Abstract:
This study analyzes the magnitude of violence reported by elementary and secondary students in Mexico in the document entitled, “Discipline, Violence and the Consumption of Harmful Substances at Elementary and Secondary Schools in Mexico”, presented by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education. The data are compared with international information on the magnitude of observed school violence, and alternatives are suggested for exploring the problem at school, based on the results of the analyzed report. Considering the reservations indicated in the article, the comparison identifies countries that report lesser and greater proportions of violence among their students.

Keywords: school violence, elementary education, comparative analysis, Mexico.

Introduction
Violence is a topic of interest throughout the world, and particularly in Mexico. The media devote extensive space to spreading information about extremely violent events in different parts of the nation. Opinion leaders, social analysts, and politicians express their concern about the situation, contributing to sharpen the impression in the collective imagination that violence is growing exponentially, in an uncontrolled manner, in all aspects of social life.

On the other hand, one of the dominant themes in the discourse of the first year of this presidential administration (2006-2012) incorporated the reference to violence, thus seeming to intend to influence Mexican families’ perception of security through programmatic strategies with suggestive names, such as “Llimpiemos México” (“Let’s Clean Up Mexico”) and “Rescate de espacios públicos” (“Rescue of Public Spaces”).

In consonance with this discourse, in February of 2007, the “Escuela Segura” (“Secure Schools”) program was presented. The program aims at converting schools into “places free from violence, delinquency, and addictions” (SEP, 2007). Its perspective is to focus, at least at the beginning, on the 45 municipalities that concentrate 58% of the nation’s criminal indexes. The clear implication is an association between criminal behavior and policies to prevent violence at school.

Educational policy seems to have addressed the topic from a perspective of criminal violence associated with illegal behaviors. Although other countries have performed studies that explore violence in schools, such as the study directed in 2003 by the Department of Justice in Canada (which sought to establish the impact of crime prevention programs) and studies carried out in France, Israel, and other countries that explore the relation between school violence and criminal behavior (Avilés, 2002; Soen, 2002), the topic has been analyzed more as a dimension of the interaction among school agents, particularly students, in the daily context at school. This perspective relates the concept of violence with school bullying. The distinction is important because this focus has been the principal generator of the available knowledge on school violence.

In this context, and taking into consideration that the magnitude of school violence has been established with precision in a national study by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE)—discussed below—reflection is necessary from various perspectives on diverse topics. One of these topics is the degree to which violence is present in comparison with other parts of the world;
another need is to identify possibilities for enriching and increasing the precision and scope of information in the mentioned report.

Such is the idea behind the study described here. As a result, a documentary review has been made of reports on research similar to that of INEE—research that attempts to explore the proportion of students who participate in acts of violence as aggressors or as victims, especially by means of samples that attempt to explain the phenomenon in nations or regions. The objective of the comparison is to locate the results available in Mexico with respect to results published in other contexts.

The Study by INEE
Violence at school or bullying is a complex problem made manifest in very diverse manners, independent from the criminal connotations or possible links with crime. Various types of violence and diverse typologies classify violence. The specialists agree that the definition of violence is not easy, partly because of the cultural variations regarding what is considered a violent act, and the various meanings and interpretations acquired by individual actions in complex human interaction.

In Mexico, the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Aguilera, Muñoz and Orozco, 2007) recently published the results of a study called *Discipline, Violence and the Consumption of Harmful Substances in Elementary and Secondary Schools in Mexico*. These results provide data on the magnitude of violence in the nation’s elementary and secondary schools, as experienced and reported by students and teachers. To this information, INEE adds its reading of the manifestation of violence, and data about the school, family, and school context, based on information provided by the actors themselves.

Research on the topic began in Europe in the 1970s. Today we have numerous international studies available, and valuable theoretical contributions have been made for understanding the phenomenon of school violence. In the Ibero-American regions, for example, we have the work of Miriam Abramovay, in Brazil; Alfredo Furlan and Sylvia Ortega, in Mexico; and Rosario Ortega, in Nicaragua and Spain. In Norway and the Anglo-Saxon world, outstanding studies are by Dan Olweus (the initiator of research on the topic) and Peter K. Smith in England; in Asia, the work by Johi and Morita and Mitsuri Taki.

The INEE study in Mexico is valuable, among other reasons, because it permits a dimensioning—in representing the frequency—and a transversal perspective of the problem of violence in elementary and secondary schools throughout the nation. In addition, it offers descriptions of what happens in specific secondary schools, integrating the results of a large-scale approach (quantitative) into the results of a small-scale approach (qualitative). The study’s results encourage careful reflection on the variety of implications for associated aspects, and stimulate a view of the topic in the context of Mexican schools.¹

The results of INEE’s large-scale approach can be generalized to the Mexican educational system, as well as to the principal types or strata into which educational service is divided. In the case of elementary school, there are urban, rural, and community schools, and private institutions, and in the case of secondary school, there are general and technical schools, schools with distance learning or tele-secondary schools, and private schools. In national educational research on the topic, no precedent complies with this important characteristic in exploring the phenomenon.

Brief Reference to the Definition of Violence
Strong debate surrounds the definition of violence. Diverse applications exist and some individuals defend, even from that perspective, that the nature of the phenomenon varies substantially in different cultures, at least in certain manifestations (Taki, 2001). In spite of these differences, agreement exists to a greater or lesser degree on the meanings of violence—meanings that research has helped to construct.
At a conference on policy and research on the topic, organized in Norway in 2004 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the participating nations published a document stating that the definitions of violence typically refer to the “unfair or abusive exercise of power, particularly when it is repeated and systematic” (OECD, 2004:3). These countries recognized the existence of “gray areas” in terms of disagreeable or disrespectful behaviors’ becoming violence, even when they are smaller in size but repetitive.

Upon analyzing three definitions of violence: one from the encyclopedia, another from an authority on the topic (Olweus), and yet another from the World Health Organization, Smith (s/f) affirms that these concepts have two points in common: first, that violence causes some type of damage—physical, psychological, material, etc.—or at least threatens to cause damage; and second, that violence is intentional (accidental damage would therefore not apply). The same author warns that in general, the definitions of violence differ in five aspects:

1) If violence refers only to the physical plane or includes other manifestations;  
2) If violence refers only to people or also to objects and facilities;  
3) If violence refers to an open manifestation or also to the possibility of violence (threat of manifestation);  
4) If the exercise of violence is justified “legally” or not, to control students or individuals who commit disruptive or even illegal acts; and  
5) If violence is exercised by an individual or can be exercised impersonally by a group of individuals or even an institution, such as a school, through regulations, practices, or habits in relation to the way people are treated.

This diversity in the definition’s implications from the linguistic point of view also exists in disciplinary and even historical terms, as indicated by Sanmartín (2006). In addition, one of the central aspects of the concepts of violence as identified by Smith is not necessarily complied with in certain ways of defining the term. For example, the impersonal violence exercised by a group of individuals or an institution may not be intentional since it has structural or cultural origins; however, it is aggressive toward individuals with practices, norms, or habits. Therefore, a definition that is widely accepted by specialists is still far from being attained.

In spite of the above, in another study we propose a classification of the basic types or forms of violence that exist specifically among students (Ruiz and Muñoz, at press). These types or forms are aggression, whether physical, which can be direct, in the form of blows, kicks, etc., directed to a person, and indirect in the case of damages or the theft of personal objects; or verbal, which can be face-to-face or with the use of diverse media like letters, notes, messages, Emails and/or text messages, in which the aggressor may or may not be identified; and social, which consists of the spreading of rumors that seek to damage the victim by generating a negative social perception, promoting a label or prejudice among group members, social exclusion that limits the victim’s acceptance in the peer group; and ridicule. Some authors identify the additional dimension of psychological aggression and its association with the affectionation of self-esteem or the manifestation of fear. In our opinion, this final dimension affects all the forms of aggression previously listed, since the impact can be a consequence of any form. The INEE report concentrates on some of these manifestations of violence or bullying.

Exploration of the Magnitude of Violence: Some Alternatives on a Road Not Traveled
The objectives of the INEE study are clearly of a descriptive nature. In general, the study’s purpose was to characterize some of the traits of violence in the nation’s elementary and secondary schools by
exploring the phenomenon. In other words, the basic aim was not to measure associations among the variables or find partial explanations of the phenomenon, although its implicit purpose may have been to stimulate reflection in this direction.

Three facts were observed in the students’ responses, as indicated in the report:

1) The number of students who report participating in violent acts is relatively small.
2) More elementary than secondary school students admit participating in acts of violence.
3) Students who admit participating in acts of violence are less numerous than those who affirm they are victims of violence, as seen in Graph 1 (a and b).

Specifically with respect to the magnitude of violence, INEE indicates that in spite of the presence of the problem, “the data suggest in general, a very low incidence of the problems addressed” (Aguilera, Muñoz and Orozco, 2007:36). This statement is of course based on a very broad perspective: approximately 20 million students in the nation’s elementary and secondary schools, and with strict adherence to the frequency of response of those who accepted participating in violence in comparison with those who did not. The report indicates that high percentages manifestations of violent acts were reported in some cases, although these cases were a minority. This conclusion encourages further reflection.

INEE’s approach has some methodological annotations. Because of the characteristics of the instrument used to address the phenomenon (a questionnaire “about context”, which included questions on various aspects, such as violence) and because of the magnitude of the information obtained (from almost 48 thousand elementary students and slightly more than 52 thousand secondary students, as well as approximately 22 thousand elementary teachers and 6 thousand secondary school teachers), capturing the complexity and wealth of the phenomenon was complex. Involved aspects were student motivations, feelings and situations associated with violent behavior, the impact on victims, the varied possibilities of aggression toward classmates, the places where aggression primarily occurs, the ways students experience these situations, and so on.

GRAPH 1 (A AND B)
Percentage of Students Who Participated in and Were Victims of Violence in Elementary and Secondary School

1A Participation in Violence
Note: In the last two questions, the percentage is not zero. The INEE report does not present the data because the variables were not grouped through the analysis of principal components.

Source: By author based on INEE (2007).

Due to the specific aspects of the approach, not all of the possible manifestations of aggression were explored, especially the most subtle. Thus the conclusion must be broadened and the study made more precise from the viewpoint of new approaches, by including manifestations of violence at school like indirect aggression (verbal or social), which uses various media, such as notes, messages, Email, and cell phone messages in some contexts—especially in secondary school—as well as the content of that type of aggression; or, on the other hand, the relation of aggression to students’ personal characteristics, the spreading of rumors about classmates, damage done to belongings, and other actions.

The Cisneros Study (Oñate y Piñuel y Zabala, 2006) identified twenty-five forms of manifesting violence towards classmates at school; these forms are included in Table 1. Almost all of them are “less evident” than those mentioned in most studies. The different types of violence in this classification may not be mutually exclusive in the analytical sense, but they have the advantage of identifying a complex set of violent manifestations at school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violent Behaviors Against Other Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calling someone a nickname</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accusing someone of things he has not done or said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not letting someone play with the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitating someone to ridicule him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not letting someone speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making someone cry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealing someone’s things</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Taken from: Oñate y Piñuel y Zabala (2006).
The particular meaning that some of the actions in this classification have in certain contexts can always vary. In some locations, a sporadic manifestation of low intensity of one of these behaviors, under certain circumstances would probably be considered student entertainment rather than an act of violence. Therefore, setting the point where an act becomes aggression is one of the challenges of an analytical, classifying exercise.

Olweus (in Benítez and Justicia, 2006) establishes a reference for the above: a minimum frequency of one time per week and a minimum duration of six months. We find this criterion somewhat arbitrary.

The INEE report presents various analyses of the manifestations of violence as a function of aspects of different levels: aspects relative to students, such as sex or age; aspects relative to the class, such as sanctions received due to lack of respect for the teacher; aspects relative to the family, such as the frequency the parents know when their child is not in school, or the student’s perception of conflict in family relations. Other data correspond to the school, such as the degree of academic demands, and the student’s perception of institutional discipline, or aspects relative to the type of school the student attends.

These comparisons in the INEE study led to some significant variations in observed violence—variations that suggest relevant aspects that need to be studied. The study found, for example, that being a male, having failed a grade (and therefore being older than the group) or having low grades, having changed schools, revealing a level of conflict in family relations, and having been punished for disrespect to the teacher, are characteristics of most of the students who admitted having participated in violence or having been a victim of violence.

Based on these findings, studies must be designed and carried out in Mexico to take available techniques into account that permit identifying the magnitude of each variable (involving student, classroom, school, type of school, etc.). In this manner, studies can contribute to explaining the magnitude of violent behaviors observed, or to constructing a hierarchy of the importance of these variables in terms of the predictive power of the violent behavior. This is possible with techniques of multilevel analysis applied to a set of data grouped by different criteria. Thus a contribution can be made to establishing the magnitude with which certain individual variables—previously identified in the INEE study—explain the variations in students’ manifestation of violent behaviors.

In other countries, projects from this perspective have already been carried out. For example, the Institute of Criminal Research in the German state of Niedersachsen obtained information from approximately 23 thousand students in 2005 about school climate and violent behaviors at school; most of the students (17,021 students) were in ninth grade and a minority was in fourth grade (6,142). By applying these techniques, the researchers found that the most important predictors for accepting violence as a type of interaction and for exposing one’s self to violence in the media (videogames, movies, etc.) are individual characteristics. Other important predictors are precedents of family violence (Möble, Kleimann and Rehbein, 2008).

Using the same analytical tool and the same database as the previous study, but concentrating on fourth-grade students, Simonson (2008) found that some characteristics of class composition, specifically the proportion of immigrant students and the proportion of students with parents with little education, explain observed violence in a significant manner; in addition, some behaviors of the parents’ child-raising and the existence of domestic violence were also predictive variables of the phenomenon among students.
On the other hand, the tendency for more elementary students than secondary students to participate in violent acts has also been observed in other countries. For example, a study by the National Institute for Children’s Psychology and Psychopathology and the National Center for Drug Monitoring in Slovakia observed practically the same tendency (Nociar, 2008). Some alternatives for explaining this tendency are that the phenomenon is manifest in greater proportions in the younger generations; or as INEE points out, secondary school students are more reluctant to incriminate themselves. However, given the exploratory nature of the approaches, it is unwise to make inferences in this regard.

The School Context is Key in Understanding Violence Within

As pointed out, the INEE report contains the results of two approaches: one large-scale and the other, small-scale. Given the nation’s size and diversity, as well as the nature of a large-scale approach, the conclusion of the students’ report of the magnitude of violence does not reflect the angles and uniqueness of specific contexts; in addition, the social problems that surround the school may be associated with the manifestation of certain forms of violence within the school. The small-scale approach mentioned in the INEE report, however, which was carried out in twenty secondary schools in five states of Mexico (and explored, among other aspects, the characteristics of the disciplinary system of the visited schools and some of the most visible violent behaviors among students), offers data that link the school’s context with violent behaviors. For example, verbal and physical aggression is more evident in schools of marginal contexts (Aguilera, Muñoz and Orozco, 2007:151); the observation was also made that in two cases in which a tendency was detected for students to form part of gangs, the school personnel was clearly aware of the presence of such groups around the institution (Aguilera, Muñoz and Orozco, 2007:154). Other approaches in Mexico consider the school context; most of these studies were carried out in the Federal District and Estado de México.

For example, a study completed in 2002 by Velázquez (Velázquez, 2005) in nine preparatory schools in eight municipalities of Estado de México (five public schools and four private schools), presents students’ opinions of violence, which they consider a central topic at school. One student refers to his experience as “hell”; others indicate that violence was a “very serious problem” when they were in secondary school, and that it was sometimes a reason for changing schools.

Ortega et al. (2005) provide data from Mexico City, from the 2003 Survey of Addictions from the National Psychiatry Institute and the Unit of Attention to Mistreatment and the Sexual Abuse or Children. The article points out that 28.3% of the boys and 23.4% of the girls report that “many robberies occur right outside school”, an undoubtedly worrisome figure. The authors also indicate that 30.9% of the boys and 23% of the girls believe that their schoolmates are “dangerous”. This information shows that in certain urban areas, the issue is cause for alarm.

Tello (2005) describes the social scenario of schools that report violent behaviors:

The presence of certain elements that are now seen as contributors to violence and insecurity, like graffiti, even on school walls; stores with bars on the windows and small and dark rooms, with video games; pool halls, liquor stores, Internet cafés—used mainly to connect to sexual experiences and pornographic films, and occasionally to sites that sell summaries and homework; and vegetable stands or grocery stores that hide beer sales to teenagers, repeat and characterize the conformation of secondary schools in low-class neighborhoods (Tello, 2005:1169).

However, this is not the only scenario that favors manifestations of violence at school. Research on the topic has shown that violence is not limited to unfavorable social contexts or specific groups, but can
be gestated in all social groups (Defensor del Pueblo, 2007). INEE also found in the large-scale study that the students who most admit to having participated in acts of violence in secondary school are students at private schools.

In spite of the above, a generalized tendency is that the teachers who perceive most violence outside of school also point to violence within the institution. A strong correlation between the indexes of violence inside and outside of school is presented in the INEE report. In that correlation, shown in Graph 2, we see that some percentages are very close to one hundred and also report high levels of violence around the school. At such schools, the problem is definitely perceived as very serious.

Because of the above, the school’s social context seems to occupy a place of high importance in the manifestation of the phenomenon of violence. In this respect, a study directed by the University of Bergen in Norway, from 1997 to 2002, with students aged eleven to fifteen, concludes that victims and aggressors are involved in different types of dysfunctional relations with their family, peers, school and community (Carvalhosa and Samdal, 2008).

Graph 2 shows that few teachers report very high levels in their perception of violence from a system perspective; on the contrary, most indicate low levels.

The above reveals the need to design qualitative approaches that explore the nature of the social processes associated with the violence or harassment that filter into the school, the mechanisms of filtration, and the way the school incorporates, detains, addresses, or even capitalizes on the social manifestations associated with violence in formative terms. It is important to discover individual experience and the meanings individuals construct around the aggressive behaviors and attitudes made manifest in varying intensity within schools. INEE reports that only approximately two students out of ten bother their classmates. Yet since little evidence exists on the unique way schools are affected, it is important to develop this type of approach.

Does Mexico have a greater proportion of manifestations of violence than other countries, communities, or regions?
Another way to explore the frequency of the problem is to compare the data from the INEE report with data obtained in other contexts. When data are not produced by research designed for this end, the corresponding analyses should be seen with reserve, in light of the varying social conditions, educational systems, methodological approaches, and cultural dynamics of the country. In this regard, Benítez and Justicia (2006) indicate that the differences in the percentages of participation in violence and victimization can be due to the diverse forms of defining the concept, the differences in the instruments used, and the characteristics of the sample.

However, once these reserves are established, comparisons of the results of independent projects do not limit the exploratory and analytical power of comparing studies that measure the proportion of manifestations of violence at school, in the absence of strictly comparable data in different contexts or for all cases.

Some transnational studies (cfr. Olweus, 1984 and Morita, 2001) make technically valid comparisons of data from different countries, and have not found significant differences (Carney and Merrel, in Benítez and Justicia, 2006). Other projects, however, have found important differences.

The HBSC Survey and INEE Results

The literature on the topic emphasizes two interlinked studies, known as the HBSC survey because of the name of the coordinating group (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Bullying Analyses Working Group). The first study included twenty-five countries or regions and collected information from students aged eleven to sixteen. The data correspond to the 1997-1998 school year, and the same testing instrument was used for all. Except in Greenland (where the survey was applied like a census), a two-stage sample design was used: first for schools, and then for students within each selected school in each nation. Originally, 28 nations transmitted information, although three of them did not provide sufficient data on the sampling units to allow consideration in comparative analyses. The average sample size was 4,528 students, ranging from 1,648 to 1,567.

One of the relevant conclusions of this study is the existence of a very important variation—which Tonja et al. (2004) describe as “dramatic differences”—among the percentages of students who are involved in school violence in the participating nations; the proportions range between 9% and 54%. Graph 3 shows the proportion of students involved in situations of violence, whether as aggressors, victims, or both, in the designated countries or regions.

Finland, Greece, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Slovak Republic, Scotland, Republic of Ireland, Sweden, and England have a frequency of this phenomenon of less than 20%. In fact, Sweden reports approximately 10% and England, slightly more. Countries reporting a frequency between 20% and 30% are Norway, Poland, the Czech Republic, the United States, Portugal, Canada and Hungary; while those with frequencies greater than 30% are Israel, Switzerland, Belgium (Dutch-speaking, Flemish), Latvia, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greenland, and Lithuania.

As indicated, in Mexico, 17% of the elementary students mention having been hurt physically. That proportion is similar to the set of students from Latvia, Germany, Greenland, and Lithuania who were victims of bullying.

The percentage of Mexican students in secondary school who have been the victim of physical violence is 14%, similar to Denmark, Switzerland, and Israel.

On the other hand, the percentage of Mexican elementary students who have been the aggressor is 19%, very similar to the percentage reported by the Danes and Germans; in secondary school, this percentage is approximately one-half (11%), and is similar to that observed in the United States, Canada, Hungary, and Israel.
From a general perspective, the statement could be made that in this comparison, Mexican students are involved in actions in which there is physical aggression in proportions similar to those observed in bullying in countries that have a relatively greater frequency of the phenomenon.

According to Graph 3, a relatively consistent trend is that a greater percentage of students mention having been victims rather than perpetrators of acts of violence, as also reported by the INEE project with data provided by Mexican students. The countries that do not seem to follow this pattern are Austria, Germany, Belgium, and the United States.

Subsequent to the above study, the same research group carried out a project with similar methodology during the 2005-2006 school year. This study centered on exploring the inequality of services provided to teenagers; the results were recently published. The participants in this new version were 41 nations or regions—twelve more than in the previous exercise. Part of the obtained information corresponds to a dimension of bullying that specifically asked students about their participation in fights.
Graph 4 shows the percentage of students aged thirteen who participated in fights on at least three occasions during the previous twelve months, in the designated group of countries and regions. The data from this graph are comparable to the percentage of participants in fights among elementary school students in Mexico since the information was obtained from sixth-grade students, who have an average age of thirteen. In this case, the comparison is considered to have a higher degree of legitimacy than in the previous case. The nature of the students’ action that is the object of study is practically the same. The Mexican students were asked if they had struck blows in fistfights during the school year, while the previous study compared bullying with participation in fights. As indicated, fights are one of the important indicators of bullying, although certainly not the only indicator. The observation in Mexico, as well as in most of the countries or regions, is that significant differences exist between the boys and girls.

The proportion of Mexican elementary students is similar to that observed among the boys of Iceland, Luxembourg, Lithuania, and France. The secondary school percentage is compared with the fifteen-year-olds in the study (Graph 5), since the approximate average age of students in the third year of secondary school in Mexico is fifteen. These students answered the questions from INEE. The results are similar to those of boys in Israel, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, and Sweden.
Percentage of Thirteen-year-old Males and Females in Various Countries Who Have Participated in Fights at Least Three Times in the Past Twelve Months

Source: Currie et al. (2008).
GRAPH 5
Percentage of Fifteen-year-old Males and Females in Various Countries Who Have Participated in Fights at Least Three Times in the Past Twelve Months

Source: Currie et al. (2008).
Other Studies and the Results of INEE

Additional comparisons with other studies made in various nations are presented in Table 2, which shows the magnitude of violence with important variations. The average percentage of elementary and secondary school students who affirmed having struck blows in fistfights (aggressors) in Mexico is 15% for both educational levels, and the percentage of students who affirmed having been the victim of physical violence at both educational levels is 15.5%. With these data, the assumption can be made that the Mexican situation is of lesser magnitude than that of Turkey and the United States, greater than that of Japan and Norway, and relatively similar to that of England, Holland and Korea, although with slightly higher percentages of victims and aggressors than these final three nations. Since Smith (s/f) does not report the confidence levels for the percentages from those nations, it is not possible to establish if the variations among countries with similar figures suggest significant differences.

| TABLE 2 |
|-----------------|------------------|---------|
| Country Explored Aspect | % |
| Turkey (Falkasifoglu, 2004)<br>4,000 students, grades 9 to 11 | Participated in fights in past twelve months | 42 |
| | Threatened others | 19 |
| Korea (Kim, Koh and Levental, 2004)<br>1,700 students aged 12 to 14 | Aggressor | 16.7 |
| | Victim | 14.1 |
| United States (Nansel et al., 2001)<br>15,000 students, grades 6 to 10 | Aggressor | 44.3 |
| | Victim | 41.1 |
| England (Morita, 2000)<br>Students aged 10 to 14 | Victim | 12.2 |
| Holland (Morita, 2000)<br>Students aged 10 to 14 | Victim | 13.9 |
| Norway (Morita, 2000)<br>Students aged 10 to 14 | Victim | 10 |
| Japan (Morita, 2000)<br>Students aged 10 to 14 | Victim | 9.6 |

Source: By author based on Smith (s/f).

Based on the above, the United States is outstanding in the percentage of students who mention having been victims of violence, as is Turkey, in terms of participation in aggression. The percentage of students participating in fistfights in the United States is not among the lowest, yet neither is it among the highest in the group of 41 nations under study.

Using the above comparisons, the idea is formed that although the levels of violence in Mexico are higher than in some countries, they are similar to those of other countries with different social and cultural characteristics.

Benítez and Justicia (2006) present the results of a series of studies that show the magnitude of victims and aggressors. Graph 6 compiles those results and includes those of INEE.
Graph 6 shows that the percentage of aggressors is clearly less than that observed in Mexico. Three studies list a proportion of victims of violence similar to that of Mexico. With these data, there seem to be insufficient elements to assume that the magnitude of violence in Mexico is drastically different from that of other nations, although the assumption can be made that the magnitude of violence in Mexico may be greater than in some nations.

On the other hand, a national study carried out in Canada indicates that 13% of students between ages eleven and twelve have committed acts of aggression against their classmates, and 11% have been victims (Craig, Peters and Konarski, 1998). The ages of the students in this project correspond to the sixth grade in elementary school from INEE. For that report, participation in fistfights is 19%, and students who have been physically injured represent 17%. Specifically for this group, the trend of a great proportion of aggressors and a lesser proportion of victims occurs in both countries with approximately the same distances in percentage terms. The magnitude of the amounts is clearly higher in the case of Mexico, with a difference of six points with respect to Canada, in participation as well as in victims of violence. It is probable that the differences are statistically significant; if this is the case, there are more students involved in the problem in Mexico than in Canada, at least near the end of elementary education.

School Violence in Countries That Are Culturally or Socio-economically Similar to Mexico

The interest of some studies, in addition to verifying the degree of difference in Mexico, is to focus on countries and communities that can be assumed to share characteristics with Mexico. The results presented below are from students who speak Spanish and/or live in a developing country.
Nicaragua

A study directed by Ortega *et al.* (2005) on violence among peers, based on a representative sample of the elementary school population in Managua, finds data that show a lower magnitude for Mexico when compared with INEE data (Graph 7).

**Graph 7**

*Percentage of Students Who Report the Frequency of Certain Acts of Violence in Nicaragua and Mexico*

The proportion of Nicaraguans and Mexicans who reported having been robbed is very similar (48.3% of Nicaraguans and 46.4% and 43.65% in Mexican elementary and secondary schools, respectively). In fact, we could assume that the amount is practically the same if we take into consideration the variation in the precision of the percentage due to the confidence intervals. This similarity does not occur, however, in the receiving of blows (37.5% in Nicaragua, and 17% and 14.1% in Mexican elementary and secondary schools, respectively) and threats (25.5% in Nicaragua and 13.1% in Mexico)—amounts that are roughly one-half.

Brazil

A study completed in Brazil (Abramovay, 2005) with samples from four state capitals and the federal district, indicates that 4.8% of the students manifested that in the previous year they had been hit at school, a much lower number than the 17% and 14% of Mexican students in elementary and secondary school who stated having been physically hurt in the previous school year.

With respect to robberies, Brazil reports a trend similar to that observed in Mexico: 58.2% of the Brazilians stated having been victims of this aggression, while only 4.8% admitted they had stolen something; 40% of the Mexicans manifested they had been the victim of robbery, and only one or two out of ten admitted having stolen an object or money. The same trend occurs in Brazil, although in greater proportions.
**Canary Islands and Spain**

The Canary Institute of Educational Evaluation and Quality (ICEC, 2005) presented a study of a representative sample of secondary school students and teachers that showed that 15.77% of the community’s teachers reported that conflicts at school had to do with student violence. In those terms, the comparison of teachers’ perceptions would indicate a larger amount in Mexico, where 63% of the teachers state that fistfights occur at their school, although infrequently.

We must not forget, however, that many studies—including the INEE study—have consistently found that teachers’ perception of the magnitude of violence at school may be slanted since teachers tend to minimize the problem.

In the case of the data obtained from secondary school students, the study from the Canary Islands used a scale to explore the degree of occurrence of *fights between individuals*. In this case, the percentages are shown in Graph 8.

The question used in this testing instrument does not refer strictly to blows, but uses the more generic terms of “fights”. The term allows students to include verbal disagreements—the reason very few respondents answered “none”.

This is different from Mexico, where approximately two out of every ten students participate in or are victims of fistfights. In the Canary Islands in contrast, more than six out of every ten affirm that fights occur with differing frequency (if the three categories of the scale are totaled). In this case, the comparison shows a lower magnitude in our country.\(^{11}\)

**GRAPH 8**

*Percentage of Students in Different Grades Who Indicate Frequency of Fights between Individuals at School in the Canary Islands Community*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ninguna</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poca</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bastante</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musha</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: By author, based on ICEC, 2005.

On the other hand, a study in Spain coordinated by an organization called “Defensor del Pueblo” (“Defender of the People”) and backed by Unicef, does not necessarily lead to the same conclusion. This project has a very solid design, which was nationally representative in secondary education. The sample included 3,000 students from 300 mandatory secondary schools. It had the additional strength of taking two measurements over time, thus permitting an appreciation of the evolution of the problem between 1999 and 2006. On comparing the two studies, one of the encouraging results for Spain is that the trend in some manifestations of violence seems to indicate a reduction with respect to the data
available from the first measurement. This permits assuming that the preventive policies and lines of intervention at school may have a positive impact on the magnitude of the manifestation of the problem at school.

Graph 9 offers results from INEE and the Spanish study. This comparison, which seems most pertinent because of the coinciding violent actions the students had undergone, shows signs that the problem is of greater magnitude in Mexico, specifically in the situations mentioned in the graph.

**GRAPH 9**

*Percentage of Students who Reported the Incidence of Various Acts of Violence in Spain and Mexico*

Approximately the same numbers of Mexican students in elementary school report constant teasing (24.2%). The Spanish secondary students indicate insults or ridicule (26.7%), in contrast with the Mexican secondary students, who report a percentage of occurrence of about one-half that amount (13.6%).

In terms of physical injury, which is the manifestation of violence by antonomasia, the differences in percentage points between Mexican students in elementary and secondary school do not seem very important, at 17% and 14.1%, respectively. Yet if we take into consideration the confidence levels reported by INEE, we can affirm that they are statistically significant (in elementary school, the real value is between 16.3% and 17.8%, while the secondary value is between 13.6% and 14.5%). Thus it is very probable that the percentage of Spanish students who have experienced the same situation (4.4%) differs significantly from the Mexicans at both educational levels.

Another aspect where the difference is very clear is in robbery. The frequency reported by the Mexican students at both educational levels is similar (46.4% and 43.6%), yet it is almost three times greater than that of Spain (16%); without doubt, the situation is also unfavorable in this comparison. The topic of threats is not very different: our secondary school students report close to six percentage points more than the Spanish students.

Other projects (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano and Slee, in Stys, 2004) discover that in Canada and the United States the magnitude of violence is very similar, while affirming that it is still greater than in European countries. The comparison made here between Spain and Mexico points in the same direction; in other words, Mexico shows higher percentages of frequency than Europe. In
addition, the research project in Nicaragua shows levels of violence that are equally high in comparison with the studies in Spain.

Conclusions
The results of the INEE study have very important potential in generating broad discussion on the phenomenon of violence in Mexican schools, as well as in identifying promising lines of research. The perspective used in the report has been employed in other countries and contexts. Here it has permitted, except for some differences and certain considerations, comparisons with results taken from literature.

The evaluation of the magnitude of violence as very low in relative terms, as in the analyzed report, can be explored with greater precision in the conceptual aspect and diversity of methodology, as suggested here. In spite of the existence of specific cases in which the levels of violence are very high (as reported by INEE and as shown in various research reports that reveal the situation of violence experienced in specific zones or schools primarily in the Federal District and Estado de México), the magnitude of this phenomenon in the schools of our country can be considered (with all the reserves of the case and taking into account the definition discussed at the beginning of the document) as similar to the phenomenon in Canada, the United States, and some regions of Europe.

Except for the PISA (2003) study, which bases its conclusions on the perception of the magnitude of violence in schools according to their directors (and whose results are not discussed here because of the differences observed in other studies and in the INEE report between teachers’ and students’ perceptions), there are no international studies of the topic in which Mexico has participated. It is therefore very important to promote Mexico’s participation in studies such as the study directed by HBSC, and to design international research projects along with countries that share cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic similarities.

Given that condition, comparisons with data similar to those obtained by INEE (in other words, from students who declare having committed acts of violence against their classmates or having been victims de violence), in spite of their methodological limitations, have served to construct an idea of the magnitude of violence in Mexican schools, in comparison with schools in other countries.

Based on the above, it has been possible to establish that reasons are not sufficient to assume, at least in the analyzed documents, that the magnitude of the problem in Mexico is very different from that observed in most studies in other countries, especially with regard to the proportion of students who consider themselves victims of aggression. However, the proportion of Mexican students who are involved in violence is higher than that of some countries; and with respect to other countries, the difference is still considerable (for example, the comparison with data from Spanish students).

It is also important to indicate that certain evidence suggests that countries on the American continent (at least those with available information) show a greater proportions of students who are involved in this problem, in comparison with the Europeans. Or at least, the magnitude of violence in the Americas is similar to the European countries with most violence. The available data are evidently not conclusive since other European countries have shown proportions that are relatively similar to those reported by INEE in Mexico.

The large-scale study by INEE provides data on manifestations of violence in student interaction that most of the studies report, but it does not offer data on the more subtle behaviors, which are difficult to record in this type of approach. The instruments used will need to be broadened to be able to obtain information on a wider range of manifestations of violence at school.

The report offers data of interest, worthy of analysis in the light of other available information. Examples are the personal, family-related and scholastic characteristics of the most and least aggressive
students. Also necessary is a careful analysis of the differences found by type of school—not covered by this document—at both the elementary and secondary levels and with respect to the possible relation between the schools’ disciplinary systems and the magnitude of violence discovered. This analysis would be in addition to the necessary research based on results.

Lastly, it is important to point to the growing comprehension of violence in Mexican schools, a result of research as well as the knowledge of creative successful interventions. Such comprehension should be taken into account to determine the nature of the educational policies to be implemented.

An integral strategy to improve the processes of interaction implies a review of the guidelines for interaction within educational institutions, the recognition that some institutions are motivated by their organizational structure, and by teachers’ skills in serving students (including the skill to mediate conflicts and the knowledge of students’ psychosocial development), as well as the degree teachers make conscious, collegiate decisions on specific strategies to adapt to the cultural setting and students’ interests.

This strategy must also imply the definition of actions that are preventive as well as corrective, and yet more, favor the type of desired interaction among individuals at school. These strategies, of course, should put special emphasis on promoting skills for specific interaction between students and teachers.

Notes
1 This article hopes to make a contribution in this direction although it evidently does not exhaust all the topics, based on the report, that could be discussed.
2 This notion is associated with a sensation of security or insecurity in a setting where violent actions do not occur all of the time.
3 It is assumed that this form of aggression is not necessarily intentional in the sense that certain behaviors are reproduced by the force of tradition, by the phenomenon of group conformity, or by the tendency to obey; nor because there is always—necessarily—a clear, personal intention to harm others, although this intention may be present with a certain frequency. The phenomenon of conformity was studied by Asch (1956), who demonstrated that 33% of the individuals considered in his studies tended to adapt their judgment to others, even if it were clearly and completely erroneous. On the other hand, Milgram (1963, 1974) showed in studies on obedience and authority that 65% of the individuals who participated in the experiments were willing, stimulated or pressured by an authority figure to inflict physical harm of a determined intensity on unknown individuals who had committed errors in an experimental situation.
4 The authors of the report published by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education, as mentioned throughout this article. Mentions of the INEE report or INEE data refer to the same document.
5 Testing instruments used along with achievement tests of student learning. The objective of these questionnaires is to obtain information that permits identifying sociocultural aspects and aspects of the school setting that explain to a degree the variation in student performance observed on achievement tests.
6 This study used a representative sample of 24,990 students from fourteen autonomous communities in Spain, from elementary, secondary, and high school, ages eleven to eighteen.
7 These techniques are also known as logistical models or the analysis of structural equations. They are techniques that permit identifying effects on dependent variable “y” from data obtained at various levels. This analysis avoids what some researchers call “the atomistic fallacy”, which consists of making inferences involving inter-group variability, based on data obtained in another level; in other words, from individuals.
8 The correlation was direct and significant, with a value of .647 (Aguilar, Muñoz and Orozco, 2007:111). The construction of the indexes was based on the teachers’ perception of the frequency of various manifestations of violence, within and outside of the institution. The values of the indexes range from zero to one hundred, and as some advance, the perception of the frequency of violent acts within and outside of school increases.
9 A working group financed by the World Health Organization and coordinated from the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom. It was founded in 1982, based on a study carried out by three researchers. The project was quickly adopted by the World Health Organization. The HBSC study was carried out by an extensive network of researchers with the principal objective of obtaining new understanding of the health of
teenagers in social contexts. An international coordinator (currently Candace Currie) and a database administrator are elected to serve.

10 The sample was formed by 3,042 students from the third to the sixth grade.

11 Assuming that the comparison is relatively valid, in spite of the different way the students were asked questions in this study.

Bibliography


