

MODELS OF SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION POLICIES FOR REDUCING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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Abstract: We experience the presence of violence as a reality, and we feel it even more by showing violence on television as a “normal” part of our daily lives. Garbarino argues that millions of children and adolescents around the world grow up surrounded by violence (Dogutas, 2011, p. 2), and even more frightening is the fact that it occurs in places that are perceived as safe, such as family and school.

School violence as a subject of public discussion has become dominant in the last few decades in the world (Show, 2004, p. 94) although this does not mean that it is a new problem in the societies. In fact, it is believed that since there are schoolyards, there are bullies in the school, there are fights between children, there are cases related to extortion of money or the children are experiencing harassment from other children. But dilemmas over whether any form of school violence is a normal part of every student’s childhood are slowly disappearing, and research is focusing on exploring many different aspects of school violence. In addition to the analysis of the phenomenological and etiological characteristics of school violence, an even more important aspect of the analysis is which prevention policies, programs and measures are most effective in preventing or reducing it.

Therefore, the subject of this paper are the models of school-based preventive policies and programs which aim to prevent school violence, with the purpose to determine their effectiveness or their impact in terms of developing a positive child behaviour and reducing the violence in schools. Through the analysis of the literature, it can be noticed that in different countries and in different social contexts, different types of school-based prevention policies and programs that are applied show different results. Hence, the solutions to how to deal with school violence are very diverse, ranging from classroom conflict management to the development of national programs, from the creation of experimental schools to school-police-legal partnership teams. Certain preventive policies have aim to enact more rules, to tighten the sanctions (zero tolerance

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policy) (Carra, 2009, p. 105), to strengthen school safety through the involvement of the police and other security measures and some of the policies are focused on learning socio-emotional skills or they are based on principles of the restorative discipline. Therefore, from a scientific and applicative point of view, it is necessary to identify the positive aspects of different policies and programs and to apply them appropriately to prevent or reduce certain types of violence in a certain social context.

Keywords: models, school violence, prevention, children

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children and among children is an important topic in modern criminological and victimological research in recent decades. The data from some studies show that up to 50% of all children aged 2 to 17 years are thought to have been affected by a form of violence (physical, sexual, or emotional abuse) in the past year - the equivalent of 1 billion children (Hillis et al, 2016, cited in World Health Organization, 2019). Experiences of violence, particularly in childhood, can damage children's physical and mental health and affect their whole lives. Violence can also affect educational outcomes and children's potential to lead successful and prosperous lives (World Health Organization, 2019). In the hope that learning about violence in the early childhood can prevent it from occurring, schools often accept a mandate to offer violence prevention programs (Tutty, et al., 2005). There are several reasons why schools are places where prevention efforts should be implemented. First, early intervention is essential for learning nonviolent choices and the school is an ideal environment for that (Tutty, et al., 2005). Second, simply providing education and organized activities for children can help prevent violence: schools and education systems can help by encouraging parents and children to enrol and attend. Having quality education can increase the likelihood of taking part in organized activities, which can make it less likely that children will become involved in aggressive behaviour or violence (World Health Organization, 2019). The social, behavioural and academic success in school often predicts the adjustment and productivity of children in their adulthood (Tutty, et al., 2005). Third, skilled teachers can deliver violence prevention programs and act as significant role models outside the family or community life. Schools can reach parents, improving parenting practices that may be harmful to children's health and education (World Health Organization, 2019). Fourth, violence should be seen as a major health issue, which should be addressed in the school curriculum (Tutty, et al., 2005). Based on the above-mentioned reasons, schools should increasingly engage in the development of effective programs for the prevention of violent behaviour in children and school violence. Prevention programs should be adapted to the needs of school but it is also essential to have them evaluated occasionally in order for their effectiveness to be determined and the need for their modification, supplement, or complete replacement with some other school based prevention program.

MODELS OF SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION POLICIES FOR SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Solutions for responding to school violence have emerged over the past two decades, from classroom conflict management to the development of national programs, from the creation of experimental schools to school-police-legal partnership teams. Certain preventive policies are oriented toward increasing the rules, tightening sanctions (zero tolerance policy) (Carra, 2009, p. 105), to strengthen



school safety through the involvement of the police and other security measures. On the other hand, there are models that are based on learning socio-emotional skills or on restorative discipline.

When we elaborate about different prevention policies for school violence, first there is a question whether schools need external or internal prevention programs. External prevention programs for violence prevention are usually offered to schools by an external agency that has expertise in that area. One advantage of externally offered programs is that those who present the program are most often professionals that know the material well and are comfortable with the topic (Tutty, et al., 2005). Staff from external programs can comfortably discuss the violence prevention concepts with children, thus relieving teachers of some of the responsibility to handle disclosures and potentially embarrassing material. A disadvantage of external programs is that the use of the program is voluntary; only a portion of the children in an area will have access to the program (Tutty, et al., 2005). Those most likely to need the information, the individuals who know little about the problem, are least likely to be aware of the programs. Another disadvantage of external programs is that staff is in schools for a limited time. Internal programs are integrated directly into the schools curricula, into health or family life education classes. Another advantage of internal programs is that teachers can integrate violence prevention concepts with other relevant topics, such as self-esteem and resolving conflict, or as issues emerge between students. A disadvantage of school-based curricula is that some teachers may feel that the topic area is beyond what they should be expected to teach (Tutty, et al., 2005). It may be ideal to integrate both external and internal prevention programs for school violence.

Regardless of whether they are internal or external prevention programs, they can be part of a variety of different models based on different approaches and principles regarding the prevention of school violence. One of the most famous, but also the most criticized model for prevention of violence in schools is the **model of zero tolerance**. This model is based on the basic premise of punishing any violation of the rules, which means that for various student offenses such as violence, carrying a weapon, cigarettes, alcohol or drug use, they will always be punished. Zero-tolerance policies have gained widespread popularity among the US politicians and administrators as they promise to find a good solution to a difficult problem (Skiba, et al., 2011, p. 24). A study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 79% of the schools included in the study had zero-tolerance policies (Flaherty, 2001, pp. 41-43). This type of policies and programs are stimulated by many factors. Among the factors leading to zero tolerance policies (primarily in the United States) are the school tragedies that occurred at Littleton, Colorado, Jonesboro, Ark., and in West Paducah School, Kentucky (Ashley & Burke, 2009). *But is the zero-tolerance policy effective?* It is hard to imagine that if something is banned it is enough to solve a problem such as school violence. The spirit of zero-tolerance policy is a punitive reaction and results in exclusion, conflict and refusal, so with this type of policy, the school “shuts its eyes” to violence and reduces the value of taking appropriate and different intervention (Twemlow, SW and Sacco, FC, 2008, pp. 11-13). Due to lack of resources, school staff often relies on quick correction, low-budget disciplinary actions that push students out of the classroom (Skiba, et al., 2011, p. 24). **Accordingly, there is no evidence that zero-tolerance policies can improve student behaviour, school climate or overall school safety.** Numerous exclusions have not been shown to be effective in changing student behaviour or improving school safety. One researcher concluded that students, in order to reduce their exclusion rates, change schools instead of improving their behaviour (Skiba, et al., 2011, p. 24). These policies have been criticized for “throwing” the problematic students out of school on streets, where there is a potential danger of being under certain influences that may further enforce their tendency to commit violence (Ashley & Burke, 2009). These punishments, by excluding students from school, provide more opportunities for those who are away from school (often with little parental supervision) to socialize with peers who show violent or deviant behaviour.



Law Enforcement Model. Schools increasingly respond to the perceived increase in violence by incorporating a law enforcement model to reduce violence among children. **Measures underpinning this model of prevention policy include** *the use of metal detectors, increased police presence in schools, student and staff cards, a ban on cell phone use in schools, school uniforms and mandatory punishment.* However, a study comparing violent and safe schools found that safe schools were described not as schools with police presence or which use police tactics, but as schools with leadership that inspires in the students a “sense of fairness, belonging and empowerment for effective change” (Kelker, 2003, pp. 71-75). This model is more suitable in cases when there is a danger for student’s safety by third parties entering the school, but not in cases when there is an occurrence of psychological forms of violence in schools.

Model of learning social skills. The basic premise of the social skills learning model is that differences in opinion and conflicts exist between children in the school environment. Thus, if schools aim to improve children’s behaviour, a fundamentally different approach is needed, i.e., the one *which is oriented on integrating learning and strengthening socio-emotional skills in students’ daily interactions.* This approach assumes that conflict is inevitable, educators and students need to understand the dynamics of the conflict and be prepared to deal with disagreements in constructive ways. Therefore, students can receive training for development of their social skills, problem solving and peaceful conflict resolution.

In the focus of the programs based on this model is the learning of socio-emotional skills. Based on the review of such programs, skills can be grouped into three categories: ***emotional processes, social/interpersonal skills, and cognitive regulation*** (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Emotional processes include emotional knowledge and expression, emotional regulation and behaviour regulation, and empathy. Social/interpersonal skills include understanding social cues, interpreting other people’s behaviour, managing social situations, positive interaction with peers and adults, and other pro-social behaviours. Cognitive regulation includes attention control, inhibition of inappropriate reactions, cognitive flexibility, or shifting (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

When it comes to the positive effects of this approach/model, numerous studies highlight the positive results of applying exercises that are based on learning socio-emotional skills. In fact, this approach has several advantages such as, time efficiency, low cost, and integration in school curricula. In terms of effects, evaluations of the programs that are based on the model for improving behaviour through learning socio-emotional skills show promising results for students. Meta-analysis of evaluations found positive effects (Durlak et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of evaluations of 213 primary school prevention programs analysed the positive effects through six categories. In all six categories: socio-emotional skills, attitudes towards self and others, positive social behaviours, behavioural problems, emotional stress, school success - the results were positive. However, the authors of the evaluation found that ***for effectiveness of the programs only the program characteristics are not enough***, but the key factors are ***the persistence and quality of its implementation*** (Jones & Bouffard, 2012), which means that they need to be included in daily interactions, relationships and school practices.

Based on the consistent evidence of effectiveness (Kelker, 2003), it can be concluded that this approach/model in education and in skills development can be the most effective approach for improving children’s attitudes and behaviour, especially in the field of primary prevention and for increase of emotional intelligence.

Model of restorative discipline. The basic philosophy of restorative discipline which is based on restorative justice (established for the peaceful settlement of disputes) has found its way into education, recognizing that ***the traditional approach is inappropriate for preventing and resolving problems.***



In fact, restorative discipline is seen as alternative for the zero-tolerance policy that focuses on excluding students even for various types of inappropriate behaviour.

The model of restorative discipline is based on a different philosophy from traditional discipline approaches in schools. **The restorative discipline approach asks the questions:** What happened?; Who was injured and what are the effects?; How can the mistake be corrected?; What did we learn in order to take into account the different opinions next time?, **in contrast to the traditional response-oriented approach**, What happened?; Who is to blame?; What is the appropriate punishment? (Hopkins, 2004, cited in Meyer & Evans, 2012). **Acceptance of the use of restorative justice principles by teachers and families in schools is commonly referred to as restorative practices** (Meyer & Evans, 2012). The essential belief of restorative practices is that there will be positive changes in people (students) when those who are in competent position do things WITH THEM, rather than targeting THEM or FOR THEM. Therefore, successful restorative practices:

- recognize relationships as a centre for community building;
- build systems that recognize inappropriate behaviours and injuries in a way that strengthens relationships;
- focus on the injure, rather than just on the breaking of the rule;
- give voice to the injured person;
- include cooperation in problem solving;
- enhance change and development;
- emphasize responsibility (Restorative justice or Restorative practices, n.d.).

McCluskey et al (2008) describe some of the key features of the schools that use restorative practices to improve student's behaviour:

- There is a positive school climate, which includes all students, where students have a strong sense of belonging;
- Students have positive relationships with adults at school and feel confident with each other, have high respect for their school community and can fix things when they do something wrong;
- School staff focuses on enhancing student achievement, rejects explanations for failure, and takes action for successful educational outcomes;
- Families feel welcome at school, participate in activities designed for parents, regularly receive information about the student and are involved in supporting the child's appropriate education, including actively locating their problems;
- The average daily school attendance is high;
- Students receive support and encouragement for their educational and socio-emotional needs, including positive relationships with the peers and the teachers;
- There is a comprehensive system of restorative discipline policies and practices with clear definitions of behaviours and consequences, and they are known in the schools and in the families;
- There is an on-going support - including threat assessment, crisis management and school suspensions to deal with serious behavioural problems;



- Restorative practices and mutual respect are the basis for interaction between the members of the school community, not retribution and punishment (Meyer & Evans, 2012).

The effectiveness and the success that demonstrate the restorative discipline policies is a sufficient argument that this approach should be part of any school prevention policy that aims to prevent or reduce child violent behaviour.

WHICH MODEL OF PREVENTION POLICY IS MOST EFFECTIVE FOR REDUCTION OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE?

There is no single answer to this question. In essence, it can be concluded that there is no universal solution. As William Modzeleski of the US Department of Education emphasized, ***“There is no one program, no silver bullet, so that you can get one program up and say, here it is if you put this program in your school, you are going to resolve violence”*** (Vlokh & Snell, 1998). If all schools were the same, with similar rates of violence, with the same students, with the same quality of teachers and similarly dedicated staff, similar budget funds, then they would be free to establish the same policy for all schools. But the schools are not the same!

The first step before deciding which approach the school will apply is the assessment of violence. This assessment should include multiple assessment methods and use multiple data sources. Capaldi et al. (1997) argue that data should be collected from a variety of sources (e.g., home, school, community) from multiple sources of information (observers, children, peers, parents, teachers) and using a variety of methods (lab tasks, classroom, playground, questionnaires, interviews, standardized tests, records) (Swearer & Espelage, 2004, pp. 2-4). After *analysing the context in which programs should be adopted and implemented* **schools can identify the optimal approach and particular programs (with positive results from evaluations) that can resolve the issue of school violence.**

Vlokh & Snell point out that, *the ideal violence prevention policy should be adjusted to the needs of each school* (Vlokh & Snell, 1998). *The schools need a range of approaches ranging from the daily routines for students to school’s extensive efforts to promote a supportive and positive climate, from programs for learning of socio-emotional skills for all students to intensive services for the students who need them most.* Some of the schools should use multiple approaches, from daily exercises for learning socio-emotional skills to intensive interventions (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Other schools can start with daily exercises and add other components (interventions) if there is a need for that (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In fact, the best approach is the implementation of integrated prevention models, which would mean the fusion of independent strategies or programs into a coherent program or strategy in schools (Domitrovich, et al., 2010). These integrated programs that target multiple risk and protective factors in an integrated manner may have a synergistic effect on preventing children violent behaviour and school violence at all.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When analysing the issue of models of preventive policies for school violence, we can conclude that there is no ideal model of prevention policy, because the needs and problems of each school are different. What should be emphasized is that every school prevention policy should not be oriented solely



on reaction to the violence, preventing repeated violent behaviour of students, intimidation and punishment of the students, but it is necessary:

- to contain a series of approaches, *from daily activities, i.e. to have an integrated model of prevention, based on the model of learning socio-emotional skills (as part of primary prevention and the foundation of any preventive policy) and restorative approach in reaction to the violence, which is based on reconciliation, correction, learning from mistakes and consequences, responsibility, renewal and building trust, active cooperation of all parties including the victim, parents, school staff and providing assistance and reintegration for the victim and student with violent behaviour;*
- to emphasize the active role of students, family, as well as the wider environment in *undertaking* coordinated activities and interventions and actions for improving child behaviour and prevention of school violence.

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