

School violence: where are the interventions?

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One billion children experience some form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence each year¹. Most of these children live in low- and middle-income countries, and much of this violence occurs in and around schools². For the 90% of children globally who are enrolled in primary school, violence may be even more common in school than at home². About 60% of children aged 6-10 years report recent physical and emotional violence from peers at school², and 46% to 95% of primary school students experience corporal punishment from teachers, including in countries with legal prohibitions³. Sexual violence and harassment are also common, experienced by more than 10% of students in 96 countries⁴. But some groups are at even higher risk. In Uganda, for example, 20% of disabled, but 10% of non-disabled primary school girls aged 11-14 years reported sexual violence, mainly from peers but also from teachers⁵.

Young people who experience physical, sexual or emotional violence are more likely to experience further violence, and to perpetrate it. Violence is associated with a host of adverse health and social outcomes, including increased risk of poor mental health, substance use, chronic inflammation, poor educational outcomes and worse future employment prospects. Teachers' use and tolerance of violence at school is likely to reinforce girls' and boys' use of violence in peer interactions and intimate partnerships, via social learning about how to navigate relationships. The cost is high: globally, the cost of violence in and around schools in lifetime earnings lost is estimated to be USD 11 trillion⁶. In recognition of the scale of the problem, commitments to reduce childhood violence feature across Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality) and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

But where are the effective interventions to address this? Prevention of multiple forms of school violence is critical. Yet at present, interventions are siloed and tend to focus on only one outcome, such as peer bullying or adolescent dating violence. Only three interventions which have sought to address both peer and teacher violence have been tested in randomised controlled trials⁷⁻⁹. These, and other studies mainly from high income countries, suggest that whole-school approaches which address the ecosystems in which children and adults teach and learn are promising ways to address multiple forms of school violence.

There is a glaring gap in evidence about which interventions are effective in low- and middle-income countries, where contextual norms and the epidemiology of school violence can differ substantially from high-income countries. In less well-resourced school systems, large student to teacher ratios and lower levels of professional support and training for school personnel are likely to increase use of harsh classroom management practices, and limit schools' ability to effectively change norms and interrupt the use violence.

According to the most recent global systematic reviews of separate literatures on different forms of school violence, very few interventions have been tested in low- or middle-income countries. None of the 67 trials using the WHO Health Promoting School Framework were of violence interventions in a low- or middle-income country¹⁰. Three of 42 bullying trials¹¹; one of 15 socio-emotional learning interventions¹², one on child sexual abuse prevention¹³, and one of 26 bystander programmes to reduce sexual violence and harassment¹⁴ were trialled in a low- or middle-income country. More encouragingly, all six trials of teacher violence prevention¹⁵ and 20 of 52 adolescent dating and intimate partner violence prevention intervention trials were conducted in low- or middle-income countries¹⁶.

Part of the core mission of schools in most countries is to promote social and emotional learning, making them an ideal setting for prosocial behaviour change interventions. Schools therefore have enormous potential to help children learn non-violent ways of relating both at and outside school. But at present, most schools instead contribute substantially to the perpetuation of violence. We call for urgent investment in: 1) development of interventions to address multiple forms of violence across school ecosystems; 2) research to understand what the key elements of school interventions are, and how they can be transported, adapted or tailored to diverse contexts, with a view to scalability and sustainability; and 3) a large-scale programme of testing intervention effectiveness in diverse low- and middle-income country contexts. We need to assess the best models for outcomes that are sustained over time, and then to develop the policy infrastructure,

capacities and skills that will make it possible to sustain and scale-up effective interventions at and through schools. We can't achieve the Sustainable Development Goals without this.

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