EdData II: Education Data for Decision Making

Brief Report on the Intersection of Safe Learning Environments and Educational Achievement: A Literature Review

A safe school "is free of danger and where there is an absence of possible harm; a place in which non-educators, educators, and all learners may work, teach and learn without fear or ridicule, intimidation, humiliation, or violence." Prinsloo (2006)[1]

Unfortunately, students in many schools around the world face corporal punishment, sexual and gender-based violence, fighting, bullying, gang-related violence, and cruel and humiliating forms of psychological punishment. Evidence from the United Kingdom indicates that 30 percent of children aged at least 7 years and 20 percent of children aged at least 11 years experience bullying at school (Brown and Taylor, 2008), with a smaller proportion of students experiencing frequent bullying. During the 2009–2010 U.S. school year, 23 percent of public schools reported that bullying occurred among students daily or weekly, and 9 percent reported widespread disorder in the classrooms (Robers et al., 2012).

School Violence in Developing Countries

An increasing body of evidence from developing countries suggests that school violence is common (Mullis et al., 2012a; Saito, n.d.). The 2012 National School Violence Study in South Africa found that more than one-fifth of high school students were threatened with violence or had been the victim of a physical assault, sexual assault, and/or robbery at school during the year. According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) global databases (2004–2013) in Kenya, approximately one out of five women and men (aged 18 to 24 years) who experienced sexual violence before 18 years of age reported that the first incident occurred at school. Similar rates of sexual violence occurring during childhood while traveling to or from school were reported by 23 percent of girls and women and 15 percent of boys and men aged 13 to 24 years in Tanzania and similarly in Zimbabwe.

Corporal punishment is permitted in 89 countries. In many cases in which corporal punishment is banned, the laws enforcing the protection of children may be poorly enforced. For example, a 2010 desk study (Too Often in Silence) of school violence in West and Central Africa revealed that nearly 55 percent of children were victims of corporal punishment in Benin and Senegal. The same study (an effort by UNICEF, Plan West Africa, Save the Children Sweden, and ActionAid) also found that in the Central African Republic, 52 percent of primary school teachers inflict corporal punishment daily.

RTI International's research on school effectiveness echoes these findings. In Haiti, approximately 71 percent of learners noted that teachers hit students who incorrectly answer questions. In Tanzania, this figure was approximately 44 percent.

Why Safe Schools Matter

It is well understood that school violence affects learning. Direct and indirect experiences of school violence can lead to children's lowered attendance and participation in class and poor attitudes toward life-long learning. School violence has also been found to affect students' physical and psychological health and emotional well-being.

In response to the growing recognition of the scale and severity of school violence, educational theorists have promoted the concept of school safety. School violence is a serious issue that threatens children's *access* to education and their right to a *quality* education. To understand exactly how school violence impacts educational achievement, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned RTI to conduct a literature review. The review focused on research in developing countries from the past 10 years that links school violence and educational achievement.

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[1] References can be found in the full report available on the USAID's EdData II Web site at www.eddataglobal.org.

The interplay of school violence and school disruption on educational achievement is complex and not well understood (Cornell and Mayer, 2010). Many studies are concerned with the proximate outcomes of experiencing violence such as school avoidance, inability to concentrate, and/or depression. Research on the linkages between school violence and educational achievement in developing countries is even more sparse and patchy, making it difficult to determine reliable comparisons among locations or analyze trends.

When We Talk About School Violence, What Do We Mean?

In developing and developed countries, vulnerability to bullying and other types of school violence varies based on gender, sexuality, disability, stigmatized illness (including HIV/AIDS), refugee status, or minority group status (Jones et al., 2008; Pinheiro, 2006). Although research has made considerable progress in documenting and conceptualizing violence in schools, there is a lack of research examining the impact of school violence on objectively measured educational achievement. It is difficult to separate school violence issues from all of the other problems that typify resource-poor schools and are associated with low achievement (e.g., poor teaching standards, lack of pedagogical materials). Developing countries also lack reliable and/or comparable test scores and large-scale quantitative surveys face considerable, practical obstacles to implementation.

Yet, despite the gaps in existing knowledge, there is compelling evidence that school violence has a negative impact on educational achievement in developing countries.

In general, school-wide perceptions of school safety, discipline, and bullying were all related to average reading achievement. Students from non-English/ Afrikaans South Africa and Botswana schools (2011 prePIRLS) whose principals reported moderate problems of discipline and safety in their schools had substantially lower reading achievement than pupils whose principals reported "hardly any problems." The main 2011 Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS) of developed countries was consistent with prePIRLS findings—the safer the school as reported by their teachers, the higher the students' average reading achievement (Mullis et al., 2012b). Similarly for mathematics achievement, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS; Mullis et al. [2012a]) found that students whose principals reported "moderate problems" in their schools had substantially lower mathematics achievement, by 45 points on average, than students whose principals reported "hardly any problems." In addition, there was a 32-point difference in achievement between students who reported they were "almost never" bullied and pupils who said they were bullied "approximately weekly."

The Low International Policy Profile of School Violence Is an Opportunity for Impact

Relevant research on school violence in developed countries has far outweighed that in developing countries. Regions other than sub-Saharan Africa are especially under-represented. If more developing countries participated in the prePIRLS, the linkage between school-wide violence and achievement in the developing world may be better understood.

The significance of school violence for developing countries should not be measured by its low policy profile at international and even national levels; instead, this is a leadership opportunity to

- Review programs for reducing school violence in developing countries
- Support large-scale, gender-sensitive longitudinal and comparative research
- Disseminate evidence-based best practice and support a wider roll-out of effective interventions
- Raise awareness among national education policy makers and other donor agencies
- Strengthen widely used school frameworks by including school safety metrics.

Overall, a critical mass of evidence must be compiled to highlight the profound and long-lasting harm that school violence inflicts on its immediate victims and their societies. To generate this research, future studies should include qualitative data to complement the findings of large-scale quantitative surveys and context-specific, school- and household-based studies. The studies should also focus on developing countries in existing cross-national studies.