Parents and Teachers' Beliefs about Students' School Aggression.

Creencias de padres y profesores acerca de la agresión entre estudiantes en el ambiente escolar.

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Abstract

The focus of the study is to get to know the beliefs that parents and teachers have about aggression among peers in the school context, and the potential understanding and dispute areas between these two roles. This is a qualitative study, based in the principles of the Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). Participants were sixteen parents and nine teachers, of 7th and 8th grade from three middle class, private subsidized schools located in Santiago, Chile. Results show as important aspects the notion of development actors have about the students vital cycle stage, the experience adults have about aggression among peers, and the perception of the school as an everyday space in conflict. Finally, the school – family alliance appears as a transversal phenomenon, as the aspect that's more affected by the aggression among students. The implications of do opposite perspectives about school are discussed, and also the need for teachers and parents to become closer through empathy, the importance to generate participation protocols for parents inside schools, and to establish prevention and intervention strategies that involve the entire school community.

Keywords: aggression among peers, family – school relationship, teachers, parents, beliefs

Resumen

Este estudio busca conocer las creencias que albergan padres y profesores acerca de la agresión entre pares en el contexto escolar, y los posibles puntos de encuentro y/o tensión que se generan entre estos actores. Es un estudio cualitativo, basado en los planteamientos de la Teoría Fundamentada (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). Participaron dieciséis padres y nueve profesores de séptimo y octavo grado de tres colegios particulares subvencionados de nivel socioeconómico medio, en Santiago de Chile. Los resultados señalan como aspectos importantes: la noción de desarrollo que plantean docentes y apoderados respecto a la etapa vivida por los estudiantes, la vivencia de los adultos frente a la agresión entre los estudiantes, y la percepción de la escuela como espacio cotidiano en conflicto. Surge como fenómeno transversal la relación familia – escuela, aspecto que se ve afectado por la agresión entre estudiantes. Se comentan las implicancias de visiones tan opuestas respecto a la escuela, la necesidad de acercar las posiciones de docentes y apoderados a través de la empatía, la importancia de generar protocolos de participación de los apoderados al interior de los establecimientos educacionales, y de establecer estrategias de prevención e intervención que incluyan a todos los actores de la comunidad escolar.

Palabras clave: agresión entre pares, relación familia – escuela, profesores, apoderados, creencias

School violence is a topic that has attracted attention within the last few years, alerting parents, school administrators and teachers. In Chile, authorities have responded to this alert by launching the School Violence Law (Diario Oficial, 2011), while several entities have been in charge of developing violence prevention and school coexistence improvement programs. Several studies indicate the number of students who are victims of aggression, deepen into the characteristics of the offenders and the assaulted (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2013; Ministerio del Interior y Seguridad Pública, 2009; Page, Daniels & Craig, 2015; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing & Salmivalli, 2012; Subsecretaría de Prevención del Delito, 2016). However, there is no clarity regarding the understanding from the different actors about the topic, neither about the way in which these actors manage the situations associated to school violence. Beliefs related to how the actors understand the phenomenon could be an important element to develop school coexistence intervention events, which consider the actors determinations, as well as the beliefs that originate the decisions about these actions.

Due to the lack of research done simultaneously with teachers and parents regarding school violence, it is very important to discuss the beliefs of these actors in order to find a common ground or critical points that may interfere with the intervention strategies. Thus, a qualitative study is suggested to explore the actors' beliefs, regarding aggression among peers in school.

Theoretical Background

Peer aggression and adolescence

The approach that peer aggression has had so far, has been strongly defined by the concept of bullying, which refers to a power relationship of one person above other (Berger and Lisboa, 2008). At the same time, Varela, Tiimes and Sprague (2009) indicate that the phenomenon is called "school violence" when referring to a wider violent phenomenon, in which the aggression is constant and unfounded.

To deepen into this situation, Garcia and Madriaza (2005) indicate that violence can be used a way to establish hierarchies, defining rules of coexistence among peers, particularly, when the group has notice lack of rules from outside. In this sense, it could be considered that peer aggression is the externalization of a deeper issue: the actors of school system perceive absence of rules regulating their daily behavior. At the same time, this is socialized, which "refers to the process through which the group models characteristics and specific behaviors for their members, based on the theory of social learning" (Berger, 2008, p. 154).

Violence is presented as a way to establish rules in a context in which there are not any, extending this relationship to the rest of the school community. Relationships among peers in the school context are sometimes regulated through aggression, which could be presented in a visible way, such as the case of physical aggression –the most spread type through press – and other which are more invisible, such as social exclusion (Perez, 2011). Moreover, aggression could be direct, when the offenders directly and openly attack the assaulted, or indirect, consisting on hurting the position and social acceptation of the person, deliberately manipulating their interpersonal relationships (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006).

Analyzing this phenomenon during adolescence has become very relevant, since previous studies show that a higher prevalence occurs between 5th and 8th grade (11 to 14 years old, approximately) (Subsecretaria de Prevencion del Delito, 2016). In this respect, it is important to understand evolutive processes which are inherent to adolescence, that might be held accountable regarding this situation.

During adolescence, "psychosocial moratorium" (2000) a term coined by Erikson, occurs, consisting on a period in which several roles are experimented before committing with a particular one. This process implies role testing, reflected in alienation from the parents, while connecting closer with the peers (Daddis, 2008; Ojanen, Gronroos & Salmivalli, 2005). In relation to this, Cumsille, Darling & Martinez (2010) propose that teenagers who are more controlled by their parents, are more likely to lie and get involved in risky situations. That is to say, giving teenagers their own space to start taking responsibilities, would decrease chances for dangerous behavior.

Teachers and parents' perspective towards peer aggression

Teachers observe their students interactions directly (Tropp-Gordon, 2015). From the teachers' perspective, the causes for school violence are context-related, and thus, out of the teachers' reach (Lopez, Carrasco, Morales, Ayala, Lopez and Karmy, 2011). Additionally, several times, teacher are not able to identify aggression situations among students (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson & Power, 1999), or do not consider them serious (Perez, 2011), which would cause the teachers' role to blur, holding students accountable for the situation, being expelled from the school system, as a means to save the school from this violence.

Regarding the parents' position for school violence, in Spain, parents consider their intervention more important that the teachers', considering even more important, a group intervention between parents and teachers (Perez, Yuste, Lucas and Fajardo, 2008). In Chile, Lopez et al. (2011) has pointed out that two types of parents have been identified: one is composed by the parents who attend school, with children who do not have difficulties, and a second group whose parents do not attend school regularly, who are held accountable for troublesome students. These parents feel their children are being individualized and considered responsible for school violence.

Family-school interaction

The main purpose of the creation of an alliance between family and school is to enhance a wholesome development of the students (Alcalay, Milicic and Toretti, 2005). Amatea (2013) states that there are three paradigms associated to the school-family alliance: (1) separation, in which the two spaces are not only separated and differentiated, but also in conflict, being the school considered as more competent to educate children; (2) recuperation, in which a family-school relationship is assumed, but shaped by the school, and (3) cooperation, which is a paradigm consisting on making family and school working as a team, solving problems together, considering that success is also the result of collaborative work between both spaces. Based on this, it can be considered that under the separation and recuperation paradigms, occasionally, the relationship between family and school is characterized by mutual disregard, lack of communication and disagreement, generating a circle of misunderstanding (Alcalay et al., 2005). This situation, as Alcalay et al. point out (2005), causes teachers to disqualify parents, who even if they want to participate, feel uncapable to do so, handing in the power to the school (Cerri, 1993).

Rivera and Milicic (2006) indicate that parents consider violence in school as an important source of

conflict. Thus, school violence situations could make relationships between parents and school even more distressful, causing an eventual break between them. If we consider school -family alliance as part of the context in which aggression occurs (Paez Martinez, 2015) being the latter the context for this interaction between human beings and their environment (Baridon, Chauvie and Martin Seoane, 2014), the need for an analysis from the ecological perspective is necessary (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

School – family alliance takes part in the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in which aggression between teenagers occurs, being both spaces macrosystems of the students. As Berger and Lisboa (2008) state, a risk factor related to the mesosystem would be lack of communication between the microsystems in which the person is developing. These authors establish, for example, that better communication between family and school allows a more positive development of the child. In this sense, it can be said that an alliance between both parts would allow joint actions that could effectively help decrease aggression situations among peers in school, promoting a better development, as long as enhancing contexts are generated for a positive environment.

Beliefs. Belies are regarded as the attitude of someone who considers something to be true, regardless of the evidence of its veracity, guiding management, comprehension and possible interventions for the situation (Quintana, 2001). Nespor (1987) states that beliefs are strong behavioral predictors, since, as mentioned by Dweck (2000), people develop them to organize their world, giving meaning to their experiences.

Beliefs regarding education are relevant, particularly when analyzing how the community actors are related among each other, and with the school. Parents believe that education given by the school will allow their children to move forward, taking part in the world (Perinat-Maceres and Tarabay-Yunes, 2008). On the other hand, teachers work based on the belief that education must impart values, focusing on a wholesome development of the individual, socializing the students, more than focusing on the academic aspects (Bosch, 2002).

Rivera and Milicic (2006) indicate that teachers and parents' beliefs regarding the role of each group in the students' education, point out to a collaborative and complementary work; disagreements arise where this job begins: for the teachers, education starts at home, where the parents need to be in charge of rules and values, seeking and granting a proper behavior in school. For the parents, these needs belong to different plans, being a collaborative work in which they take care of the children's needs keeping them studying, while the teachers educate them.

Present Study

The purpose of this research was to get closer to family and teachers' beliefs from 7th and 8th grade students, regarding peer aggression. Considering the fact that current studies about this topic are descriptive or only contemplate the students' perspective, this research proposes to add the teachers and parents' point of view, as the adults gathered together around students involved in violence situations. For this, the purpose of this study is to know the family and teachers' beliefs regarding aggression among peers in a school violence environment, and the possible common ground or tension points generated between these actors.

Design and Methodology

The design for this study is exploratory, since a closer approach to a so far non-explored topic is pursued. A qualitative methodology was used, based on the considerations of the Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2002), constructing the phenomenon along with data recollection and analysis.

Sample. The participants of the study were nine head teachers and sixteen family members from 7th and 8th grade, from three middle class private subsidized schools located in Maipu, Metropolitan region in Chile. Participants were contacted through the school institutions, explicitly indicating that their participation was volunteer. All of the participants signed a consent letter, to ensure data confidentiality.

Data collection strategies. Two deep interviews were carried out on each teacher, in order to develop a bond with the interviewee to examine their personal life experiences into deep, regarding aggression. One of the

teachers, due to time issues, was able only to be interviewed once. In the case of family members, focus groups and interviews were carried out, according to the participants' availability for each educational institution.

Results

Ideas on Development

As seen in figure 1, participants indicate an idea on the students' development which turns out to be paradoxical between autonomy and self-regulation – independence, to become distant with their families while getting closer to their peers -, and control and care, referred to as constant watch of the teenagers. Parents and teachers talk about children, even if they refer to students between 11 and 15 years old, emphasizing the importance of an adult being in charge of them. Supervision would be a way to decrease the risk of the students being exposed to problematic situations.
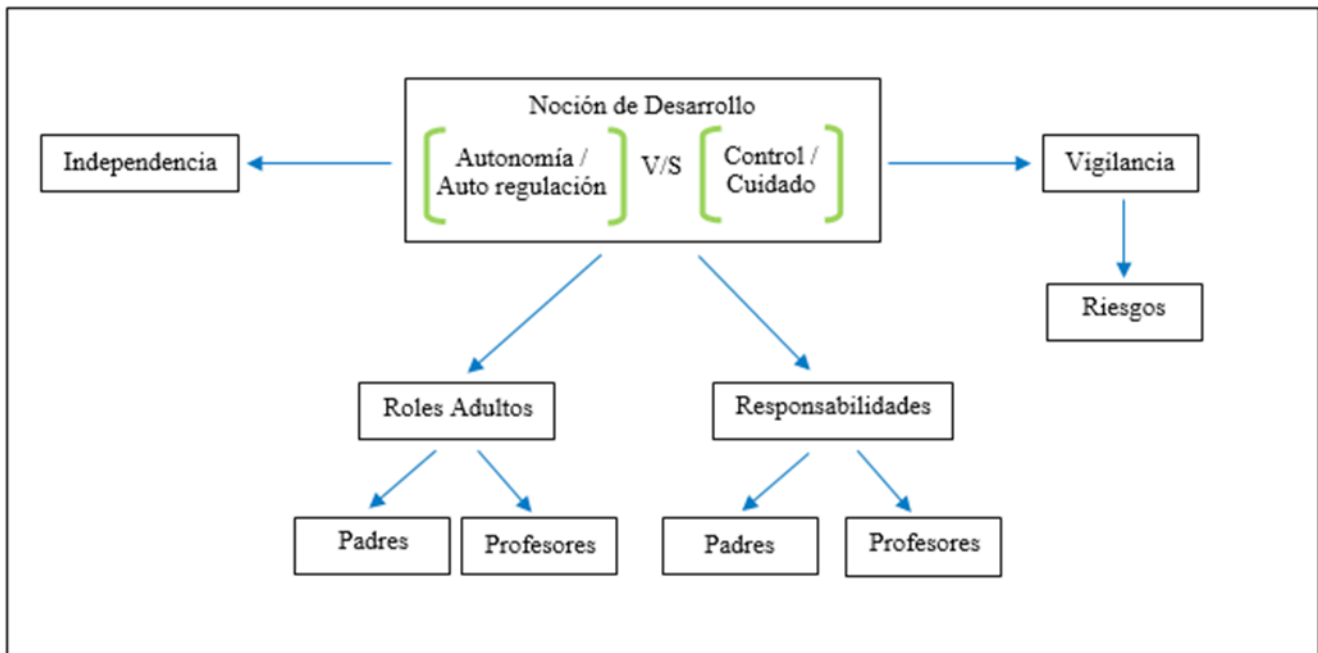

Figure 1. Ideas on development.

This has a direct effect in the roles of adults and their responsibilities. Parents assume the role of supervisors expecting other adults in their daughters and sons' lives to assume this role as well. Students are positioned in the role of children who require order and control: more control means more care and more preoccupation. At the same time, teachers expect control from the parents over their children, asking them to take care of everything related to them. According to this, the student that misbehaves is not responsible for it, since the parents are supposed to play the role of the educators in order for them not to act in this way. Same occurs regarding teachers, from the parents' perspective, inappropriate behavior occurs due to lack of control and supervision over students. From this point of view, school violence could have a careless teacher as a guilty adult who did not take care of their students.

Adult life experiences regarding aggression

Figure 2 shows a diagram about the teachers and parents' life experiences regarding aggression among students. Based on the teachers' beliefs, it is possible to identify "hopeful teachers", who even when recognizing the difficulties of the job, persist on preventing aggression, and "resigned teachers", who consider that the problem is too big and out of their reach. Resigned teachers assign the responsibility of their students'

behavior to home education, believing there is nothing they can do about it. According to the family and teachers' beliefs, there are two types of parents, the "involved parents", with a strong presence at school, associated to concern about their children, and "neglectful parents", who do not attend school, due to their jobs, to a time schedule which does not match the teachers' or, according to the participants, effectively because they are not interested, showing lack of preoccupation for their children. This group would be the responsible for school aggression, since they would educate their children to be aggressive.
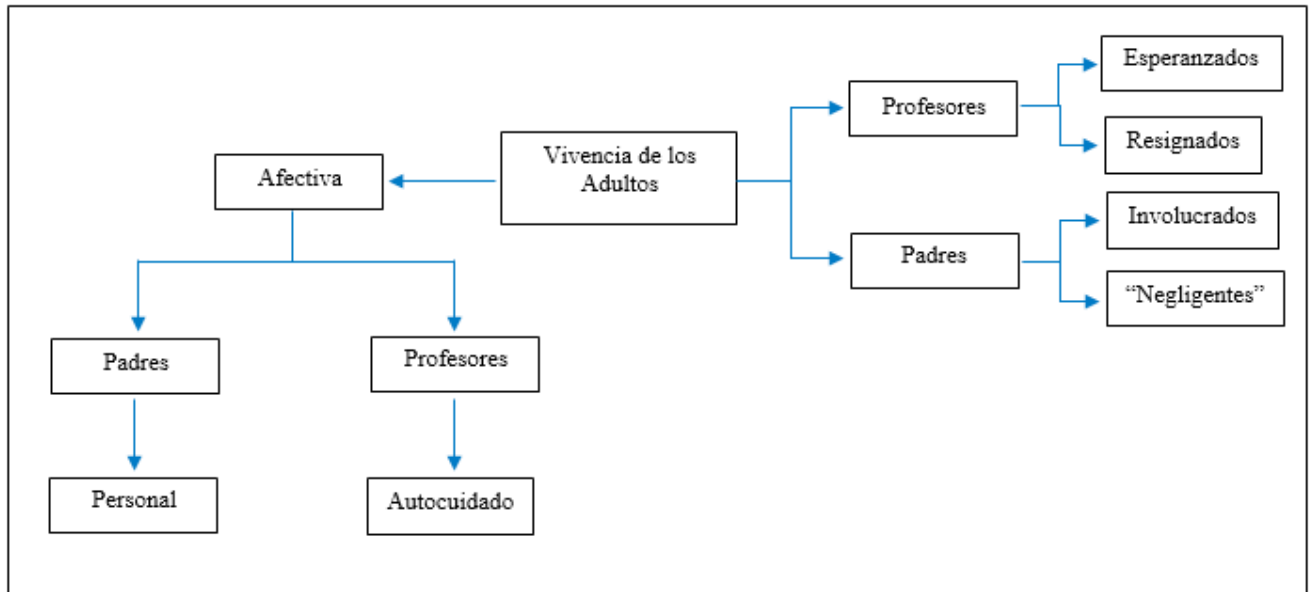
Figure 2. Adults life experiences regarding aggression

Life experiences of both actors regarding the phenomenon of aggression is affective presenting differences which identify the relationship. For the parents, a possible aggression situation is experimented personally and emotionally: they are afraid about their children's safety. For these parents, this is an urgent topic which requires immediate and absolute attention of the school community, particularly from the head teachers. For the teachers it is also an affective life experience, since they become sympathetic towards the parents, due to the fact that some of them have children of their own. However, their attitude is defensive, presumably from a selfcare stand, keeping a certain distance from the situation. Teachers portray themselves from a professional position, tensioning the relationship with the parents' need for teachers to get involved personally in the problem. Regarding this, the teacher does not fulfil the parents' expectations, interpreting this situation as lack of preoccupation and care for the students' welfare.

School perception

School – for parents – is portrayed as a dangerous space, which lacks supervision and surveillance, turning into a risky place; parents would send their children to school worried about what might happen to them during school day. To counteract this, parents establish involvement based on control; they find a way to be present at school, observing how the institution works in order to protect their children and also, others'. On the other hand, for teachers, school is a protected space, that's holds a non-violent island inserted in a context which is considered violent, being thus, an agent of change. However, school must defend itself from the environment influences, since it is inserted on the same physical space in which many of its students live. For this, the school looks to differentiate and separate itself from the context. This aloofness implies to leave negative influences out, which sometimes includes leaving parents out.

As it can be seen in figure 3, this situation causes problems regarding crossed expectations, parents seek to participate in order to protect their children in a hostile space, while the school considers itself as a safe

place, which stops being secure in the moment sociocultural environment is welcomed– being the family, the representatives of this action –.
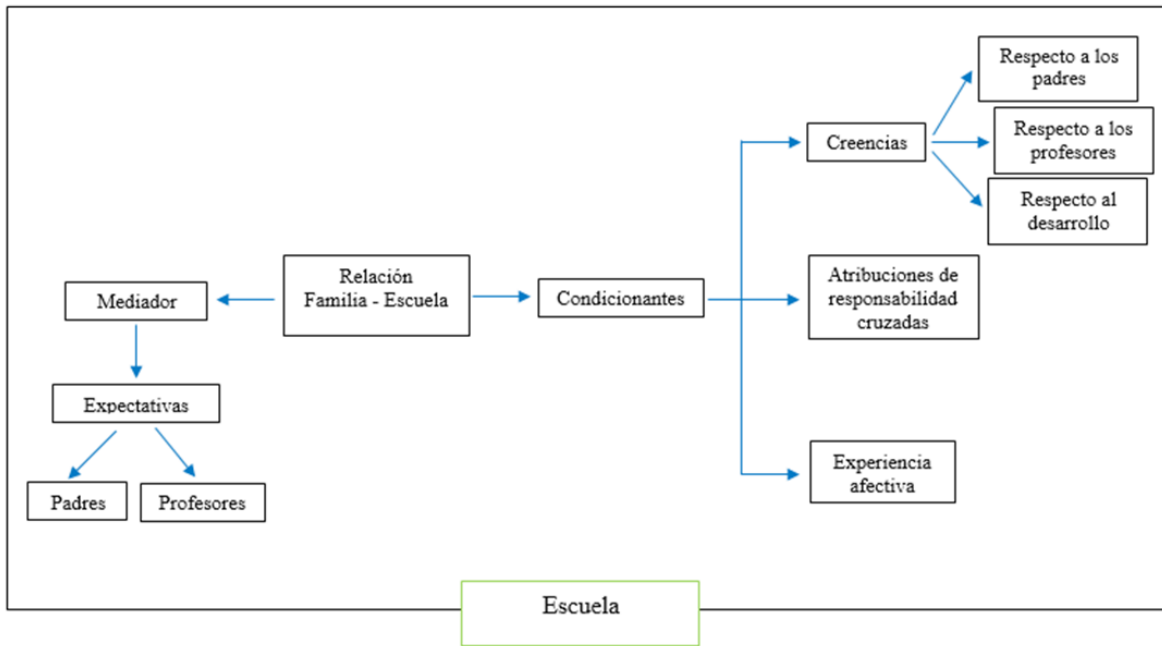

Figure 3. School Perception

Transversal phenomenon: School – Family Alliance. The School-Familly alience, as indicated in figure 4, emerges as a background phenomenon in this study, with determinants and intermediaries. The first group of determinants consist of beliefs.
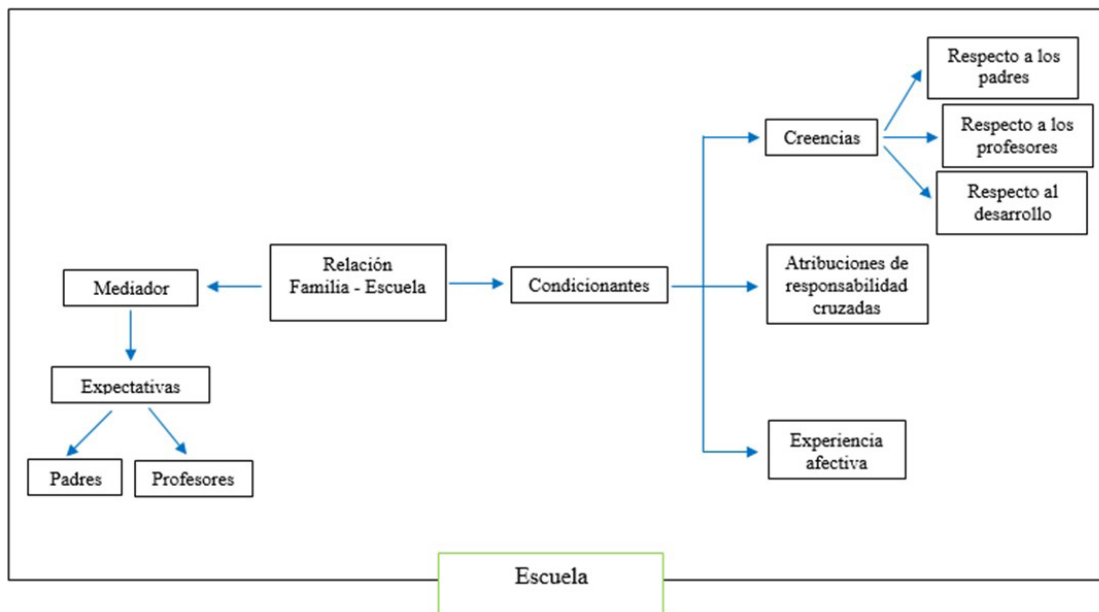

Figure 4. School-Family Alliance

Teachers maintain the belief that parents who do not attend school do not worry about their children, being responsible for their behavior and performance issues. On the other hand, parents hold the belief that teachers can handle aggression dynamics, regardless of the school support. Thus, when the teacher does not know how to handle a violent situation not reaching an appropriate solution, the actions are interpreted as lack of commitment and negligence. The last belief to be considered is related to development, in which both actors refer to and treat students as children, not teenagers. The belief that students need to be supervised to be protected from risks inside and out of the school is maintained. This causes students not to feel responsible for their own behavior, holding the teacher and family accountable for what the student does.

The latter sets as a condition, crossed responsibilities attributed to the different actors. To clarify who is guilty of the aggression situation is considered the previous step before intervention, turning into an obstacle for the resolution of the problem, since for the parents, the teacher did not avoid the situation, and for the teachers, the family educated the student in an appropriate manner.

The affective experience is established as the third condition of the school – family alliance. For both actors, the aggression situation has an emotional load, but only parents position themselves from this point of view, demanding the school to take measures against it. Teachers use the emotions to urge the resolution, but they do not show their emotionality, since it could interfere with their professional doing.

On the other hand, the school – family alliance is mediated through the expectation that both actors have on each other. Parents expect teachers to know how to handle aggression, get involved personally and to be available for them. Teachers expect family to educate the students in terms of values, to be in charge of them being responsible and to behave properly, attending to school when they are called. In this way, they do not know what the other expects from their role, but also, their own expectations do not receive responses, causing misunderstandings and disagreements. Finally, every relationship has the school as background, being the place that receives the students and in which different representations are generated for these actors.

Conclusions

School violence evidences a gap in the sociocultural structures which schooling pretends to instill (Flores, 2003). School violence has somehow become part of schools, as a form of school coexistence. However, when the perception of the actors about the school environment is considered, and thus, the role of violence in school is considered as well, the situation becomes tense. For the teacher, the school is a safe space – externalizing violence – while parents believe it is a very dangerous place. Studies show that, effectively, school has become more dangerous lately (Adimark, 2009), and for this reason, it would require constant supervision on the students. It is possible as well for the school to become a non-violent island, in an environment that shows more visible and explicit dangers, such as drug traffic, robbery and street fights, among others (Lunecke, 2009). The school would act as an agent for change, giving space for attachment and bonding relations for the students, helping to prevent risky behaviors to which teenagers are exposed daily (Alcalay, Berger, Milicic and Fantuzzi, 2012). These mismatching viewpoints regarding school, show that a part of this violence is present on a daily basis on the spaces in which these individuals interact, but that it is no longer detected. To which extent is violence naturalized in the most vulnerable contexts? Is violence being reproduced in these contexts? Is this causing the chances of being integrated into society to decrease?

The latter implies two important aspects. One the one hand, to cross – hold the actors accountable do not allow to move on in search of shared solutions, causing teachers and parents to focus on finding who is responsible, instead of focusing on the real and concrete situation of aggression that should be the main issue, and on the other hand, the vision of the students as children without responsibilities, having effects on the daily role they have, since experimentation of roles during adolescence becomes more difficult, obstructing the development of an identity of their own, separated from their parents, interfering with autonomy as well. It also forbids the possibilities of teenagers to be considered as responsible for their own actions, having a superficial vision of the problem. From this, the question then arises: in which moment, and based on which processes the teenager becomes progressively responsible of their own actions? And regarding the adults who are responsible

for them, what effects can be seen on self-perception and self-efficacy when the students get involved in risky situations, such as felonies or drug addiction?

Regarding the possibilities of collaborative work between family and teachers, Paez Martinez (2015) indicates that relationships between family and school are usually unidirectional and bureaucratic, indicating why it is so important to modify them towards more constructive and dialogic relationships. To contrarrest this, prevention and detention appear as an opportunity to deal with aggression situations. However, in order for this to happen, it is necessary to generate technical skills in schools for the programs to have an efficient implementation, useful for the schools, and to educate school community; the schools need to have the proper knowledge to intervene, since good intentions are not always enough. Schools need to educate the full school community regarding what violence is, without positioning themselves as the knowledge keepers, in contrast with the parents who would be considered ignorant regarding the topic, since this would make the gap between them even bigger.

It is important to remark that to visualize violence as normalized in the system, it is necessary to make deep changes in relationships and functions that have been established among the actors of the school system. For this, every actor needs to be available for a change. In this regard, formative spaces for the family are fundamental, creating a space in which the heads of the school educate teachers, and teachers educate parents, emphasizing the importance of this topic from the viewpoint considered as the most important for parents and the school. This could be materialized by developing strategies for class groups along with the families for early detection of aggression situations, looking for solutions collaboratively. In this way, teachers would not be alone in their job, allowing parents to actively participate, positioning both agents in new stances to relate to each other. Teachers have the chance of daily observing the students' interactions enhancing a positive classroom environment that promotes a positive coexistence (Troop-Gordon, 2015), as well as strengthening their beliefs regarding aggression, which will determine how they act against these situations (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). Based on this, interaction with families is unavoidable, and thus, it is necessary to learn how to handle aggression situations with the families, not without them. (Vasquez Huertas and Lopez-Larrosa, 2014).

Also, it is important to mention that as a good relationship between parents and family is developing, better relationships with the students are also enhanced. Baridon, Chauvie and Martin Seoane (2014) point out that students who experience aggression situations, frequently consult their friends and classmates instead of their teachers. In this way, if a model of collaborative work between family and school is transferred to the students, there an indirect intervention by promoting the development of skills and abilities among peers. In a system where problems are solved through dialogue, students are taught into doing the same; they are being taught in a model which turns them into better people within a social system.

Finally, these results allow to establish some lines of action which could improve the school – family alliance, particularly focusing on aggression situations among students. First of all, it is necessary to create a close bond between family and school, since each of them has beliefs about the other which guides their way of acting in this relationship, which is not necessarily correlated with reality. From this idealized image, expectations are generated, and when they are not fulfilled, inappropriate judgements about each other come from that, opening gaps which are difficult to overcome in time. It is imperative for both groups to know each other, generating mutual comprehension and collaborative work; the ability of both to be sympathetic to each other is key.

Secondly, the need of supporting the teacher is established. Teachers are distressed due to their daily tasks because they need to take care of a series of additional tasks to their pedagogical job. When we also add the emotional burnout generated due to the affective bond created with the students, we realize that we are facing professional whose mental health could be compromised (Aleman, Aleman and Ramirez, 2004; Extremera, Rey and Pena, 2010). In this way, it is extremely important to consider the latter from a public policy and educational management point of view, allowing a contract with more hours to work aside of the classroom in activities or spaces for selfcare. To this, we also need to add the need of handing in and enhancing tools for the teachers, in order to approach – mainly from a preventive point of view – aggression among peers, as well as

promoting guidance towards collaboration among each other, with other professionals of the institution, and the students' families, in order to handle these situations better.

In third place, the need to have protocols regarding the family participation is imperative as well. Parents are not clear about what their level of commitment should be at school, getting involved as much as they consider they must (Gubbins, 2011). This causes different levels of engagement among parents, which does not necessarily respond to the teachers' expectations. This situation causes misunderstandings and problems which could be avoided if the school pre-establishes explicitly what kind of participation they require, and also, if the idea of participation would expand among the parents (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). The school – family alliance is fundamental, but full of difficulties. If any of these can be avoided through clear and strong communications, it must be done.

The present study is limited by the fact that the parents who participated in it belong to the group which participated the most in the educational institutions. In this way, the perspective from those who are considered "negligent" by some teachers and other parents is left aside from this research, due to their difficulties to attend school. The vision of these parents could be different from the one proposed by the other parents regarding their participation. In the same way, the fact that the investigation was carried out with a qualitative methodology suggests that the results are not directly extrapolated to other contexts, due to the school level or type of institution, among others. This research contributes to the understanding of the aggression phenomenon among students of Chilean schools.

In conclusion, it must be remarked that aggression among students is a topic that affects all of the actors of the school community, since everybody, in a way or another, becomes sympathetic towards the issue. To visualize the role and consequences of these situations for every actor promotes empathy, as an opportunity to intervene efficiently, also guiding preventive work, but this task can be carried out, as long as the school and school community receive proper tools. Parents are interested on their children's welfare, but they need clear guidelines from the school in order to help, and in the same way, the school needs to receive parents as peers, not as students. Teachers and family need to know, listen and understand each other, for the school to be able to, effectively, play an instructive role in society to become agents of change towards more inclusive, democratic and fare societies.

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