

A case study from Israel

Addressing violence in schools through transforming their organisational culture

The Human Dignity Initiative, Israel, with Bernard van Leer Foundation programme staff

“As I entered the school, I saw the principal holding a pupil with one hand and speaking on the phone – probably with the pupil’s mother – with the other, attempting to convince her to take her son away, as he was throwing stones in school. The child refused to cooperate with the attempts to calm him down or to send him home, and continued shouting, spitting on the principal and the secretary and cursing the people around him. The principal requested me to wait in his room until the issue was settled. This event evoked in me extremely difficult emotions, and yet it allowed me a quick initial glance at the issues the principal has to deal with in everyday life, as well as at behaviour patterns I would encounter at school.”

Organisational consultant for the Human Dignity Initiative

Violence in schools is of great concern in Israel, as elsewhere in the world. This includes individual children behaving violently (as described above) and more general violence among and across groups of children. The Bernard van Leer Foundation is concerned with two issues related to violence in schools. One is how to protect younger children from being bullied by older ones; the second is more preventative and seeks to discover if it is possible to alter a school culture by encouraging younger children to behave differently when they reach the higher grades.

These issues form the basis for the project “Young Children and the Human Dignity Initiative”, which supplies organisational consultants to primary

schools in different parts of Israel. The project is supported by the Foundation and conceptualised and carried out by Sikkuy, an Israeli civil rights organisation. Sikkuy has introduced the Human Dignity Initiative into a range of environments in Israel. Its work in schools stimulated the Foundation to enter into shared learning about how the Human Dignity Initiative can enlist young children and improve their human environments.

The nine primary schools in the project are located in neighbourhoods that are disadvantaged socially, politically and/or economically. They present a range of challenging environments, for example:

- One school is explicitly based on ‘democratic principles’ between staff and students, with children from kindergarten onwards involved in the discussions and the voting that structures the school’s daily life. The issue in this school is how to agree on boundaries that staff, students and parents will respect.
- A Jewish religious school sees Human Dignity work as based on values enshrined in scripture, and struggles to develop appropriate behaviour based on those values for different categories of actors within the school.
- Arab schools in Israel reflect the contradictions of democratic values in the society around them. For example, Arab teachers are frequently made to wait at roadblocks and experience undignified treatment by Israeli soldiers.

Because of the different cultural contexts, the project has to seek universally acceptable norms whilst respecting diversity. Examples of such norms are the

unacceptability of corporal punishment and agreement that a situation where ‘children do not dare raise their eyes to me’ represents repression, not respect.

The project’s problem analysis does not present children as little hooligans in urgent need of discipline. Sikkuy conceives of any organisation as a complex system of relationships that must become imbued with respect for each individual’s dignity. Within a primary school, for example, Sikkuy expects the behaviour of all actors – principal, staff, parents and children – to become mutually respectful. The only new resource introduced into a school by the project is a consultant from the Human Dignity team, who, over a period of three years, is expected to mobilise and institutionalise resources for empathy and respect that are already present among the various actors within the school.

The project exemplifies Foundation thinking on early childhood, children’s rights and children’s participation because it:

- explicitly recognises the personhood and dignity of young children;
- establishes symmetrical relationships of respect between children and adults, rather than the more usual asymmetrical relationships;
- translates abstract rights – a child’s own rights as well as other people’s – into tangible everyday behaviour;
- encourages a child to understand their intrinsic value, as well as the value of another person;
- promotes early exposure to values of human dignity and related behaviour.

The Human Dignity Initiative in schools is an expression of the relations between children and children, teachers and children, teachers and teachers, and between parents and children. The value of ‘dignity’ is expressed through daily behaviors such as empathic listening, acceptance of the other, and conflict resolution through mutual respect. The opposite of human dignity is humiliation and violence. A Human Dignity programme integrates consciousness-raising of all programme participants with the creation of organisational structures that anchor awareness in concrete, visible, measurable change. (The Sikkuy team can be reached at <sikkuy@inter.net.il>)

Starting from the top

The project, which began in September 2004, illustrates the principle of starting from the top, i.e., with the school principal. Some principals were verbally aggressive towards staff and children, routinely resorting to public humiliation. “Leaders need to serve as personal models – the eyes of others in the organisation are constantly on them, assessing to what extent the leaders exemplify in their daily behaviours the values being promoted” (project documents).

Some problems ‘at the top’ included the following:

- One principal was enthusiastic about his school entering the project, but was not willing to allocate the time needed to conduct workshops for teachers, and the school ultimately withdrew from the project.
- The consultant had to cope with a principal’s use of personal power to enforce respectful relationships (a contradiction in terms). At a workshop conducted by the consultant for teachers, this principal tried to bully the consultant, but to her credit later acknowledged that this was inappropriate.
- The project was inaugurated in one school with a display of balloons on which children had written messages expressing respect, but their excitement took a little time to subside, in which short duration the principal and one teacher had already begun screaming “Where is your respect?” and “Shut up!” at the children, again not perceiving the contradiction in their behaviour.
- A school principal had begun ‘values education’ activities based on Jewish scripture that were close to the ideas of the Initiative, but he did not include teachers who removed their head covering after the school day because he did not consider them to be suitable role models.

Most principals involved in the project show a capacity to learn and to grow in respectful behaviour. They are aware of their central role. In one school, levels of violence decreased significantly after a new principal took over, even before the school joined the Human Dignity Initiative. In addition, principals may be at the apex of power within a school, but in dealing with the world outside, they too are vulnerable to the arrogant exercise of power by ‘superiors.’ There are reports

of the local government Head of Education arriving at a major meeting very late, and of an Inspector of Schools chastising a school principal in front of staff.

Alternatives to power relationships

“Often, teachers fear the child’s behaviours... The teacher’s response to this fear is to show the child who’s boss, to demonstrate to the child how strong the teacher is and how small the child is. One of the project’s purposes is to enlarge a teacher’s ability to contain the children’s behaviour and feelings, without resorting to the use of power” (project documents).

Fear of loss of authority and the need to ‘show who’s boss’ is also what motivates principals to humiliate teachers in public, and in turn moves officials from the Education Department to ‘put down’ school principals. At these levels, violence and abuse is verbal, not physical, but surveys have established the occasional use of physical violence by teachers against students. For example, in one school, the consultant noticed that teachers were carrying small sticks or short lengths of rubber hose in their briefcases. They were apparently using these ‘weapons’ to threaten children and maintain order. According to informal chats between the consultant and students, some of the teachers actually used them to punish unruly children. During a workshop, the consultant worked with the teachers on different ways to confront bad behaviour, and the issue of the sticks and hoses came up. The teachers reluctantly acknowledged that corporal punishment contradicts human dignity, so the consultant asked the teachers to demonstrate their commitment to dignity by depositing the hoses and sticks in a wastebasket. Everyone complied.

The sticks and hoses clearly served a purpose and apparently gave the teachers a sense of security. The consultant’s act was bold, but would it have been better if the principal had done it? The consultant felt that the principal’s tenuous authority with the staff had prevented his taking such action. When a defence mechanism is challenged (and here, taken, in one dramatic moment), the teachers should be provided with new tools and abilities for confronting the fears that prompted the earlier carrying of ‘weapons.’ The next step is for the consultant to explore with the teachers how they might maintain order without using threats of corporal punishment.

Avoiding verbal abuse

Irritated teachers, in the heat of the moment, may be tempted to use verbal abuse, such as: “When God distributed brains, he skipped you” or “I knew you wouldn’t get it”. Many teachers are convinced that empathy, listening and understanding are not compatible with maintaining order and setting limits, asking “What do we need all this soft stuff for?” or “How can we be empathic towards a kid who hits other kids or who uses profane language?” Project activities have prompted animated discussions about the place of empathy in setting limits. For example:

- A teacher remembered her childhood and being hurt by her teacher’s authoritarian style. She told the group that gaining an understanding of her own experiences has helped her to change her approach to students. At first she opposed listening empathically to a violent child, but later agreed to listen to the child without necessarily condoning the bad behaviour.
- Another teacher reported a successful shift to a facilitative style, and that shortly after “a child asked me how I am feeling, something that has never happened in the past”.
- During a workshop on ‘dignified’ and ‘undignified’ behaviour, one teacher cried, later reporting that she had realised that her marital relationship was not based on human dignity. She raised the subject with her husband and they resolved the ensuing crisis. The school principal saw this as demonstrating the project’s success. The project consultant commented: “I was flattered that I had managed to reach people with the message, although I had not intended that the workshops should affect relationships in this way”.

Encouraging teachers to analyze difficult situations

Difficult situations can be analyzed along the lines of ‘event–thought–reaction–outcome.’ A teacher reported feeling offended and angry when a parent upbraided her for not giving a child a solo role in a play, although no solo roles had been assigned so that all children could participate equally. The example was used in a workshop to analyze how a negative event could be made to yield positive outcomes through a reaction based on careful thought in the split seconds available. Fairly soon afterwards, a meeting was held, in the presence of the principal and the inspector of schools, between a



Photo: Courtesy SIKUY

Parents and students team up to define guidelines for dignified behaviour.

teacher and some parents who had filed a complaint against her. The teacher used the ‘event–thought–reaction–outcome’ analysis and presented her version of the situation in a manner that generated a workable solution.

When teachers use respectful behaviour and use strategies that facilitate problem analysis, anger management and development of empathy, it has had a positive effect on the children. For example:

- A kindergarten teacher interrupted a physical fight between two children and asked them to sit down and discuss the cause of their dispute, in what way each of them had been responsible for it, and what could be done differently the next time such a conflict arose. The two returned calmly, with an agreed analysis, and became friends again.
- Children in one school did not seem to have a vocabulary for discussing emotions. This seemed part of a wider communication problem. The

teachers exclaimed: “We never realised how little we listen to the kids, how little we know about them, because we never really talk to them”. Clear measures of progress have been developed, for example: “At the end of first grade (age 6), children will be able to identify and name their feelings”.

- A child may be told: “Yossi listened when you spoke, now you must listen when he speaks”. Children are encouraged to develop the ability to restrain themselves and to experience the accomplishment of having done so.
- Schoolyard play can be characterised by indiscipline, even anarchy, and serious injuries can be sustained. Younger children fear violence and bullying by the older ones. In one setting, play areas were divided according to age, and each week one class took responsibility to prepare a special activity for the others. Teachers found ways to make supervision more effective without increasing their ‘on duty’ time.

Positive situations do not emerge automatically, and teachers have to develop facilitative skills. A fourth-grade student once asked for the responsibility of distributing bread at lunch break to his class, but then announced that he would keep the sack of bread for himself. When reasoning failed, the teacher snatched the sack from him and he ran out of class, humiliated. Teachers analysed this incident at a workshop, in terms of possible alternative behaviour for the teacher, for example sending another child to the neighbouring class for additional bread that could be distributed to the hungry children and then talking to the errant boy without the pressure of immediate action.

When children go home

Encouraging the adults in the children's school environment to behave respectfully towards them is an important part of the Human Dignity project, but adults in the home environment need to do the same to reinforce the message of positive behaviour.

Although the project has no direct involvement with the home environment, the changed attitudes at school can sometimes exert a change at home. For example:

- A father was telephoned by the school to say that his son was behaving badly. His response was: "So hit the kid and he'll get the message". Teachers sometimes hesitate to contact parents whose children are in trouble for fear of such a response. However, in another school, a child reported that after a classroom discussion of human dignity, he went home and told his father what he had learned, and the father then said that he would never hit the child again.
- Even before the Human Dignity project, schools had made efforts to deal better with parents, for example by encouraging home visits by teachers and appointments for parents with staff. One school had a standard letter of praise to parents whose children did well. Generally, however, where such positive mechanisms for interaction existed, their use was not sufficient to generate any strong momentum.
- At a parents' evening in one school, the staff decided to go beyond the conventional presenting of children's grades. Instead, they tried to empathise with parents who came in feeling defensive about their parenting, and to use the

meetings to foster personal contact. Staff reported considerable improvement in the quality of the meetings.

The struggle continues

This description of the project focuses on the positive processes of organisational change that have occurred in schools. However, such change is often not achieved easily. Consultants' reports from all nine schools emphasise the considerable challenges associated with their efforts to bring about change. Project assessments are expected from the nine schools at the end of the project period in late 2007 and a subsequent analysis will be reported a year later. The ensuing documents will present the lessons learned concerning what has worked under certain conditions, and what has not worked. It will be interesting to see what happens when the children aged 5–8 years at the beginning of the project reach the higher grades and begin to set the tone through their behaviour to younger children.

A view from the Oak Foundation **Protecting children from violence and abuse**

Florence Bruce, Senior Programme Officer, and Fassil Marriam, Regional Programme Coordinator, East Africa; Child Abuse Programme, Oak Foundation

The term 'child protection' is used in various ways. In some parts of the world it has been used in a narrow sense to identify the action taken by the state to remove children from environments that are violent, abusive and exploitative. Today, however, the term is being expanded. For example, in contexts of war or natural disasters, it can include programmes that offer education, play and recreation, providing structures and activities that help children regain a sense of normal life. The notion of 'protection' thus takes a much wider meaning than simply protection from harm or abuse.

In some countries (e.g., the UK), the term 'child protection' is being used in a more positive way "to place it alongside approaches which emphasise childhood resilience and strength" (Parton 2006). Early intervention programmes are an example. This changing context places protection much closer to the notion of prevention.

Oak's programme on child abuse is targeted specifically at sexual abuse (a cross-cutting form of violence to children that excludes no sector of the population) and sexual exploitation of children in exchange for cash or in kind (goods, benefits, advantages, etc.). The two are linked intimately in the lives of many children around the world and in many programmes they are considered together. For example, a child domestic worker who is sexually abused by her employer's family may have no option when thrown out of the home but to sell sex on the streets.

"Sexually abused children do not stand out in a crowd", Oak was told¹ and there is no easily recognisable target group needing support. Nor are

the sexual abusers of children easily identifiable. They are mainly men but, as we are now finding out, a large percentage of them are children under 18. Many of the victims of sexual abuse go undetected for years or even forever, if they do not seek help. This is why primary prevention programmes are still necessary and why the Oak Foundation aims to mainstream a concern for sexual abuse into existing agencies' work in a number of fields (such as education, domestic work, children about to leave care and community development). However, for mainstreaming to be successful, good preliminary data on the issue is needed, as well as relevant training programmes for agencies that may be willing to mainstream child protection concerns but may not necessarily have the appropriate skills to do so.

The problem of sexual exploitation of children is more visible, but the children may not be accessible to the services trying to help them. Where they are accessible, it is very difficult to help them to leave prostitution and to find alternatives. All too often, they simply 'graduate' into adult prostitution or die of AIDS.

The phenomenon of child sexual abuse images on the internet is one of the most abject forms of child abuse and exploitation. The legal framework across countries is currently piecemeal and serious data is in short supply. While police in some countries are becoming more efficient in tracking down consumers and suppliers, in many places little is known about the culprits and how they operate. Similarly, the motivation that makes men seek out young girls is little understood, although some work is being done in this area (e.g., ILO/IPEC 2004).