



Preventing violence against children at schools in resource-poor environments: Operational culture as an overarching entry point

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ABSTRACT

This paper articulates a case for prioritizing prevention of violence against children (VAC) at schools in resource poor environments of developing countries. The first section makes a broad case for why it is important to focus on schools as an entry point for preventing VAC. The second section discusses how the whole school approaches prevalent in developed nations such as Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) can be adapted and contextualized for resource poor environments. The paper delineates between school climate and the operational culture of a school and discusses why practical approaches tend to address the latter. The final section of the paper discusses an evidence-based example of such an approach; the Good School Toolkit for preventing VAC at schools in resource poor environments. The paper concludes by articulating strategic considerations to bear in mind when designing such interventions.

1. Introduction

Experiencing violence at any point in a person's life is deleterious (Heise, 2011; Lansford et al., 2002; Michau, Horn, Bank, Dutt, & Zimmerman, 2015; Riggs, 2010; Veltman & Browne, 2001). There is an even stronger consensus that the violence experienced during childhood can have a profound and long term consequence on the identity (Lansford et al., 2002), self-image (Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001; Riggs, 2010), development (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Leiter, 2007) and, therefore, the potential of that child. Loss of such potential is consequential not only for the child but their families, communities, and the wider society (Currie & Widom, 2010; Gelles & Perlman, 2012; Naker, 2005). Therefore, preventing violence against children is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic imperative for the entire society.

Schools present a strategic opportunity for preventing violence against children (VAC). As institutions they are mandated to provide spaces, processes and environments for creating opportunities to learn, and have existed for centuries, yet, the impact of violence experienced at school, and its effect on health and socio-economic outcomes for the child and their families have been overlooked (Cappa & Wardlaw, 2014; Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2017; Know Violence, 2017). More than a billion children are expected at school on any given school day and a substantial portion of them will experience violence when they are there (UNESCO, n.d.). Elsewhere, we have discussed why schools present a viable opportunity to prevent VAC at scale, why this has not happened so far and why now might be an opportune moment to prioritize this work (Naker, 2017). In this paper

we will focus on articulating an overarching approach for preventing violence at schools in resource-poor environments of developing countries and discuss what such an approach could look like.

2. Preventing VAC at school

There is a vast body of literature addressing the practice of VAC prevention at school but much of it has emerged from North America and Western Europe (Lester, Lawrence, & Ward, 2017). While this experience is helpful and the conceptual approaches that literature offers can inform strategies in resource-poor environments, there are sufficient differences in the context to merit an adaptation of the approaches developed in the Global North. Many of the interventions aimed at preventing violence in schools in developed countries are aimed at reducing bullying (Bradshaw, 2013) or dating violence amongst adolescents (De Koker, Mathews, Zuch, Bastien, & Mason-Jones, 2014). In developing countries, a significant proportion of the violence towards children is perpetrated by adults (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Lee, 2015), and furthermore, children may enjoy weaker protection under the law, either due to lack of child centric policy or weak enforcement. In some environments there is still a persistent belief that learning cannot happen without pain, and therefore corporal punishment is a common practice within the school (Gershoff, 2017).

Only a limited literature on the subject from developing countries is so far available (Lester et al., 2017) although there is considerable interest in identifying risk factors that lead to VAC in schools in such environments (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2017; Know Violence, 2017). Progress has been slow due to the complexity of the

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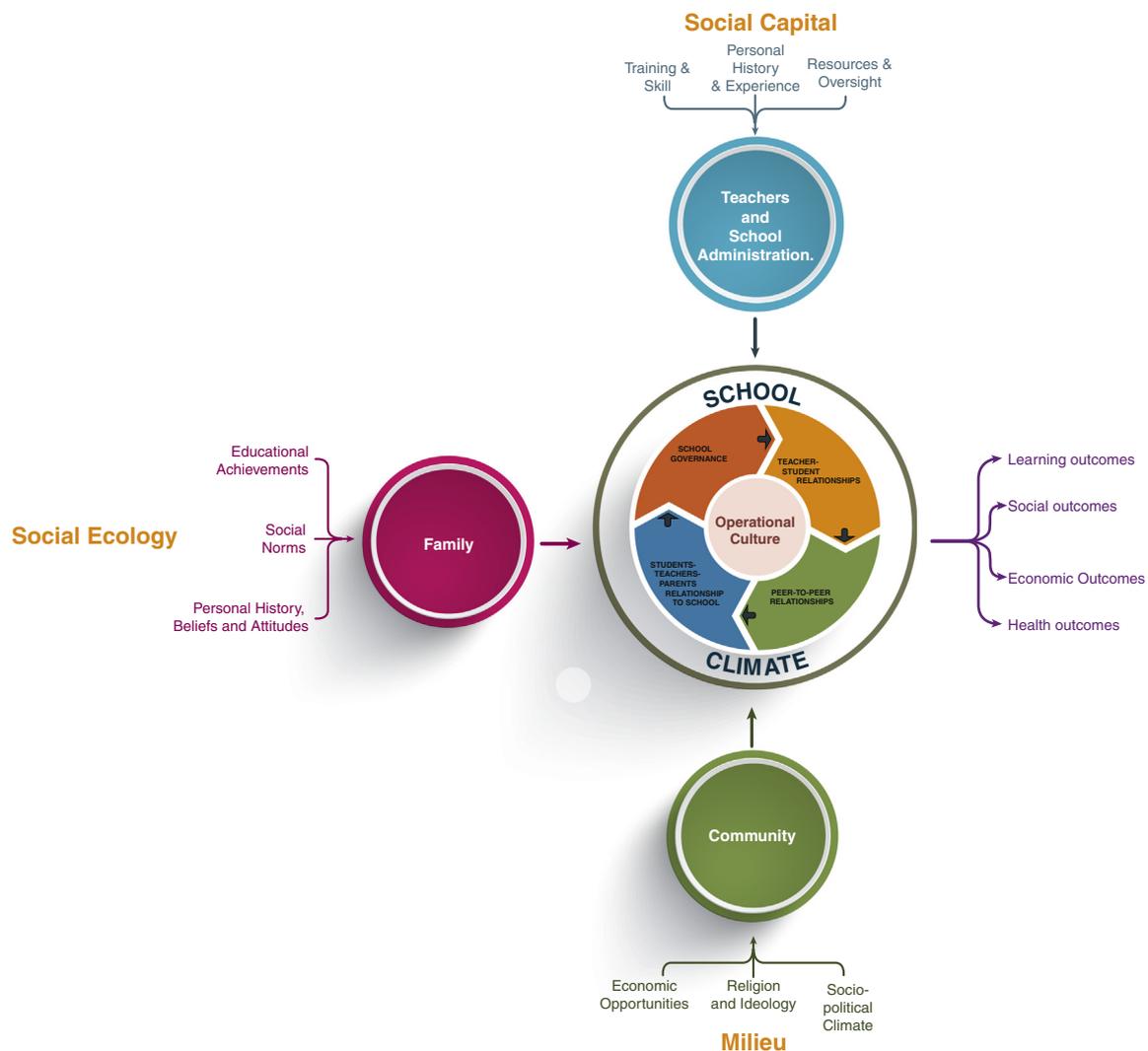


Diagram 1. Locating school climate.

problem, and exacerbated by the lack of resources, intense economic pressures, poor governance and teachers' lack of skills or capacity to manage behaviour at crowded schools without the threat of violence. This situation is further intensified by the global consensus that the conception of VAC should go beyond simple acts of commission, to also include acts of omission (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011). WHO, for example defines interpersonal violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (Butchart, Hillis, & Krug, 2016). Thus, the range of ways in which violence can manifest makes the problem harder to address, and in this context, the work of preventing VAC at schools evolves into a more expansive intervention of influencing the child's experience of school, rather than just elimination of certain practices such as corporal punishment (Naker, 2009).

Children's experience of school may be influenced by a broad constellation of factors referred to as the school's climate (Anderson, 1982; Dymnicki, 2013). Tagiuri has described the concept of school climate as a compound of four interrelated dimensions (ecology, milieu, social system and culture) (Tagiuri, 1968) while Moos has described it more in terms of the social ecology of the environment, and delineated it into six components (Moos, 1979a,b). Regardless of the frame of reference applied to the concept, the interplay and aggregate effect of these dimensions or components are commonly understood to contribute to the

emergence of the climate of the school. It is fuelled by socio-economic pressures, overarching culture and ideological legacy, values and social norms that individuals bring to the school, and expressed in the school's traditions, practices and governance (Anderson, 1982). The school's climate can be thought of as the overarching determinant of the manner in which stakeholders experience, behave and feel at their school (Cohen, 2006).

A broad consensus is emerging that the school's climate may have a deep relationship with the level of violence children experience at school (Anderson, 1982; Steffgen, Recchia, & Viechtbauer, 2013; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Freiberg, 1999). There is also some evidence that influencing components of the school climate may be a powerful strategy, not only for overall prevention of VAC at school, but also for leveraging the impact of other interventions aimed at influencing the experience of school (Devries et al., 2015; Johnson, 2009; Karwowski, 2008; Kasen, Berenson, Cohen, & Johnson, 2004; Steffgen et al., 2013). Thus, addressing the school's climate may not only be instrumental in preventing VAC but may also influence the learning, health, economic and social outcomes for the child (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2017; Know Violence, 2017).

3. School climate and operational culture

However, when confronted with such a complex set of interdependent factors that contribute to the concept of school climate, it is

difficult to design a feasible intervention that can be implemented with fidelity to the design, and in a sustained manner. Faced with such a challenge, many practitioners have adopted the practical strategy of designing interventions that address a component of, rather than the entire school climate. Such interventions, often called Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS), focus on feasible targets for a time limited intervention such as the social relationships, values, norms and the governance of the school (Bradshaw, 2013; Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). Such an approach circumvents the limitations school-based practitioners face to their ability to meaningfully address the broader social ecology or the milieu surrounding the school.

A vast number of PBIS programs (Bradshaw, 2015) have been designed to address two of the four dimensions in Tagiuri's taxonomy (Tagiuri, 1968): the social system and the culture of the school. For practical reasons, we have chosen to refer to the combined effects of these two dimensions of the school climate as the *operational culture* of a school. This terminology has the added advantage of presenting the problem to be addressed not as a prevailing condition as a result of factors beyond the control of schools (climate) but as a more inspiring concept of expression of values, beliefs, creativity, norms and mores (culture) that are within the control of individuals at the school. The switch in language signals a shift in the framing of the problem; the reality of a school should be conceptualized as a creation and expression of its members rather than a condition that has befallen them and is beyond their control (Diagram 1).

PBIS or anti-violence interventions at school tend to adopt a three-tiered approach: *universal* or *whole school*, *selective* (targeted), and *indicated* (needs-driven). Most interventions tend to have a whole school approach with additional tiers grafted on, as needed (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). Based on data from North America, Bradshaw estimates that 80% of the interventions in schools are universal or directed to the whole school, 15% are selective, and 5% are indicated. Approximately 20,000 schools have experienced such interventions in USA. The evidence for their efficacy is dependent on fidelity with which the original intervention is implemented or the context of the school, though on average they have been shown to reduce peer violence by between 20 and 30% (Bradshaw, 2015).

In developing countries, however, there are fewer examples of such interventions (Lester et al., 2017) and concerns about fidelity and context are even more complex. Furthermore, the concerns within these environments go beyond peer violence or bullying, and include adult-to-child violence too (Burton & Leoschut, 2013), and therefore the intervention requires an adaptation to the context (e.g. Plan International's Learn without Fear Campaign, Save the Children's Violence-free Schools, and Raising Voices' the Good School Toolkit). In these approaches, the operational culture of the school is conceptualized as consisting of three key domains: relational (children's interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers), psychological (attachment, belonging, identification with school) and structural (policies, administrative infrastructure and capacity) (Moos, 1979a,b). This conception allows for the development of practical entry points for intervening within schools (see Diagram 2 below).

An essential component of such interventions is that they may begin in the school, but then they flow to the surrounding communities to consolidate and extend the outcomes. Thus, these interventions are based on a systemic design that begins from a student's experience of school and works outwards from a child-centric point of view on what a high-quality school experience would look like, addressing all the key actors who contribute to that experience. The design of such interventions hinges on tracing how influence flows towards the learner based on their individual characteristics, the nature of their interpersonal relationships, the socio-economic character of their community and the societal infrastructure that exists to enable a successful navigation of the learning experience. The multiple layers of influence flowing through the ecological framework surrounding the learner (Atkins et al., 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Domitrovich et al., 2008)

form the basis for the design of the intervention. While such interventions pay attention to and try to leverage the social conditions, it is not their mandate nor a realistic expectation that they will influence the milieu (Tagiuri, 1968) or the broader social ecology (Moos, 1979a,b) of the community surrounding the schools. For that reason, they are primarily focused on influencing the operational culture of the school rather than the school climate.

An example of such an intervention with evidence of effectiveness (Devries et al., 2015) is the Good School Toolkit (Raising Voices, 2013), currently being rolled out at scale in approximately 750 schools in Uganda (see www.raisingvoices.org/schools). The Good School Toolkit is a school-wide intervention led by two teachers, two students and two school affiliated community members who aim to influence the operational culture of the entire school through a six-step process and four entry points (see Diagram 2). A randomized and controlled evaluation of the methodology found that the intervention reduced the risk of physical violence from teachers to students by 42% within 18 months of the intervention (Devries et al., 2015). Furthermore, the Good School Toolkit was also effective at increasing attachment of students to their school and reducing peer violence (Devries et al., 2015, 2017; Raising Voices, 2017). The intervention is effective for all students including those who are marginalized such as children with disabilities (Devries et al., 2014). Although preliminary indications are encouraging, whether these impressive effects are sustained beyond the intervention period or whether such a methodology can be implemented at scale requires further evidence.

4. Strategic considerations for designing practical interventions for preventing VAC at school

Given that school-based interventions are still in the early stages in developing countries, where investment per pupil is significantly lower, governance and oversight functions are generally weaker and the capacity to experiment with innovative ideas is limited, there is a unique opportunity to learn from experiences elsewhere and influence the design of the interventions. Given the emerging momentum and converging influences, it is important to begin the work of developing guiding ideas about how the work of preventing VAC at schools should be curated and marshalled. The following are some preliminary suggestions:

1. **Acknowledge that VAC is a social problem.** This means recognizing that there are socio-economic reasons for the existence of VAC and the practice is perpetuated by deeply held beliefs. Such problems are unlikely to be solved by a single intervention or even a single set of interventions (Espelage, Gutsell, & Swearer, 2004). If a teacher understands the underlying beliefs that give rise to a particular reality, they are much more likely to develop insight-based interventions rather than those based on fear or punitive repercussions. Such an approach requires analyses of the interpersonal space between adults and children (Espelage et al., 2004), politicizing imbalances of power and status, and creating viable alternative models of adult-child relationships that resonate with this ethos. Such an approach, accompanied by credible practical suggestions, could elevate agency in individuals and create school-based protagonists for disrupting the status quo (Naker, 2009).
2. **Recognize that VAC at school is a systemic problem.** A school is a distinct environment fuelled by the conscious and unconscious beliefs, norms, procedures and methods of that community. Consequently, it is an established system for delivering underlying values and aspirations of the community (Freiberg, 1999; Heise, 2011; Hernández & Seem, 2004). Therefore, addressing the part of the operational culture of the school that condones or endows tacit consent for behaviours and ways of thinking that ultimately manifest as VAC at schools is a prerequisite for any intervention that hopes to create a sustained effect. Creating a model for why the

Entry-points through which the **Good School Toolkit** influences the operational culture of schools.



Diagram 2. Entry points through which the Good School Toolkit influences the operational culture of schools.

situation exists, and a hypothesis for how change will emerge, including what preconditions need to be in place, and what actions need to be taken, and by whom, and in what sequence (Hernández & Seem, 2004) is much more likely to yield a measurable outcome.

3. **Focus on creating a good school, not just a safe school.** Encourage an expansive understanding of the role of the school administration and teachers in a child's development (Cohen, 2006; Naker, 2009). Such an understanding creates imaginative discussions about the powerful roles teachers and schools in general can play in children's lives, leveraging values and traditions as well as personal beliefs about the importance of education as a life-long enterprise beyond the immediate economic utility. Such an approach recognizes that preventing violence against children at school is not only about the absence of certain kinds of acts (safe schools) but is also about the presence of certain types of

relationships (good schools).

4. **Create a continuum.** The broader the 'buy-in', the greater the likelihood of the idea gaining traction and being sustained over time (Butchart et al., 2016). Thus, it is important to create opportunities for every stakeholder to play a meaningful role in manifesting the intervention in their school. This requires involving parents, local leaders, and the local officials responsible for overseeing the delivery of education in their community. Developing an organic link between the home, the school and the community builds into the approach sustainability and diversity of solutions.

5. Conclusion

As global momentum for preventing VAC gathers pace, choices will inevitably have to be made in terms of where to apply resources and

how to prioritize investments. There is a compelling case for addressing VAC at schools as a top tier priority. Such a strategy has at least four distinct advantages. Firstly, creating a more imaginative and just operational culture is a powerful aim in its own right and leads to a whole range of desirable outcomes in multiple domains (Huang & Mossige, 2012; Leiter, 2007; Macmillan & Hagan, 2004; National Children's Advocacy Center [NCAC], 2013; Slade & Wissow, 2007). Secondly, there is convincing evidence that this strategy is effective at reducing multiple forms of VAC at school (Devries et al., 2015; Raising Voices, 2017). Thirdly, an expansive and just operational culture may be an important precondition for leveraging and synergizing other standalone interventions aimed at preventing VAC such as bullying or challenging sexual harassment (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Violence against Children, 2012). Finally, preliminary indications suggest that there are cost-effective (Greco et al., 2017) and feasible ways of implementing the approach at a practical level – and that the cost of not investing now may well be incalculable. For these reasons, we call for increased focus and investment in this strategy for school-wide approaches for preventing VAC at schools.

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