When schools are at war, teachers must broker peace

A pioneering approach is taken in a dangerous Brazilian slum

DONNA BOWATER

IT IS a Wednesday morning in a classroom in one of the most violent favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and the conversation moves quickly from the latest Brazilian university figures to the referendum on Scottish independence.

Outside, armed soldiers patrol Maré, a complex warren of buildings that is home to 130,000 people and competing drug gangs. But inside, about a dozen 14- and 15-year-olds are calm and engaged, discussing politics at home and abroad.

In a country where approximately 12 per cent of teachers suffer verbal abuse or intimidation from students at least once a week, the Projeto Uerê school prides itself on the behaviour of its 430 pupils.

Its founder, Yvonne Bezerra de Mello, has developed her own pedagogy designed to encourage respect and peace, even within a community as troubled as Maré. She has worked with some of the most challenging state schools in Brazil, where high levels of violence leave children unable to concentrate in what are typically large, tense classes.

"I've seen classes that are like war in certain schools because kids experience violence every day," she says. "Everything here happens very quickly: life, death, the criminals, the army coming in. The children can't sit for five hours in the school."

According to the 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey, 5.5 per cent of lower-secondary teachers in Brazil experience daily intimidation or verbal abuse, making the country's schools the worst in the developed world for classroom aggression (bit.ly/TablesTalis).

By contrast, no teachers in England reported daily intimidation or abuse, while 6.5 per cent said they experienced aggression weekly.

"Unfortunately, this is the hard reality," Beatriz Lugão, director of the Sepe teaching union in Rio, told *O Dia* newspaper after the survey results were released. "In the state of Rio, teachers are victims of various types of physical and verbal aggression daily. So much so, we are preparing our own survey on it."

The international media spotlight shone brightly on Brazil during this summer's World Cup, illuminating the social problems away from the football pitch as well as the games on it. And the glare will return in 2016 when the country hosts the Olympic Games.

But in the meantime, schools continue to be affected by violence. Last month, it was reported that a biology teacher in the north-eastern state of Sergipe had been shot five times by a 17-year-old student who was angry about a low mark. Critically injured, Carlos Cristian Gomes was placed in an induced coma, while staff and students at his school received psychological support.

Earlier this year, a teacher in the north of Rio was attacked by the mother of a pupil after banning two children from sitting together in class. And staff at a school in suburban Rio have threatened to strike over the abuse they experience in the classroom.

Joseanne Fonseca, who has worked as a Portuguese teacher at Projeto Uerê for nine years, says: "Respect doesn't exist in other schools because the teachers don't care; they do it because it's a job. Here, the teachers are everything to the children and they talk to us.

"There are always children who fight but here it doesn't happen. These children live in areas of risk but they are well-educated and respectful."

Ms Bezerra de Mello knows of many teachers who have left education or fallen ill as a result of difficult classroom circumstances. But she also blames poor training and large class sizes for contributing to aggressive behaviour among children.

"I've seen one single teacher for 55 pupils. This is impossible. The teachers get stressed and the pupils don't learn correctly," she says. "The other problem is the qualification of teachers… They have to know how to deal with children who live in poor states."

Today, Ms Bezerra de Mello's first lesson is with a class of teenagers. She talks them through a newspaper as a warm-up activity; her method is interactive, conversational and quick, and is followed throughout the school.

In another class of seven- and eight-year-olds, simple maths questions are delivered orally, with children expected to respond in the same manner. This approach is necessary to increase vocabulary among students who typically arrive at the school with only 600 words, she says.

"Children nowadays have a new cognition because of technology," she adds. "We have to have more active classes."

Sixty schools are using Ms Bezerra de Mello's methodology, with 10,000 trained teachers. And although the threat of violence is ever-present outside her model school in Maré, inside the children are concentrating on the sound of their violins.

"Maré is very violent, so it's very difficult," Ms Bezerra de Mello says. "Even with the army occupying, we still have drug trafficking. They act differently but the situation with the children hasn't changed: they see people with guns every day. And teachers can't do their jobs because we need to change the system." ●

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GUSTAVO OLIVEIRA

LEARNING HAVEN: Projeto Uerê was founded in response to the high levels of violence outside and inside Brazil's state schools

How does it work?

Projeto Uerê, which caters for 430 students aged 6-18, operates in the favela of Maré in Rio de Janeiro, educating children who have been exposed to serious violence and trauma.

According to its founders, the school has developed its own teaching methodology and pupils receive individual attention to help them overcome "cognitive and emotional blocks". It is intended that students receive a better quality of education than is available in state-run schools.

The curriculum includes Portuguese, humanities, science and languages, as well as workshops on music, Brazilian dance, singing and violin. In the past four years, almost 10,000 teachers in state and private schools have been trained in the approach taken at Projeto Uerê.