicos enfrentados entre aquellos ocupados en su indagación empírica. Sin embargo, buena parte de quienes responden a esos desafíos, no analizan los procesos paralelos que se configuran conforme avanza la investigación. Este es el caso de los cambios acerca del papel de las y los alumnos en este esfuerzo colectivo. El objetivo de este documento es analizar los avances y dilemas de la indagación empírica de la violencia escolar en México, concentrándose en las implicaciones derivadas de la *legitimación de las voces* de niñas, niños y adolescentes (NNyA). Este examen basado en la literatura especializada sobre la violencia escolar y las voces del estudiantado, advierte que aunque se han generalizado los estudios que conciben a estas poblaciones como individuos capaces de proveer datos de dicho fenómeno mediante la aplicación de numerosas técnicas de investigación, persiste la idea de asumirlos como fuentes de información y como destinatarios pasivos y subordinados de las decisiones y acciones tomadas por los adultos. Este análisis se dirige a expertos, autoridades y líderes sociales que, al considerar al alumnado como interlocutores en la indagación empírica de la violencia escolar, están comprometidos con el reconocimiento del derecho a la participación de NNyA y del impulso de su ejercicio efectivo en las escuelas.

Palabras clave: Indagación empírica; voces de niñas, niños y adolescentes; violencia escolar; México.

Introduction

The growing visibility of the complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon of violence in schools has caused multiple demands to know its situation in our societies. In view of these demands, the numerous conceptual, analytical and methodological challenges are evident by all those interested in its empirical research (Brown & Munn, 2008; Henry & Bracy, 2012; Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong & Kras, 2013; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, 2015; Scheithauera, Smith & Samara, 2016). However, there is little reflection in this context about the role of the students in such collective work. For that reason, this document analyzes the advances and challenges recently achieved in Mexico with respect to the empirical research on

school violence, but from the voices of girls, boys and adolescents. When conducting this study, it is informed that, although initiatives to consider these members of the school communities as subjects capable of providing information on the matter have been broadened and in a way, generalized, there is still the idea of assuming them only as data sources and as passive recipients of the decisions and actions that a wide range of actors take for them. Among these actors, in addition to teachers and principals, there are educational authorities and authorities of other government areas (such as health, social development and human rights), specialists, experts of civil organizations of different scale that participate in decisions and actions to prevent, address and eliminate school violence. Due to the content of this document, this text tries to establish a dialogue with those who, in the academy, government and civil organizations, are, on the one hand, in favor of considering students as interlocutors in the empirical research on school violence; and on the other hand, to defend the right to the participation of girls, boys and adolescents and adolescents, and its full exercise in school spaces.

Thus, this work seeks to open a path that is little known so far to analyze the challenges of this empirical research. Undoubtedly, there are certain advances related to production of conceptual, analytical, methodological and technical frameworks to collect and analyze experiences, opinions and assessments of the students about school violence, but it is still rare that these members of the school communities take a more active and proactive role in line with the exiting legal instruments of Mexico that establish the right to the participation as stated in the General Law on Girls, Boys and Adolescents Rights (Fielding, 2007, 2011; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Zurita, 2016). In fact, although in recent years, a *process of legitimizing the voices of the students* in most processes with respect to the empirical research on school violence, this does not imply that girls, boys and adolescents participate in the formulation of school and educational initiatives for it to be addressed, prevented and eliminated from Mexican schools (Zurita, 2013a; 2013b; 2018).

For those reasons, this document is interested in analyzing what these advances are and what the challenges of the empirical research in terms of the participation of girls, boys and adolescents are in the school violence research processes. With respect to this main proposal, the text is organized in four parts. The first part gives a brief summary about some challenges related to empirical research on school violence. Those who have dedicated themselves to this task in the academy, government or civil organizations, know that these challenges do not recognize any kind of borders, since they are inherent to the object of our interest (Brown & Munn, 2008, Henry & Bracy, 2012; Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka & Trach, 2015; Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Scheithauera, Smith & Samara, 2016). The next part shows some proposals of the *Voices of students* on the model of interaction between girls, boys and adolescents, and teachers, principals and other adults within the framework of the knowledge production proposed by Michel Fielding (2011). These approaches will be used to identify, in the third part, what has been advanced and also to reflect what work still has to be done. Lastly, some final comments are shown to continue this discussion.

Before developing the work, it is worth mentioning that the preparation of this documents is based on the review and use, on the one hand, of the specialized literature on school violence (Brown & Munn, 2008, Henry & Bracy, 2012; Gómez and Zurita, 2013; Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka & Trach, 2015; Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Scheithauera, Smith & Samara, 2016; Zurita, 2013, 2016); and on the other hand, of the literature of the *Voices of students* (Tisdall, Kay & Davis, 2004; Noyes, 2005; MackBeth, 2006; Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). It is important to say that both document collections have been used in several individual and collective, institutional and interinstitutional, documentary and empirical research works conducted for more than a decade, on social participation and violence in basic education schools in Mexico (Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Zurita, 2010; 2013a; 2013b; 2016; 2018).

Empirical Research on School Violence in Mexico

The available information about violence in Mexican schools shows several features that have been identified in other countries regarding emergency and exacerbation of this problem (Brown & Munn, 2008; Monks, Smith, Naylor, Barter, Ireland & Coyne, 2009; Maunder & Crafter, 2018), which, although it is not new, it has acquired unknown features since the 90's (Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). It is known that it is a phenomenon with characteristics that resemble other types of violent expressions –such as the difference in power between individuals involved, the purpose of committing some type of damage, the combination of individual, school and social factors that promote its production and reproduction, among others- but in the school environment, violence assumes qualities, configurations, scopes and unique implications (Hymel & Seawer, 2015; Smith, 2016; Zurita, 2016). In this overview, notable efforts have been made to establish theories, analytical frameworks and methodological proposals for its study (Brown & Munn, 2008; Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong & Kras, 2013; Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka & Trach, 2015; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, 2015; Scheithauera, Smith & Samara, 2016; Smith, 2016). In addition, it is unobjectionable that as time goes by, not only the number of disciplines that are involved in this company is larger, but it is foreseen that this trend will increase in the future as stated by Henry & Bracy (2012). This trend is an expression of the complexity of school violence since from different knowledge approaches, a comprehensive and holistic analysis that makes this phenomenon understandable from all the psychological, social, cultural, political, legal, educational and economic viewpoints that configure it can be adopted (Hymel & Swearer, 2016).

Nowadays, there is an extraordinary number of studies in which experts of different disciplines collaborate and they use several research techniques. In fact, some of them are very innovative since they recover the use of information technology and social networks as spaces where school coexistence has been expanded and also where unknown manifestations of school violence such as cyber harassment have been generated. However, nobody will hesitate about saying that its dynamics and distinctive processes in schools are not enough known (Brown and Munn, 2008; Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong & Kras, 2013; Scheithauera. Smith & Samara, 2016). Then asking the questions, what type of information is necessary to make better decisions? How this information can be collected? Who should be considered informant? What type of topics should be included? Is it pertinent to use standardized instruments in different geographical and cultural context?, among others, inevitably implies to make a balance of the recent trends regarding the conceptual, theoretical, analytical and methodological frameworks used in the research on school violence (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Smith, 2016). It is advisable that a part of this balance is located in the study on the role that several members of the school communities play in the empirical research on this phenomenon, especially of the students since they are a group historically invisibilized and excluded from the participation in relevant issues of the school and educational system.

To conduct an analysis of the role of Mexican students in the empirical research on school violence, it is necessary to explain several approaches that constitute baselines in this document. In recent years, the empirical research on school violence has traversed several paths (Brown & Munn, 2008; Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong & Kras, 2013; Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka & Trach, 2015; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, 2015; Scheithauera, Smith & Samara, 2016; Smith, 2016). In the 90's when new dynamics with respect to discipline, indiscipline and violence started to be analyzed, the use of qualitative techniques, conceived as the most pertinent sources to obtain information of certain types of populations, prevailed. These populations were particularly members of schools, who were contacted for interviews, focus groups, observations in classroom and schools, among other techniques (Gómez & Zurita, 2013). This initiatives expected to describe and understand the phenomena associated with the discipline and school violence. For that reason, populations, contexts and/or cases considered in this type of studies used to be smaller in quantity; since the interest was in delving deeper the why and how. However, as the violent expressions were diversifying and getting more complex in different educational environments and between

numerous populations, quantitative research techniques, mainly surveys were applied and they were aimed at documenting the trend of violence at state, national and regional level and according to certain education levels to respond to the several *what* of this problem. For instance, in these efforts, the proposals were on knowing the evolution, making comparisons in time and spaces between similar or different populations and the impact of the actions taken (Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Zurita, 2013; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Smith, 2016).

As time goes by, it was observed that in Mexico and other countries, violence was being configured as a complex problem in our societies (Brown & Munn, 2008), regardless the type of school, educational system or country (Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Scheithauera. Smith & Samara, 2016, Smith, 2016). This consensus spread rapidly among the academic communities, scholars and authorities engaged in its approach and prevention. "Confrontations" between qualitative research works and quantitative research works also vanished as it was recognized, on the one hand, that both types provide pertinent, relevant and useful information, and, on the other hand, that their combination based on academic criteria, notoriously increased the possibilities of description, explanation and understanding of the problem in question. It was then when the discussion changed approaches, as for instance, the proposals of new and renewed research techniques to give an account on the implications of technologies in the dynamics and processes of school coexistence; the need to build or to adequate instruments that can collect information of the expressions of school violence specific to certain context and common expressions in culturally different countries. (Monks, Smith, Naylor, Barter, Ireland & Coyne, 2009; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Smith, 2016). In short, the evolution of the phenomenon of school violence and the development of the empirical research demanded reflection about and innovation of theories, methodologies and techniques used for its study.

The second approach has to do with the visible increase of empirical research works on school violence in the last years, characteristic that has been arisen in other countries (Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong & Kras, 2013; Monks, Smith, Naylor, Barter, Ireland & Coyne, 2009; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). This increase could lead to think that there is more and more information about violence in educational centers. However, when national and regional surveys or surveys by type of education level are reviewed in detail, several of their limitations are exposed. For example, despite the application of several surveys to know violence in Mexican schools, there is still no information that allows the observation, monitoring and comparison of the phenomenon in wide temporary and spatial horizons. Undoubtedly, this is due, in the first place, to the fact that their target populations are different, and in addition, to the fact that not all surveys collect information about the topic that interests here. In fact, there is a type of survey that is distinguished from others since it only addresses topics of violence, indiscipline, aggression among other topics, such as: the *Survey on School Environments in Public Primary and Secondary Schools of the Federal District, 2015* or, the *1st National Survey about Homophobic Bullying, 2012*. Other surveys here are those that have as a main topic, violence, discipline, indiscipline or aggression. Such is the case of the survey *Discipline, violence and consumption of harmful substances to health in primary and secondary schools in Mexico, 2007;* or, for example, the *First, Second and Third National Survey about Exclusion, Intolerance and Violence in Upper Secondary Schools in Mexico 2007, 2009 and 2013*. Finally, the most common type of surveys is the one that has questions about the school violence, peer harassment or cyber harassment, as for example the *National Survey about Discrimination in Mexico, 2010* or the different *Evaluations of Learning and Teaching Conditions in Preschool, Primary, Secondary Schools and Upper Secondary School* that the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (INEE, by its Spanish initials) conducted between 2014 and 2018.

However, it should be noted that the vast majority of existing surveys arose with other purposes, different from those raised in the research exclusively about harassment and school coexistence. When making a careful reading of the definitions, categories, methodologies used and the questions used, it is observed that the information from surveys that have been generalized in recent years has weaknesses and problems with respect to the systematicity, comparability,

validity, representativeness, relevance and even the conceptualization of violence in schools. Thus, although at first glance it seems that there are more data, an important part of them does not constitute a reliable information that indicates the condition of this social problem at national or state level, according to the education level, the type of sustenance of the school, the shift or modality of educational service, among others (Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Zurita, 2013b). The results are, as you can imagine, the confusion and ignorance of school violence since data are usually extrapolated to greater scales that correspond to specific cases that stigmatize involved individuals (stalker-victim), schools, cultures and societies where it occurs (Hymel &Swearer, 2015; Smith, 2016; Zurita, 2016). This environment becomes even more complex since, today, school violence has become, due to its dissemination and approach by the media, a superficial and trivial topic that has motivated the creation of an industry of doubtful quality supposedly focused on its prevention and elimination (Brown & Munn, 2008; IIDH, 2012; Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Zurita, 2013b; 2016; CEPAL, 2018). In fact, this situation, coupled with the unfortunate use of such knowledge, may be some of the main reasons that explain the weaknesses of several actions for prevention, approach to and eradication of this violence both in Mexico and other countries (Monks, Smith, Naylor, Barter, Ireland & Coyne, 2009; Smith, 2016; Zurita, 2013b; 2016). In summary, it would seem that there is more available information due to the dissemination of surveys, evaluations, research works, studies that include questions about this phenomenon, but in reality what is unknown about school violence today is greater.

The third approach is related to the current relevance, in a certain sense, urgent reflection about empirical research on school violence. It is widely supported that the academic research on this phenomenon is a field of study nourished by the participation of numerous disciplines (Henry & Bracy, 2012) which, as in other tasks of the academic work, they are forced on the production of knowledge according to certain scientific standards (Brown & Munn, 2008, Gómez & Zurita, 2013). On the one hand, there is a set of data derived from the control of the discipline and behavior of the students that are built by schools and educational systems as institutional statistics of acts of indiscipline, aggression, harassment and violence. On the other hand, there is a wide range of actors of the academy, government agencies, civil organizations and international organizations that collect and build a lot of heterogeneous information, through the application of several research techniques, variation of which is known that depends on conceptual frameworks, methodological designs, techniques used in studies, as well as the availability of the necessary resources for the achievement of the objectives set. However, the reliability and validity of the existing data, of the party that provides that information and the theoretical and analytical references used for its collection and analysis are required to be discussed today (Gómez & Zurita, 2013, Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong & Kras, 2013, Scheithauera. Smith & Samara, 2016; Smith 2007, Zurita, 2016). This is where a host of challenges affecting strategic courses of action derived from decisions made in terms of public policies, legislation, prevention programs and even those that do a research on school violence and, undoubtedly, those that face it and deal with it daily in schools, are faced. In this way, the evolution of knowledge produced requires a detailed and careful review of the relevance of its use in the corresponding decision making.

These approaches briefly described above help to delineate an scenario where there is an effect, which without being intentional can be, at the beginning, encouraging in Mexico as well as in other countries that historically have stand out for their limited or reduced participation of students of different education levels (Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Zurita, 2016). This is the *process of legitimization of the students' voices* that has caused the empirical research on school violence, which would seem to indicate a first step towards the recognition of their intervention in issues affecting day by day. It is convenient to study this phenomenon since it is increasingly paradoxical that, although students have been the main recipients of most education policy actions throughout the history, they have been those with the fewest opportunities to express their voices and with no real opportunities for their voices to be taken into account in the formulation of education policies and, even in matters that they daily face in the classrooms and schools (Zurita, 2016). The participation of girls, boys and adolescents in the research processes conducted to generate proposals, make decisions and

take actions in issues of vital importance –such as school violence- and to practice education for democratic life in schools, has motivated specialists in the world to discuss this phenomenon from the proposal *Voices of the students*. Below there are some approaches of this proposal that will allow the analysis of the role of the students in the empirical research on violence in Mexican schools.

Voices of Students

Voices of students is a movement and a current that studies the ways in which girls, boys and adolescents participate mainly in school spaces (Tisdall, Kay & Davis, 2004; Noyes, 2005; MackBeth, 2006; Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). As it can be supposed, the presence of this movement has been greater since the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, but it has important antecedents in the work of several classic thinkers, John Dewy, Paulo Freire, among others. The *Voices* is closely linked to participatory democracy models and to movements in favor of the rights of girls, boys and adolescents. This current is mainly focused on the school since this institution has the historical mission to teach and daily exercise the democratic principles in the first years of life, their civic behavior and configuration of a political identity will be displayed in the society once they are recognized as citizens (Tisdall, Kay & Davis, 2004; Noyes, 2005; MackBeth, 2006; Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015).

As in other theoretical studies, the discussion about this perspective has been intense and has covered from the relevance of the use of the term *Voices* to the several participatory processes that include it. Next, some of the aspects that have generated some controversy will be explained. First, for some critics, the persistent conceptions and discourses in which the students are conceived as passive, subordinated and incompetent recipients, can be, in a certain way, reaffirmed with the term *Voices* since most empirical research works take them into account as a source of information of several school and/or educational topics. However, the members of the *Voices* point out that this use is due to the search for legitimation of the proposals formulated and made by teachers, directors and other authorities. In doing so, they say that the application of several techniques to collect information among the students, such as interviews, life stories, focus groups, research works, surveys, and even consultations with these population groups, does not constitute any optional act of girls, boys and adolescents as producers of knowledge nor the fact that these techniques configure them as autonomous actors and with agency in accordance with the principles of a participatory democracy.

Additionally, some critics of this movement say that the inherent force that seems to accompany the notion *Voices* vanishes immediately if there is no one who hear them and if it is not specified when, how, where, why and for what they must be heard. According to the critics, if those elements are not taken into account, the *Voices* become a naive movement that does not address the relationships of power that structure the teaching and learning processes in the school. However, its promoters agree to say that the analysis of these aspects in the instruments governing school management and coexistence fully reflect the tasks that are still pending with respect to the promotion of the participation of the girls, boys and adolescents. In addition, the participation should be in tune with the institutional, organizational and regulatory design of the schools such as the formulation of policies and programs tailored to these populations (Zurita, 2013b, 2016).

Another issue that has provoked additional questions to the term *Voices* is related to the blurred idea of inequality, inequity and exclusion that can be experienced by girls, boys and adolescents in many ways in schools as well as in other spaces. The idea of *Voices* would seem that it does not recognize the relevant differences between the students who express them. But the specialists of this movement have said that the research of the *Voices* considers variables such as gender, age, religion, socioeconomic status, place of residence, migratory status, membership of an ethnic group, school career, education level, type of school, among others. In fact, if variables

such as them were not taken into account, the application of this proposal could not go beyond the description of the empirical phenomenon in a specific context (Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). In other words, the perspective of the *Voices* opens great possibilities to understand and explain advances and challenges of the participation of girls, boys and adolescents in schools of our times, showing the pending debts with respect to inclusion, equity, respect and exercise of the human rights of these groups.

A last question that underlies this proposal is the criticism about who the participants are, in this case girls, boys and adolescents. They should have autonomy and identity that allow them to recognize themselves as holders of rights and be recognize by others as social actors with agency (MacBeth, 2006; Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lundy, 2007). This autonomy and identity not only require to be guaranteed through several legal instruments of different legal status or with the existence of formal or institutional schemes to participate (Zurita, 2016; 2018). It is required that in all environments where these populations develop their daily life, they enjoy the recognition of their rights and identities and that they have their own spaces for the effective exercise of their right to participation.

Consistent with the main objective of this document, it should be noted that some specialists of the *Voices*, like Michael Fielding (2007, 2011) has been focused on the analysis of interactions that are configured for learning and teaching between girls, boys and adolescents, and those adults who constitute the group of teachers and directors of schools. This interaction comprises from the most basic contacts for obtaining information where girls, boys and adolescents have a passive and subordinated participation since they respond to what others want to know, how they want to know and when they want to inquire into it; to those who propose topics, prepare proposes to collect information, make decisions and take actions derived from them. They are girls, boys and adolescents in addition to adults, since the participation is not limited to age or the function they perform in the school. This is possible in environments where, at the beginning, this last type of intervention is legal, legitimate or is implemented in the participatory democracy model in the school. With this proposal, Fielding draws the attention to the possibility to construct, in contemporaneous societies, more dynamic and complex processes of this interaction that lead to transform the conventional ways in which historically girls, boys and adolescents have been considered in schools.

To delve into the analysis, Fielding builds a model of *patterns of partnership* that contain six types of interaction about which there are different conceptions of the students such as: a) information sources to know their well-being and progress, b) active participants in the dialogue and discussion that are activities proposed and coordinated by adults (teachers, principals, among other figures of the school communities), c) co-researchers under the responsibility of the school team with high profile and active support of the students, d) knowledge creators in which students assume a more relevant role in the management but have the support of the group of teachers and group of administrators; e) authors in the same level of teachers and administrators of schools but without full autonomy and authority to propose topics, make proposals, make decisions, and finally, f) main figures of the intergenerational learning processes corresponding to participatory democracy model, where the responsibility and commitment are shared by all those who collaborate and among whom there is no type of difference or hierarchy (Fielding, 2011, p. 67).

In addition to the foregoing, it should be added that the uniqueness of Fielding´s proposal is that, in this interaction, girls, boys and adolescents are conceived in different ways according to their participation in the production of knowledge and according to the principles of legality and legitimacy that support it. However, this wide range of options does not represent an evolutionary model in time or in the topics about which knowledge is built. Therefore, the usefulness of the Fielding's model is unobjectionable since, for example, it could be analyzed how the students and the groups of teachers and administrators interact during a period, in a delimited space and with a specific topic. How the interactions between girls, boys and adolescents, and adults at a certain time and environment, but depending on several school and educational issues may be also known.

Recognizing the relevance of the Fielding's model, the configuration of girls, boys and adolescents as producers of knowledge of school violence gains distinguishing characteristics since the hegemonic discourse is based on its "close" and "superficial" conceptualization that identifies the students as its main protagonists, especially regarding the peer harassment and the cyber harassment (Gómez and Zurita, 2013; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Smith, 2916; Zurita, 2016). If girls, boys and adolescents have a relevant role in the emergency and especially, in the aggravation of school violence, one could ask what the reasons for the students to not assume and to not have a more leading role in building knowledge are that can be used to make decisions leading to prevention, approach and eventually reduction of this problem. According to Fielding, it is about moving towards more active, proactive conceptions where students develop all their potentialities that are nothing but recognizing and being recognized as social actors with agency and as subjects who produce knowledge. These changes are urgent since for the *Voices*, opinions, proposals and actions of the girls, boys and adolescents are useful, pertinent and relevant to enjoy better environments for teaching, learning, coexistence and, while the participatory processes are a way to exercise democratic education in schools (Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). For these reasons, *the Voices* and, in particular, the Fielding's model (2011) is a pertinent and relevant tool to analyze the *legitimation process of the students' voices* regarding the empirical research on violence in Mexican schools. Precisely the following section presents this analysis.

The recovery of the voices of the students in empirical research on school violence in Mexico

A quick look at research on school violence shows that empirical research has produced various consequences. Some of them have to do with how girls, boys and adolescents have conventionally been taken into account in analyses as a target population in the design and application of qualitative techniques, such as interviews, participant observation, life stories as part of micro-research, or since the mid-2000s as a population interviewed when the boom of surveying to gather information on experiences, opinions, and assessments of school violence and, especially, peer bullying, started. In more recent times, students are still used as the target population in a number of research projects based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyze these violent events in schools (Gómez & Zurita, 2013; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Smith, 2016).

The questions that today call the attention of those interested in school violence have to do with identifying the most efficient methods and techniques to collect the desired information, the most robust according to established scientific standards, the most pertinent to prevent unwanted acts, the most inexpensive for the different governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in the initiatives as well as due to the numerous resources necessary for their investment in the tasks of prevention, treatment and elimination of this social problem (Brown & Munn, 2008). Unexplainably, the role of student girls, boys and adolescents as part of the research has not been deeply reflected on despite the fact that its necessary consideration in any empirical research on the matter has been confirmed over time (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Smith, 2016), while the refusal of the conception of girls, boys and adolescents as builders of knowledge persists.

Research carried out in other countries has identified the high negative costs for the contemporary education systems, meaning that girls, boys and adolescents continue to be perceived as passive, submissive and subordinate members of the decisions made by others (Lundy, 2007; Tisdall, Kay & Davis, 2004; Noyes, 2005; MackBeth, 2006; Fielding, 2007, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). This finding leads us to think that there is an explanatory factor of the poor results of the multiple actions undertaken to prevent school violence (Gómez and Zurita, 2013; Zurita, 2013b, 2016). Thus, the central question is what to do to promote research projects that recognize girls, boys and adolescents as

actors with agency capacity and producers of knowledge, which could be collected by designing and applying adequate instruments, such as action-research methodologies, and techniques, such as photovoice to prevent school violence.

Promoting these changes leads us to observe the different issues surrounding school violence from another position that adults, either teachers, principals or parents, and education authorities, usually ignore or disregard. An example is a collective and inter-institutional research on violence in public primary and secondary schools in Mexico City carried out between 2013 and 2016. This project was conducted by the Seminario de Investigación en Juventud (Youth Research Seminar - SIJ) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico – (UNAM, by its Spanish initials) and coordinated by Jose Antonio Perez Islas. The main purpose was to delve into the conditions, both structural and subjective, that cause and reproduce this social problem (Brown & Munn, 2008). To this end, various qualitative and quantitative techniques were designed and applied (Pérez Islas & Lara, 2016; Zurita, 2016). Some of the experts who took part in this initiative used planning from the *Voices of the Students* (Zurita, 2016) as part of their conceptual and analytical framework. This research identified some aspects which are now worth pointing out in order to reflect on the current advances and challenges in this matter. Among the aspects that most caught the attention of the participating team, the most noticeable is the enormous distance between, on the one hand, the predominant discourse on school violence, which in turn is reflected in the actions for its prevention, treatment and elimination, and, on the other hand, the real violent experiences lived by girls, boys and adolescents together with other members of the school communities. This became evident when girls, boys and adolescents was asked to indicate their notion of school violence. They gave immediately and very easily the practically literal definition that corresponds with that found in the classic literature of peer bullying, i.e. the notion proposed by Olweus in the early 1970s. As it is generally known, this is a form of interpersonal aggression that is deliberate and repeated over time in order to cause physical, mental or social harm to one or more persons and whose relationship is marked by an imbalance of power. However, in their statements, this conception was not assumed by girls, boys and adolescents either as a problem or as an issue that affects their school coexistence. This led the research team to ask them to give specific expressions of school violence that, according to their experience, negatively affected the coexistence in classrooms and schools. In doing so, the most important topics in the opinion of girls, boys and adolescents had to do with their interaction with adults (i.e. teachers, principals, supervisors, and parents) and the consequences of conflicts between them in which students are involved in one way or another. The ability of girls, boys and adolescents to neutralize, cope with, and overcome the consequences of these conflicts is different from their ability to solve problems with other students from the same groups they belong to, from other classrooms, or from other school grades.

Undoubtedly, the type of conflicts, the way they are conceptualized, the way they are solved, the members of the school communities that take part, the required and applicable legal regulations and instruments, among other factors, depend on the predominant school devices and cultures that are conjugated with the formally established elements associated with school management (Zurita, 2016). Thus, the results of this research showed faces unfamiliar to and unreported by recent studies that concentrate on only peer bullying and in which girls, boys and adolescents are only the sources of information of interest to adults (Pérez Islas & Lara, 2016; Zurita, 2016).

Now, from the opinions of girls, boys and adolescents, it is evidenced that their voices vary in effect according to their sex, age, school experience, school career, socioeconomic level, as indicated by Fielding and other authors of the Voices. But this did not impede to realize that underneath the discourses regarding prevention, treatment and elimination of violence that have become hegemonic in Mexican schools, interpersonal interactions persist that, fed by the institutional devices, school cultures and organizational designs, form diverse violent expressions in schools, where girls, boys and adolescents are not responsible for the spread of this social problem (Pérez Islas & Lara, 2016; Zurita, 2016).

It became evident that despite the fact that multiple actions have been undertaken to prevent, treat and eliminate school violence in Mexico in recent years, driven by multiple actors of different levels, besides producing disjointed, discontinuous, fragmented and contradictory initiatives, they have increased the problem and have even generalized the belief that peer bullying and cyberbullying are the main and most serious violent expressions, while other violent manifestations created by the education system and its schools, where other members of school communities are its leading actors, are covered up and underweighted (Zurita, 2013b; 2016).

By examining school violence from the voices of students, it is possible to recover elements that help understand why the process of legitimization of these voices, although it was carried out, did not reach other levels of participation in the production of knowledge, according to Fielding's model (2011). This situation has not so far called the attention of experts, social leaders and education authorities, even though it has been reproduced once again as a double discourse that is, paradoxically, the contradiction of the eternal democratic desires of the educational purposes and, on the other hand, the authoritarian atavisms that persist. This double discourse, which has been a historical component of the poor defense of the right to participation of girls, boys and adolescents, and its effective implementation in schools make democratic principles and the spirit of human rights unattainable ideals.

These findings confirm that there is an urgent need to undertake a more detailed and in-depth debate on the conceptual, analytical, methodological and technical frameworks of research studies on violence in Mexican schools because their implications far exceed the achievement of the objectives of the research studies, whatever they may be. As it was seen, this research also plays a role in the recognition of girls, boys and adolescents as social actors with agency capacity and as producers of knowledge on issues that, like school violence, are undoubtedly relevant to them. Although the conception of girls, boys and adolescents as sources of information has been legitimized in the Mexican analyses of this social problem, empirical research could incorporate research methodologies and techniques, especially of a qualitative nature, such as action-research, service-learning or photovoice, that contribute to consolidating the conception of girls, boys and adolescents as something more than sources of information whose use makes it possible to legitimize the decisions made and actions undertaken by others (Fielding, 2007, 2011; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Zurita, 2013, 2016).

As it can be seen, the examination and reflection carried out in this document are pressing tasks as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Mexico acceded shortly after its creation, is about to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary (CEPAL, 2018). Furthermore, it is due to the fact that Mexico, although there are important normative instruments of different legal status that recognize the participation of girls, boys and adolescents in different areas, such as schools and education, still has no legitimacy to do so (Zurita 2013, 2016, 2018). This situation is even more serious because this legal framework includes, for example, more than thirty state laws that since mid-2000 have been aimed at preventing, treating and eliminating school violence, and describe some specific participation of girls, boys and adolescents (Zurita, 2013b, 2016, 2018). In addition, there is the General Law on the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents (LGDNNA), which, among its established twenty rights, incorporated the right to participation (UNICEF, 2018) for the first time in the history of the rights of girls, boys and adolescents. Article 71 establishes that girls, boys and adolescents have the right to be heard and taken into account in matters of their interest, according to their age, evolutionary development, cognitive development, and maturity. Within the scope of their respective field of action, the authorities of the different levels of government are obliged to have and implement mechanisms that guarantee the permanent and active participation of girls, boys and adolescents in the decisions made in the family, school, social, community or any other environment where their life develops. Likewise, girls, boys and adolescents have the right to be informed by the different governmental agencies about how their opinion has been valued and taken into account. With legal instruments such as this Law, the participation of girls, boys and adolescents in Mexico cannot be subject to the will

of teachers, principals or education authorities since it is a right that must be fully recognized and exercised in schools and other spaces where their life develops. Unfortunately, it is still a distant reality for Mexican girls, boys and adolescents (Zurita, 2010, 2013b, 2016, 2018). In fact, the presence of protected conceptions of the participation of girls, boys and adolescents, the full exercise of which is conditioned by age, maturity and other aspects (Lundy, 2007, Zurita, 2013, 2016, 2018; CEPAL, 2018), is still observed in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the LGDNNA. Likewise, progress made in the recent creation of international and national legal instruments to prevent violence in schools promoted by powerful international actors, as reflected in the Resolution approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 19, 2016, which advocates for the protection of children against bullying, recognizes that the conditions still do not exist for the real exercise of the right to participation of girls, boys and adolescents in tasks associated with the prevention, treatment and elimination of this social problem.

Therefore, it is not a coincidence that both experts and representatives of national and international civil organizations involved in the defense of the rights of girls, boys and adolescents consider that the greatest challenges are found in the content, implementation and application of legal instruments in areas such as schools, since the idea persists that adults - either teachers, principals or, undoubtedly, parents - are the only ones who should participate and the only ones who should make decisions concerning school violence because they know what is best for the well-being and protection of girls, boys and adolescents. In this way, the challenges faced by Mexican students to play an active and proactive role in the empirical research on school violence end up being problems of participation, as expressed by Fielding and other representatives of the perspective of the Voices. In other words, it would seem that their recognition as producers of knowledge cannot be separated from their recognition as actors with agency capacity. Thus, Mexican girls, boys and adolescents cannot produce knowledge because they face different legal, institutional, organizational and cultural obstacles that prevent them from participating. Although the right to participation of girls, boys and adolescents is already recognized in Mexico, the conception of participation is a protected vision. In terms of the education system, for decades it has been possible to observe in different laws -such as the Organic Law on Public Education of 1942, the Federal Education Law of 1973, or the General Education Law currently in force- that there has been a conditioned vision of students participation since it has been recognized that this population can undertake certain activities, but has also been prohibited from taking part in core issues associated with schools and the education system. Likewise, another limitation is related to the availability of a single institutional modality of participation that is the Association or Society of Students, and that, in addition, is not recognized for all levels of the educational system. But these problems are more paradoxical when it is thought that the conventional literature of school violence and the opinion disseminated by the media show girls, boys and adolescents as the main cause of this social problem, but simultaneously they are prevented from assuming a more active role in the production of knowledge that could be used to prevent this problem (Brown & Munn, 2008; McCluskey, Brown, Munn, Lloyd, Hamilton, Sharp & Mackleod, 2013). The Voices of Students represents a proposal for the inclusion of these members of the school communities that have historically been excluded from any school and education decision-making process. It is worth adding this inclusion understood as a process which is not intended to superimpose the voices of girls, boys and adolescents over those of other members of the school communities. On the contrary, it is about establishing the conditions so that any of its members, without distinction of any kind, can express their opinion, share their experience and participate in the actions they decide to undertake. Consequently, as pointed out by the experts of the Voices perspective, there is an appeal to dialogue and reflection based on mutuality, reciprocity and respect among girls, boys and adolescents, teachers, principals, parents and other members of the communities in order to know, exchange and define the different perspectives, experiences and proposals they have about school violence. Although it is a model that can be applied in a diachronic and synchronous manner to deepen the progress and challenges of the Voices of the Students in a specific context and time period, this work has chosen to reflect on their role in the

empirical research on school violence in order to know what type of interaction between girls, boys and adolescents and the school team is developed, according to the Fielding's model (2011).

As Fielding and other academics have hold, the voices of students can be the heart of the schools, be expressed through multiple institutional and non-institutional channels, be developed around central issues such as teaching and learning, be reflected in the ethos of the education system and schools, be taken into account for all actions where girls, boys and adolescents take part. This work has examined the process of legitimization of the voices of students in relation to empirical research on school violence. However, to the extent that it was identified that their participation in this process does not go beyond an interaction where this group is considered a source of information, it was also shown that this is explained because, although there are new legal instruments such as the LDGNNA which recognizes in Mexico the right to participation of girls, boys and adolescents, it does so from a protected vision. Thus, there are currently no conditions in schools and the education system for this group to be considered as a social subject with agency capacity or as a producer of knowledge on a subject girls, boys and adolescents could say and contribute a lot, such as school violence.

Conclusions

LGDNNA has existed in Mexico since 2014 which, together with other legal instruments, recognizes the right of girls, boys and adolescents to participate in different environments, such as school (Zurita 2013b; 2016, 2018). However, students find on a daily basis various formal obstacles -such as normative instruments, existing modalities of participation, school organization- and informal obstacles -such as school culture, values, identities, legitimacy- when they seek to influence central issues of the school life, such as the development of regulations for school coexistence (Zurita, 2013b, 2016, 2018), while teachers and principals approve the participation of girls, boys and adolescents in matters that do not question the ways they have historically been excluded, subordinated, and made invisible (Zurita, 2018).

If attention is placed on the role of girls, boys and adolescents in empirical research to formulate actions to prevent, treat and eliminate school violence, other paradoxes are manifested that interfere with and delay the possibility of these groups being considered in an active, proactive manner as social subjects with agency capacity and as producers of knowledge. The most noticeable among them are the lack of authentic schemes or modalities of participation of these populations in schools and education systems, and distrust, conditioning, or refusal of student participation. But these positions become more pronounced as age and educational level decrease, the predominance of the adult-centered logic in schools that remain vertical and hierarchical.

In the particular case of the matter of interest studied here, it is observed the request or obligation of student participation to provide information exclusively on matters of interest to school and education authorities, such as peer bullying or cyberbullying, to the detriment of other expressions of violence such as those existing between teachers and principals toward students, between teachers and governing body, between parents and teachers (Gómez and Zurita, 2013; Zurita, 2013b, 2016, 2018). This empirical research is also based on the application of methodologies and research techniques that do not allow girls, boys and adolescents to play a more active, participatory and democratic role; unlike others, mentioned above, which do enable and encourage these groups to identify, from their experiences, views and voices, the issues that are worth reflecting on.

A strategic issue that will have to change in addition to the elimination of the protected vision of the right to participation and its exercise in different spheres such as schools and the educational system, and that would result in the design and implementation of all the necessary actions for the recognition of girls, boys and adolescents as social subjects with agency capacity and as producers of knowledge. Likewise, governmental agencies will be required to satisfy their

additional obligations, according to LGDNNA, associated with the dialogue and return of the information with/to its providers. This implies the design and operation of mechanisms for accountability and transparency on the part of the authorities with respect to how the information provided by girls, boys and adolescents was used and their results and impact when used in the initiatives developed.

The process of legitimization of the voices of students has taken place so far in a context where relevant changes have occurred in the field of educational research in Mexico and, undoubtedly, has similarities in other countries. For now, two of them deserve to be mentioned here: the first change is the institutionalization of research on school violence in the academic sphere, and the second change is the development of studies from the perspectives, experiences and voices of multiple school actors -among them, the most noticeable are girls, boys and adolescents - as well as all those actors of different levels who take part in the education system and its schools through policies, programs, legislation and other initiatives (Gómez and Zurita, 2013; Zurita, 2013b, 2016). In this scenario, the end of the predominance of the great hegemonic explanations of education based on linear, mechanical, homogeneous and ahistorical visions, which actors, despite their relevance, have been historically invisible, subordinated and underestimated, is unquestionable.

In conclusion, according to Fielding's model (2011), the interaction of girls, boys and adolescents with adults that is formed in the context of empirical research on school violence in Mexico would not reach beyond the level where students are only considered as a source of information. Thus, the discourses given by adults who hold positions of authority and have legitimacy between the school community and the education system, openly assume the role of guardians of well-being, rejecting and even disqualifying any possibility for girls, boys and adolescents to assume an active, proactive and democratic role in an issue that is directly relevant to them, such as violence in those spaces. However, the recovery of the voices of students, as explained in this document, calls for a major transformation since it refers not only to the recognition of the ownership of the right to participation of girls, boys and adolescents, but also its full exercise in schools. By demanding their recognition as social actors with agency capacity and as producers of knowledge, it is consequently requested their inclusion in the process of school and education decision-making, questioning the principles of power and authority that have historically transformed educational institutions into hierarchical, authoritarian and adult-centric institutions. In terms of school violence, empirical research from the perspective of girls, boys and adolescents needs profound changes. Thus, by placing special attention to the development of the enormous potentialities of these populations, they will enjoy the rights mandated by law not only to name diverse issues associated with this social problem, but also to enjoy the legitimacy to participate in the decisions and actions taken to prevent and eliminate it. These are, in conclusion and without recognizing boundaries of any kind, some of the challenges of empirical research on violence in Mexican schools.

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