CAPÍTULO 5

COMPLEXITY, CARE AND CULTURE: RETHINKING VIOLENCE AND PARTICIPATION THROUGH YOUTH-CENTRED NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT: This theoretical essay argues that addressing violence and prejudice in schools requires a systemic, culturally grounded, and youth-inclusive perspective. Drawing on Complexity Theory, Complex Adaptive Systems Theory, and Cultural Psychology, we conceptualise violence as an emergent and multifactorial phenomenon shaped by affective, historical, and decision-making dynamics. We propose a broader definition of violence structured around five analytical dimensions: desires and decisions, agents and patients, asymmetry, disregard for norms and rules, and the potential to cause harm. These dimensions provide anchors for policy and practice. The study shows that children and adolescents, often marginalised by discourses of protection, can act as cultural agents when they participate meaningfully in collective structures. We present design principles for a national distributed network to support youth protagonism. These principles include intersectoral coordination, shared funding, participatory evaluation, and digital collaboration. Instead of pursuing the illusion of violence-free environments, we advocate for adaptive systems that recognise, mitigate, and transform violent patterns. Finally, we contribute to debates on scientific and digital cultures by proposing youth-centred infrastructures that link educational innovation with wider processes of social transformation.

KEYWORDS: child and adolescent protagonism; distributed protection networks; systemic approach to violence; youth participation in policy; cultural transformation through education.

COMPLEXIDADE, CUIDADO E CULTURA DIGITAL: REPENSANDO A VIOLÊNCIA E A PARTICIPAÇÃO POR MEIO DE REDES CENTRADAS NA JUVENTUDE

RESUMO: Neste ensaio teórico sustentamos que o enfrentamento da violência e do preconceito nas escolas exige a tomada de uma perspectiva sistêmica, culturalmente situada e inclusiva da juventude. Com base na Teoria da Complexidade, na Teoria dos Sistemas Complexos Adaptativos e na Psicologia Cultural, conceituamos a violência como um fenômeno emergente e multifatorial, orientado por dinâmicas afetivas, históricas e decisórias. Propomos uma definição ampliada de violência estruturada em cinco dimensões analíticas: desejos e decisões, agentes e pacientes, assimetria, desrespeito a normas e regras, e o potencial de causar dano. Essas dimensões servem como pontos de partida para a formulação de políticas e de práticas. O estudo demonstra que crianças e adolescentes, frequentemente marginalizados por discursos de proteção, podem atuar como agentes culturais quando participam de forma significativa em estruturas coletivas. Apresentamos princípios de desenho para uma rede nacional distribuída de apoio ao protagonismo juvenil. Esses princípios incluem coordenação intersetorial, financiamento compartilhado, avaliação participativa e colaboração digital. Em vez de buscar a ilusão de ambientes livres de violência, defendemos sistemas adaptativos capazes de reconhecer, mitigar e transformar padrões violentos. Por fim, contribuímos para os debates sobre culturas científica e digital ao propor infraestruturas centradas na juventude que conectem a inovação educacional a processos mais amplos de transformação social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: protagonismo infantojuvenil; redes distribuídas de proteção; abordagem sistêmica da violência; participação juvenil em políticas públicas; transformação cultural pela educação.

INTRODUCTION: A CALL FOR SYSTEMIC THINKING ON VIOLENCE AND PREJUDICE IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

Violence has been a recurring feature of human societies, persisting across cultures, epochs, and geographies despite sustained efforts to contain or eradicate it. Rather than being a marginal or exceptional event, violence is deeply entangled with the ways humans organise power, regulate disputes, and construct identities. Academic literature has often treated violence through fragmented categories such as domestic, urban, or institutional. While these distinctions are useful for targeted interventions, they limit systemic responses by overlooking how diverse forms of violence coexist, interact, and reinforce one another. To confront violence more effectively, it is necessary to regard it as a phenomenon that emerges from the interplay of historical, cultural, social, psychological, and economic factors.

This study therefore adopts a systemic and integrative perspective, drawing on three theoretical traditions: Complexity Theory (Morin, 2022), Complex Adaptive Systems Theory (Carmichael; Hadžikadić, 2019), and Cultural Psychology (Valsiner, 2021). We selected these frameworks for their complementarity in explaining how violence persists and how cultural change may emerge. Complexity Theory highlights recursive dynamics, uncertainty, and nonlinearity, showing that linear or proportional causality alone cannot account for the persistence of violence. Complex Adaptive Systems Theory contributes by emphasising how interacting subsystems, such as family, school, and state, co-evolve, adapt, and self-organise in response to pressures and feedback loops, generating both stability and unpredictability. Cultural Psychology highlights how meanings, values, and affective–semiotic processes are internalised by individuals and then reshaped through interaction. Together, these perspectives enable a layered analysis that connects structural conditions with the subjective and cultural dimensions that reproduce violence and prejudice

As a theoretical essay, the present work does not rely on empirical data but on conceptual integration. This allows flexibility and creativity in proposing approaches that may guide future research and institutional practice, while recognising the limitation of interpretive bias and the absence of empirical validation. The contribution lies in outlining a systemic framework that can inform the design of distributed networks to address violence in school contexts, with youth agency at the centre of cultural transformation.

To show how deeply violence is ingrained in our lives, we cannot treat it as a recent social deviation or an occasional anomaly. Complexity Theory and Complex Adaptive Systems Theory remind us that long-term interactions generate violence as an emergent property, shaped by feedback loops across historical, cultural, and institutional domains. Cultural Psychology further demonstrates how people symbolically reproduce and internalise these patterns, turning them into everyday practices and values. Historical and archaeological evidence reinforces this systemic perspective, showing that violence has accompanied human sociality since its origins.

Findings from Shanidar Cave in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as the remains of Shanidar 3 with a spear wound dating back 50,000 years, indicate that interpersonal conflict pre-dated Homo sapiens (Hunt, 2023). At the same site, Shanidar 1 reveals long-term care for a severely injured Neanderthal, underscoring the coexistence of aggression and empathy (García-Basanta; Romagnoli, 2023). This duality is not incidental but constitutive of human existence, showing that violence and solidarity have long coexisted as adaptive responses. Other traces reinforce this continuity: the Edwin Smith Papyrus from ancient Egypt describes injuries linked to combat (Herrerín; Galassi; Dinarès, 2022), while rock paintings in Brazil's Serra da Capivara depict scenes of conflict from as early as 12,000 years ago (Paiva et al., 2022). Violence, therefore, is neither novel nor exceptional, but a persistent dynamic deeply woven into cultural history.

Recognising the resilience of violence has implications for contemporary settings such as schools. Expecting educational spaces to be completely free of conflict is unrealistic. Schools, like other institutions, reflect wider societal tensions and inequalities. They inherit the contradictions between aggression and cooperation that mark human history. The challenge is not to eradicate conflict altogether, but to create systems capable of recognising, reducing, and transforming it. Such systems must be adaptive, responsive to context, and open to creative strategies. Prevention, dialogue, and restorative practices offer ways to strengthen collective capacities for coexistence without falling into the trap of idealised or static notions of safety.

By situating violence within its historical persistence and by recognising its cultural reproduction, this study underscores the necessity of systemic and creative responses. Integrating the insights of complexity science, complex adaptive systems thinking, and cultural psychology allows us to see violence not merely as a problem to be solved but as a phenomenon requiring adaptive strategies that combine prevention with transformation. Only by embracing systemic thinking and fostering creative, youth-centred approaches can schools and societies move towards more just, resilient, and inclusive futures.

RETHINKING VIOLENCE THROUGH SYSTEMIC AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL LENSES

Viewing human behaviour as an open and complex system reveals the limitations of fragmented or simplified understandings of violence. Interactions among social, historical, psychological, and cultural factors demand an approach that recognises the complexity and interconnected nature of violent phenomena. Building on historical insights into the persistence of violence, we propose a redefinition that captures its evolving forms and embeddedness in cultural and institutional systems. In this context, there is a need for a more comprehensive and adaptive definition of violence. One that reflects its multiple forms and root causes. About this, Hamby (2017) notes that traditional definitions of violence focus primarily on physical or material harm. Only more recently have other forms, such as psychological and symbolic violence, gained visibility. These definitions also tend to divide violence into rigid analytical categories, domestic, urban, gender-based, which hinders the identification of shared patterns and the development of broader, more effective strategies.

To overcome these limitations, we propose a general yet operational definition:

> Violence refers to behavioural expressions, by individuals, groups, or cybernetic digital systems, used to impose decisions asymmetrically on others, in disregard of social norms, legal standards, or universal values, with potential to cause individual or collective harm.

Though seemingly simple, this definition centres the role of human (or human-representing digital) decisions. It offers a provisional but useful way to address the question of whether violence has a general cause, namely, the decision to express will and desires through asymmetric, norm-violating acts, without effective concern for consequences or harm inflicted.

From this perspective, we argue for the coexistence of general and specific understandings of violence. The proposed broader definition rests on five key analytical axes: (1) desires and decisions, (2) agents and patients, (3) asymmetry, (4) disregard for norms and rules, and (5) the potential to cause harm. These dimensions form the basis for a deeper and more contextualised understanding of violence. They also serve as interpretative anchors that guide the systemic analysis in this essay, and the authors further detail each axis to clarify how they interact and help identify the structural and symbolic mechanisms that sustain violence across different contexts.

Axis of Analysis	Core Description	Complexity Theory	Complex Adaptive Systems Theory	Cultural Psychology
Desires and Decisions	Violence arises from coercive decisions rooted in affective and cognitive processes. Sustainable interventions must address the psychological and cultural systems that drive behaviour.	Desires emerge nonlinearly in dynamic systems; decisions involve recursive, adaptive feedback loops.	Decisions result from interactions among adaptive agents; small changes can cascade through networks, shaping collective outcomes.	Desires are culturally mediated; decisions reflect internalised narratives and emotions.
Agents and Patients	Violence is inherently relational, involving a perpetrator (agent) and a recipient (patient). This framing exposes how power is exercised through interaction, including non-human actors.	Agency is decentralised and relational; agent/patient roles can shift and co-evolve.	Agents and patients are embedded in adaptive networks where roles are fluid, contingent, and sensitive to context.	Agency and victimhood are assigned based on cultural meanings and recognition.
Asymmetry	Power imbalances enable unilateral control. Asymmetry is reinforced by structural inequalities and often normalised through institutional and symbolic power.	Asymmetries form through self-organising hierarchies and persistent feedback.	Unequal adaptive capacities create asymmetries; network dynamics may stabilise or amplify inequalities.	Power asymmetries are maintained through symbolic hierarchies and value systems.

Axis of Analysis	Core Description	Complexity Theory	Complex Adaptive Systems Theory	Cultural Psychology
Disregard for Norms and Rules	Violence violates legal and social norms, and punitive responses alone fail to address root causes. Preventive strategies must cultivate empathy and internalised values.	Norm violation reflects systemic tension and instability; rules evolve.	Norms emerge as adaptive constraints; disregard indicates shifting strategies within evolving networks.	Norms are shared symbolic structures; disregard reflects cultural dissent or exclusion.
Potential for Harm	Violence includes potential harm, visible or not. Psychological and symbolic injuries are real and lasting, and must be integrated into broader definitions and responses.	Harm is emergent and multidimensional; often unpredictable in impact.	Harm propagates through adaptive systems in nonlinear ways, producing ripple effects across levels.	Harm includes symbolic and affective wounds that shape identity and belonging.

Table 1 - Examples from an Integrated Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for Understanding Violence

This integrated framework underscores that no one can reduce violence to isolated factors. Each axis highlights how layered interactions generate violence: desires and decisions that arise from affective–cognitive processes, relational dynamics between agents and patients, entrenched asymmetries of power, disregard for evolving norms, and the potential for symbolic and material harm. These dimensions reveal that no single perspective is sufficient. Complexity Theory illuminates recursive feedback loops and nonlinear outcomes; Complex Adaptive Systems Theory (Carmichael; Hadžikadić, 2019) explains how interacting subsystems adapt, self-organise, and generate emergent patterns; and Cultural Psychology shows how values, meanings, and emotions are internalised and reconfigured through social interaction.

Beyond theoretical coherence, the five axes offer a structured way to develop more accurate and context-sensitive diagnostics. By analysing how these dimensions manifest in schools or communities, researchers can identify hidden patterns of tension, risk, and exclusion. This diagnostic clarity is essential for moving from reactive measures to systemic responses. It also informs the design of interventions: reshaping decision-making through socio-emotional learning, exposing hidden hierarchies in school practices, restoring shared norms via participation, or addressing symbolic harm through restorative approaches. Used in combination, these entry points guide adaptive strategies that can evolve with the changing dynamics of the system.

In this sense, the framework responds to a broader challenge: overcoming conceptual fragmentation in violence analysis. Legal definitions and rigid categories, such as domestic, urban, or gender-based, have long obscured interconnections between forms of violence (Hamby, 2017). It is important to stress, however, that such fragmented definitions remain indispensable in specific domains, for example, in criminal law and penal justice, where precise typologies are required for legal prosecution and repression. The limitation lies not in their validity, but in their insufficiency when applied in isolation. A systemic view, by contrast, complements these approaches by recognising violence as part of a complex ecosystem of meanings, behaviours, and emotions (Pires, 2023a, 2023b). Edgar Morin's Theory of Complexity highlights its recursive and dynamic character (Morin, 2022); CAS theory reinforces that outcomes are uncertain, nonlinear, and shaped by adaptive interactions; and Cultural Psychology explains how prejudice persists through cultural feedback loops (Frenzel; Daniels; Burić, 2021). Taken together, these perspectives enable responses that are more inclusive, adaptive, and capable of disrupting the recursive cycles that sustain prejudice and exclusion.

YOUTH VOICES AS CATALYSTS FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Recognising and integrating the voices of children and adolescents into decision-making is essential for confronting violence and dismantling prejudice. Historically, their capacity for meaningful participation has been underestimated, reinforcing invisibility and limiting influence on matters that shape their lives (Junior; Pocahy; Oswald, 2018). Promoting youth agency is not merely a question of rights but a strategic pathway to transform the cultural practices that reproduce inequality. Young people do not resist isolated prejudices but engage with entrenched norms that demand structural change. Cultural transformation, however, is not straightforward. It requires persistence, institutional commitment, and recognition that societies operate as complex adaptive systems marked by nonlinearity, self-organisation, and co-evolution. Small interventions may yield delayed or disproportionate effects; new cultural norms emerge from decentralised interactions; and values evolve in tandem with broader institutional and societal shifts.

Traditional assumptions that adults should unilaterally define educational agendas must therefore be re-examined. As children mature cognitively, emotionally, and morally, their ability to contribute to collective values increases, requiring progressive and planned inclusion. Cultural Psychology highlights that cultural construction is not unidirectional: collective systems shape individual development, yet individuals also reshape collective meanings through daily interaction. This dynamic is not simply bidirectional but multidirectional, as personal cultures influence and

are influenced across diverse contexts, generating hybridisations, tensions, and innovations (Pires, 2023c). In multicultural schools, for instance, exchanges between Afro-Brazilian, Catholic, Indigenous, and secular traditions produce networks of mutual adjustment and symbolic negotiation. Such processes can foster solidarity but also spark conflict, depending on how institutions mediate emerging tensions. The unpredictability of outcomes reflects the strength of complexity-informed perspectives, which anticipate variability rather than presuming equilibrium.

Strategies that amplify youth voices are crucial for enabling these dynamics. Educational practices that deliberately confront discrimination do more than promote inclusion: they cultivate empowerment and critical engagement, positioning young people as contributors to a more equitable society. Digital fluency enhances this capacity, as children and adolescents navigate media ecologies that remain underutilised by formal institutions. From podcasts to participatory mapping, digital expressions become epistemic contributions and tools for cultural redefinition. Yet change is not automatic. Values sustaining exclusion are often deeply emotional and structurally embedded, resistant to superficial initiatives. Shifting them requires both personal reflection and institutional openness. Cultural Psychology shows how children internalise collective meanings and later act to reshape them (Rosa; Valsiner, 2018; Zittoun, 2019). Creating dialogical environments is therefore indispensable: practices that challenge assumptions of childhood incompleteness foster participation and agency (Pires; Branco, 2023). Even modest steps, such as involving pupils in curriculum design, can reorganise meanings and institutional dynamics, reflecting the self-organising character of cultural systems.

Child development unfolds within a web of relationships across families, schools, and communities, each embedded in a wider cultural ecosystem (Xu; Wu; Li, 2021). These practices express beliefs and values that guide decision-making (Brinkmann, 2021). Beliefs may shift with relative ease, but values are emotionally anchored and more resistant, though not immutable (Valsiner, 2021). Because values underpin perception and action, recognising youth perspectives allows harmful cultural scripts to be questioned and redefined. For this reason, practices must emerge from within systems, aligning with the values that societies seek to promote (Budwig, 2021).

Research to support such transformation must move beyond surveys and self-reports, employing participatory methods that capture lived experience (Watzlawik; Salden, 2022). Democratic engagement should be treated not only as pedagogy but as cultural intervention, enabling young people to generate new meanings through reflection and action. Cultural Psychology identifies three conditions for this process: symbolic systems that enable meaning-making; emotionally rich intersubjective interactions; and psychological resources such as memory, language, and agency (Martin; Gillespie, 2010). These conditions explain how collective practices shape development and, reciprocally, how individual agency fosters collective change.

The persistence of youth invisibility, long studied in educational sociology, reflects institutional limits that restrict children's ability to act as change agents (Junior; Pocahy; Oswald, 2018). This invisibility constrains innovation and hinders development (Qvortrup, 2017; Saltiel; Lakey, 2020). Overcoming it requires not only opening participatory spaces but also ensuring institutional readiness to legitimise youth contributions. We should understand youth protagonism as active participation in developing educational and cultural practices, fostering autonomy, critical reflection, and ethical awareness (Schneider; Martins; da Silva, 2021). Early democratic experiences enable young people to question and reconstruct biased norms. Pedagogical and social practices that promote agency, belonging, and reflection enhance their ability to deconstruct prejudice associated with race, gender, and class, strengthening the prospects for a just and democratic society. Thus, recognising youth voices does not represent a passing pedagogical trend but affirms a foundational value for building an inclusive future in which children and adolescents act as cultural agents and serious participants in decision-making.

BUILDING A DISTRIBUTED NETWORK TO AMPLIFY YOUTH VOICES

Valuing the participation of children and adolescents in decision-making is essential for building inclusive and democratic societies, particularly in confronting violence and prejudice. Yet their voices have historically been underestimated, reinforcing a persistent invisibility that limits their influence on issues central to their lives (Junior; Pocahy; Oswald, 2018). Overcoming this invisibility requires more than sporadic consultation; it demands sustained networks that amplify youth voices and legitimise their protagonism in reshaping the values and practices of everyday life.

A major obstacle to such inclusion is the moral discourse of protection. While rooted in legitimate concerns, it often masks exclusionary practices. Framed as care, it subtly casts young people as incapable, conflating vulnerability with silence and immaturity with irrelevance. Hein and Ansari (2022), in the context of disability, term this dynamic benevolent marginalisation: symbolic and practical exclusion under the guise of protection, where beneficiaries are positioned as dependent and grateful rather than as partners in transformation. Applied to youth, this logic ensures that participation is conditional, tolerated only when it does not challenge entrenched hierarchies.

Addressing this paradox requires redefining protection not as the avoidance of risk but as the creation of dialogical and developmentally responsive environments. As Ansari and Hein (2022) suggest, overcoming benevolent marginalisation involves both structural reform and epistemic recognition, enabling young people to reconstruct self-concepts validated through lived experience. This reorientation empowers them as cultural and civic actors, rather than passive recipients of care.

In this light, distributed and participatory networks emerge as a strategic imperative. Coordinating actors across schools, communities, public institutions, and NGOs, such networks reinforce agency and foster dialogical environments that challenge deficit views of youth while dismantling prejudice. They offer continuity and systemic alignment often absent in fragmented initiatives. The Brazilian *Câmara Mirim*, which invites students to propose legislative ideas (Pires, 2024), and international Student Voice Initiatives that integrate pupils into governance and curricula (Morris, 2019), demonstrate both the feasibility and the limitations of localised efforts.

Developing such a network to address violence and prejudice, however, is not a matter of principle alone: it demands concrete conditions to ensure effectiveness and long-term sustainability. In what follows, we detail these foundational elements, drawing on lessons from successful distributed models implemented over recent decades, as outlined by Pires (2023a).

Element	Summary
Local Reach and National Coordination	The network should operate across regions with contextualised solutions, linked to a national hub that shares knowledge, experience, and resources, enabling effective practices to be adapted elsewhere.
Integration of Governmental Action	Intersectoral coordination between federal, state, district, and municipal levels avoids fragmentation and ensures complementarity, similar to the Child and Adolescent Rights Guarantee System.
Partnerships with NGOs	NGOs extend the network's reach, bringing expertise, innovation, and alternative funding models that diversify and strengthen interventions.
Transdisciplinary Approach	Professionals from education, psychology, social work, and human rights should collaborate, supported by communication technologies that allow continuous knowledge-sharing and cooperation.
National-Level Information Sharing	Clear processes for exchanging data, good practices, and challenges improve cohesion, mutual learning, and replication of effective solutions across regions.
Ongoing Training and Capacity Building	Continuous training for managers, educators, and technical staff ensures evidence-based practices and consistent responses to emerging challenges.
Community and School Engagement	Involving parents, pupils, and school staff ensures legitimacy, reflects local needs, and increases the effectiveness of solutions.
Monitoring and Evaluation	Strong monitoring and evaluation systems track progress, identify problems, and support timely adjustments, ensuring ongoing improvement.
Shared Funding	Sustainability depends on pooled resources from different government levels and private partners, with mechanisms that guarantee stable and transparent funding.

Element	Summary
Cooperation and Knowledge Exchange	Cooperation across the network, through sharing experiences and lessons learnt, strengthens innovation and collective learning.
Engagement with the Scientific Community	Active involvement of researchers ensures evidence-based practices, applied research, and continuous refinement of strategies.
Integration of Communication Technologies	Accessible, modern communication tools must underpin the network, enabling timely exchange of information, reports, and strategies.
Focus on Social and Holistic Health Policies	Integrated action that combines social policy and holistic health in schools supports the well-being of children, adolescents, and families.
Private Sector Engagement	Partnerships with private schools, businesses, and foundations add resources, innovation, technical expertise, and long-term sustainability.
Use of Participatory Evaluation Methods	Participatory evaluation involving school communities makes assessments more context-sensitive, legitimate, and impactful.

Application Example: Child and Adolescent Rights Protection System

A practical example of how such a distributed network might operate is the Brazilian child and adolescent rights protection system. In this model, Child Protection Councils act as central nodes within a broader ecosystem that includes schools, community organisations, public defenders, health services, and other institutions. Schools, in particular, form a dedicated sub-network focused on preventing and addressing violence and prejudice in educational settings. This networked architecture enables coordinated action across different areas of intervention: legal, educational, social, ensuring an integrated and responsive approach to complex social problems.

Expanding this structure into a distributed educational network opens up a range of possibilities that go beyond conventional institutional roles. For instance, the creation of a national idea bank could consolidate innovative proposals developed by students, educators, and civil society actors, encouraging creative problem-solving grounded in local realities. Similarly, a bank of testimonies and lived experiences, curated with ethical safeguards, could strengthen empathy-based learning and provide powerful narratives for advocacy, training, and public awareness.

A non-commercial social platform maintained by the network could offer a digital space for horizontal communication, free from algorithmic manipulation and market-driven engagement. This platform would facilitate real-time exchange between schools, councils, and professionals across regions, fostering transparency and collaborative intelligence. Moreover, a bank of tested practices and pilot programs could function as a repository of applied knowledge, promoting scalability of successful interventions while allowing local adaptation.

In addition, these platforms could incorporate digital tools that are already part of students' everyday lives, such as collaborative storytelling, audio-visual narratives, and gamified learning. Transforming them into instruments of participation and intercultural dialogue. Unlike commercial networks driven by algorithmic incentives, educational agents and communities ethically design and curate these environments to strengthen shared meaning and participatory culture.

From a structural perspective, the network would benefit from a diversified financing model that includes federal, state, and municipal governments, but also extends to non-governmental organisations, private foundations, and individual donors. This plural funding architecture reinforces shared responsibility while increasing resilience and long-term viability. It allows for the mobilisation of public resources alongside civil society engagement, reducing dependency on a single source. Additionally, the adoption of a flexible governance structure, combining national coordination with local autonomy, would ensure both consistency in objectives and sensitivity to diverse territorial realities.

Other systemic benefits include:

❙ increased resilience through redundancy, where multiple actors can fulfill similar roles and compensate for institutional gaps;

❙ collective sense-making, as distributed actors can generate shared understanding of evolving challenges through continuous dialogue;

❙ agile policy feedback, whereby frontline experiences can inform decision-making more rapidly than in traditional vertical structures;

❙ distributed leadership, which empowers different regions and institutions to take initiative without waiting for top-down authorization;

❙ open innovation, as networked actors can co-develop and iterate solutions in real time, drawing from diverse disciplines and knowledge bases.

By linking institutions and sectors through a distributed, participatory, and adaptive logic, such a network not only enhances the system's capacity to respond to violence and prejudice, but also reconfigures the way we collectively produce protection, inclusion, and justice for children and adolescents. It promotes safer, more democratic environments where institutions protect, amplify, and integrate young voices into the design of the very systems that serve them.

KEY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Implementing a distributed network to confront violence and prejudice in schools presents structural, epistemological, and political challenges. As in all complex adaptive systems, outcomes depend not only on institutional design and resources, but also on the capacity to navigate unpredictability, overlapping responsibilities, and recursive cultural processes.

One major difficulty is the uncertainty and nonlinearity of cultural change. Small interventions may have disproportionate effects — or none at all, depending on feedback and context (Carmichael; Hadžikadić, 2019). Expectations of rapid, measurable results often clash with the slow pace of value transformation, leading to the premature abandonment of initiatives. Because change is not sequential, the effects of youth protagonism may remain latent, requiring long-term commitment and epistemic humility (McClelland et al., 2015).

Institutional fragmentation and weak coordination exacerbate these challenges, particularly in multilevel governance. While decentralisation enables local adaptation, it can also foster disconnection in the absence of strong feedback mechanisms. Political discontinuity adds further vulnerability: distributed initiatives collapse easily with leadership changes, interrupting processes of coevolution (Mazzocchi, 2025). In partisan political systems, cross-party cooperation is discouraged, and successive administrations often dismantle policies associated with their predecessors. This short-term logic undermines systemic change by preventing cumulative learning and the refinement of practices.

As discussed earlier, symbolic barriers compound these structural risks. The moral discourse of protection, while grounded in care, often reinforces perceptions of incapacity by excluding youth from engaging with complexity. This discourse produces a form of benevolent marginalization that silences young people under the guise of safeguarding them and reproduces the very exclusions that networks aim to dismantle.

Addressing these obstacles requires transdisciplinary and context-sensitive research (Morin, 2022). Longitudinal and participatory studies should explore how children and adolescents experience inclusion as epistemic actors (Watzlawik; Salden, 2022), while mapping how cultural shifts in schools diffuse across society. Such research must integrate diverse forms of data, account for affective and symbolic dynamics, and produce actionable knowledge for sustaining adaptive networks.

Yet we must critically examine science itself. Although scholars often portray academic research as collaborative, competition, hierarchies, and resource inequalities shape it. Building ecosystems that genuinely support collaboration demands humility, redistribution, and engagement with those most affected by systemic violence.

Finally, linking scientific and digital cultures in education opens pathways for participatory infrastructures grounded in openness and creativity. Digital platforms can empower youth to generate knowledge, mediate conflict, and foster solidarity across diverse contexts, transforming participation from token inclusion into co-construction of new epistemic environments.

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL CHANGE

This essay has argued that confronting violence and prejudice in schools requires systemic, creative, and culturally situated strategies. Violence persists not as a marginal anomaly, but as a recurrent phenomenon woven into human history and contemporary institutions. Its endurance across time reveals both its adaptability and its entanglement with social hierarchies, symbolic systems, and recursive cultural practices. Addressing such persistence demands responses that mirror this complexity, integrating multiple disciplines, actors, and perspectives into adaptive frameworks.

A central contribution of this study has been to highlight the potential of distributed networks that amplify the voices of children and adolescents. Far from being passive recipients of protection, young people emerge as cultural agents whose perspectives disrupt adult-centric logics and illuminate new pathways for transformation. Empowering these voices represents both an ethical imperative and a methodological necessity: without them, systemic blind spots remain unaddressed, and opportunities for meaningful cultural change are lost. Youth protagonism strengthens the capacity of schools and communities to generate inclusive values, reframe entrenched prejudices, and build resilient forms of coexistence.

However, the challenges to building such networks are considerable. Structural fragmentation, political discontinuity, and symbolic barriers, particularly the discourse of benevolent marginalization, undermine continuity and legitimacy. Short-term political logic often prevents the sustained commitment required for systemic change. Overcoming these obstacles requires not only institutional reform but also epistemic humility, recognising that cultural change unfolds through nonlinear dynamics and unpredictable feedback loops. Long-term resilience depends on financing models that share responsibility across public and private actors, as well as governance structures that balance national coordination with local adaptation.

The integration of scientific and digital cultures further expands possibilities for innovation. Participatory research methods, coupled with digital infrastructures, can enable children and adolescents to act as epistemic partners, producing new knowledge and mediating cultural tensions. Such an approach aligns with broader commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in advancing inclusive education and participatory institutions.

Ultimately, sustainable cultural change requires more than isolated projects or rhetorical inclusion. It calls for the creation of adaptive systems that learn, co-evolve, and cultivate care. By recognising young people as co-creators of cultural meaning and social responsibility, societies can transform schools into nodes of democratic renewal: places where violence is not denied, but recognised, confronted, and reshaped into opportunities for solidarity and growth.

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