

## Risks and Prevention of School Violence: Impact of Institutional Climate and Teacher Role

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### ABSTRACT

School violence represents a significant challenge that affects both students and teachers, negatively impacting the teaching-learning process and the well-being of the educational community. A positive institutional climate, supported by effective leadership, clear norms, and healthy interpersonal relationships, can significantly reduce violence in schools. Furthermore, administrative management and institutional support play a key role in creating a safe environment. Community violence also influences school violence, emphasizing the need for prevention strategies that address both the school and community contexts. The teacher's role is essential in preventing violence, as the perception of their academic competence and the quality of their relationship with students influence classroom coexistence. Educational interventions, such as socio-emotional education programs and conflict resolution, are key tools to reduce school violence, but face barriers like lack of resources and emotional responses from parents to disciplinary measures. It is crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach involving the entire educational community for effective prevention.

**Keywords:** school violence, institutional climate, prevention, teacher role, educational intervention..

### 1. INTRODUCTION

School violence represents a significant challenge that affects both students and teachers, negatively impacting the teaching-learning process and the well-being of the educational community. Within this context, the institutional climate and the teacher's role play a crucial part in preventing and mitigating such acts of violence. A positive school environment, characterized by effective leadership, clear disciplinary norms, and healthy interpersonal relationships, can considerably reduce the incidence of violence in the educational setting (Huang et al., 2020).

A favorable school climate is distinguished by strong administrative leadership and the consistent application of disciplinary regulations. Studies have shown that effective school management and constant administrative support reduce the likelihood of teachers being victims of threats or physical aggression from students (Huang, Eddy & Camp, 2020). Likewise, the implementation of evidence-based school safety policies and the strengthening of the sense of community contribute to a safer and more conducive learning environment (Peist, McMahon, Davis-Wright & Keys, 2023).

The community environment directly influences school dynamics. Violence present in the community can transfer to the school, affecting the institutional climate and weakening teachers' connection to the institution. In a hierarchical multilevel analysis conducted in Chile, Varela et al. (2020) identified that high levels of violence in the community and educational institutions constitute risk factors that deteriorate the quality of the school environment and affect teachers' emotional stability. Therefore, it is essential that school violence prevention programs include intervention strategies that encompass both the school and community contexts.

Teachers' perceptions of their academic competence and the quality of their relationship with students act as a protective factor against violence in the classroom. A positive classroom climate, based on trust and mutual respect, helps reduce conflicts and improve school coexistence (Jiménez et al., 2021). This aspect is crucial, as an environment where teachers feel capable and valued fosters a more harmonious learning dynamic and reduces the likelihood of conflicts between students and teachers.

Educational strategies for preventing school violence include socio-emotional education programs, peaceful conflict resolution, and the promotion of values such as empathy and tolerance. However, the implementation of these initiatives faces obstacles such as inadequate school conditions and parents' emotional responses to disciplinary measures (Korean Society for the Study of Local Educational Management, 2024). Overcoming these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that involves the entire educational community and ensures the necessary resources for the successful implementation of interventions.

Various programs have proven effective in reducing school violence. A notable example is "Interaction Competencies with Children for Teachers" (ICC-T), a program developed in Tanzania that has reduced teachers' use of violence through classroom management training and positive discipline strategies (Nkuba, Hermenau, Goessmann & Hecker, 2018). The effectiveness of such interventions lies in their preventive approach, which prioritizes teacher training in communication skills and student behavior management.

In addition to training programs, it is essential to implement institutional policies that reinforce teachers' and students' emotional well-being. Research suggests that access to psychological support and the promotion of a safe school environment can significantly mitigate violence in schools (Espelage et al., 2013). Furthermore, designing educational policies that strengthen the teacher's role and establish clear response mechanisms to violent situations is essential to ensuring a safe and healthy learning environment.

The institutional climate and the teacher's role play a key part in preventing school violence. A positive school environment, characterized by administrative support, effective implementation of regulations, and the promotion of healthy interpersonal relationships, significantly reduces violence in educational institutions. Likewise, strengthening the teaching role through training programs and psychological support contributes to improving coexistence and security in the school environment. To achieve sustainable change, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach that involves the entire educational community and ensures the effective implementation of evidence-based prevention strategies.

### ***Background and Literature Review***

In 1992, at the beginning of the Decennial Plan, the then-Secretary of State for Education, Fine Arts, and Worship (SEEBAC), in efforts to create better living conditions for teachers, decided to offer an incentive to teachers working in so-called High-Risk Schools. The criteria for selection were schools located in marginalized areas with precarious economic conditions, embedded in neighborhoods forming poverty belts and situated on illegally occupied land.

In the city of San Francisco de Macorís, the schools classified as high-risk included Santa Ana, Juan Pablo Duarte, San Francisco, 24 de Abril, Gregorio Luperón, Paulina Valenzuela, Juan Pablo II, Josefa Antonia Perdomo, and Puerto Rico School.

After the conclusion of the Decennial Plan, the high-risk school category disappeared, but the conditions of poverty and violence persisted. This situation prompted institutions such as Casa Abierta, the Guidance Department of the Ministry of Education and Culture, E. León Jimenes, UNESCO, and others to design and implement programs aimed at reducing tensions, improving peaceful coexistence, and providing guidelines for the prevention of psycho-social problems.

According to the Conflict Resolution Project sponsored by the Ministry of Education and UNESCO, "violence in our schools has been increasing due to multiple social, family, and economic factors. This has led to the need to equip teachers with strategic techniques for conflict resolution."

This program aimed to promote self-esteem, communication, human rights awareness, and conflict resolution strategies. It involved teachers, parents, and students in the first cycle of Basic Education at the 24 de Abril and Gregorio Luperón schools in this city.

During the 1990s, programs such as "Yo Tengo Valor" and "Yo Tengo Control" were developed, sponsored by the Ministry of Education and E. León Jimenes, involving all sectors of the educational process and implemented at the Initial, Basic, and Secondary education levels.

Casa Abierta has developed numerous school programs since 1991. The first of these programs included cooperative games as part of Parents' School activities, initially piloted in Santa Ana, Vista al Valle, and Gregorio Luperón schools, with the primary objective of integrating families and schools.

Currently, educators and school counselors express growing concern about the expressions of violence occurring within and around the cited schools. These expressions range from homicides (such as the tragic case where a teacher and the school principal were murdered), physical assaults, fights, and conflicts involving different school actors.

### ***Problem Statement***

One of the most evident characteristics of the current Dominican social reality is the prevalence of violence across all sectors of society. There is a form of social alarm due to the daily occurrences of violent actions within families, neighborhoods, and Dominican communities.

As a fundamental institution within the social structure, the school is not exempt from this reality, often reflecting societal tensions and, at times, exacerbating them.

What do we know about antisocial behavior phenomena in schools? This research aims to understand the psycho-social foundations of school violence and its main manifestations, proposing alternative solutions for peaceful coexistence in educational institutions.

The starting point is the structural violence stemming from the marginalization experienced in the neighborhoods where basic education schools are located, within the broader framework of deprivation affecting Dominicans. According to UNICEF, approximately 35% of the population lives in extreme poverty, impacting schools through material and socio-cultural limitations (Basic Education Program Document, p. 5).

Violence in schools has increased, with conflicts between peers and the constant aggressive behavior of both youth and adults in the surrounding environment. Additionally, frequent social conflicts caused by demands for basic services contribute to violent situations within schools and their spaces.

Teacher suspensions, vehicle traffic disruptions, the intrusion of young people into school premises, student confrontations, group clashes, police interventions, and raffles have become daily occurrences in the educational setting, creating uncertainty for students, parents, teachers, and the community.

The climate of insecurity and helplessness, combined with the high student population in primary schools, limited educational and financial resources, and the age differences within this population (ranging from 5 to 16 years old), fosters a hostile environment that hinders educational work.

It seems there are internal factors within schools that facilitate conflict situations, such as the lack of systematic value programs, discipline models, and high student enrollment. "It will be important to intervene in those factors that create a microclimate conducive to learning in the classroom (so that students don't fight, don't bother each other, and develop good friendships)." (Latin American Laboratory for Educational Quality Assessment, 2002, p. 9).

Furthermore, external factors such as the actions derived from a stratified and exclusionary social organization, continuous exposure to media with a high level of violence, socio-cultural environments in economic and social crises, and family breakdowns contribute to vulnerabilities in socialization within the school environment.

In the context of this study, multiple questions arise that will be addressed. These questions will serve as a permanent reference point as the objectives are pursued. Among these questions are:

- What types of violent actions occur in schools located in high-risk areas?
- How often do conflicts arise within schools and their immediate surrounding spaces?
- What are the socio-demographic characteristics of the social actors involved in these conflicts?
- What are the attitudes of counselors and principals regarding internal and external violence in schools?
- What is the influence of the physical structure of the school on acts of violence?

### **PURPOSE**

To determine the expressions of violence in the schools at the Basic Education level located in high-risk areas in the city of San Francisco de Macorís.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

- Characterize the classroom climate and the types of violent actions occurring in basic schools located in high-risk areas.
- Determine the frequency of violent acts both within and around the school environment.
- Describe the school infrastructures and their influence on expressions of violence.

### **CONCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND TYPES**

J. Galtung (1985) defines violence as something inevitable that obstructs human self-realization, explaining that individuals experience effective, somatic, and mental realizations below their potential realizations. Jordi Planella (1998) also considers violence as situations in which two or more individuals confront each other, where one or more are physically or psychologically harmed.

The concept of school violence is imprecise, as it might lead to a tendency to treat insults, arguments, or physical aggression equally.

Romero (2000) identifies six categories of antisocial behavior to differentiate:

- Disruption in classrooms
- Discipline problems (conflicts between teachers and students)
- Bullying among peers
- Vandalism or property damage
- Physical violence (assaults, extortions)
- Sexual abuse

### **DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR**

It is common to hear that teachers have lost all authority in their classrooms, that they feel distracted, unable to control their group, maintain basic discipline, or earn respect. At the same time, students constantly and openly challenge the authority of their teachers in front of their peers, gaining security and self-confidence, and gaining respect and acceptance within their peer group while undermining the teacher's authority.

Challenging authority is inherent to human development, but so is the understanding of the limits of one's freedom of action.

In educational practice, responsibility, self-esteem, and effort should be promoted. If we want students to think and act independently, with the ability to make free and appropriate decisions, we must foster their ability to self-regulate.

Savater argues that authority means "helping to grow, and this is the responsibility of adults." (Savater, *The Value of Educating*).

The challenge we face now is a new form of authoritarianism exerted by a group (the students) against an individual (the

teacher), which can lead to difficult situations for proper coexistence. These situations are common in classrooms and concern teachers.

The defiant behavior of some students and general indiscipline (called disruptive behavior), although not especially severe, affects teachers significantly, often leading to "burnout syndrome" or the "burned-out teacher" syndrome, without discounting the possibility that these behaviors may eventually lead to violent situations.

For a teenager, challenging their teacher gives them status within the group and, at times, is supported by their parents, who see school as a space of custody where the teacher is a service provider, not a role model. This devalues the teacher's work in front of their own children and society.

The family educates, the school forms, and society shapes; that is, the family transmits the values with which the individual should grow, the school trains to learn to know, do, and be (Delors Report, UNESCO), and society shapes all that learning and formation, offering a model consistent with democratic principles that set limits on what is tolerable.

Basic rules should combine the right of all students to feel safe at school, free from any form of aggression, ridicule, or discrimination based on any aspect of their life. Furthermore, these rules should address the responsibilities of the teachers, school leadership, and all school staff. Disruption in the classroom is perhaps the event that most interferes with student learning and has the greatest influence on daily life. This situation "drags" the courses into an environment of hostility and unhealthy coexistence. Disciplinary problems are reflected in conflicts between teachers and students, ranging from resistance to classes to disrespectful arguments that can completely destabilize daily life. Bullying expresses processes of intimidation or victimization among peers (classmates or students in educational institutions). These processes cause one or more students to harass others—victims—through insults, rumors, gossip, social isolation, among others. Vandalism involves aggression toward the classroom and school property (very common here in San Francisco de Macorís, where students from other public schools combine with local students to destroy property, throw stones, burn tires, and litter the streets). Physical aggression is violence against individuals, which, according to studies on the subject, makes up less than 10% of antisocial behavior cases; as many conflicts occur in schools, but they do not involve extreme violence. Sexual harassment is a hidden form of antisocial behavior that is severely sanctioned socially, and when it comes to light, it causes outrage and scandal. What aspects or variables influence the occurrence of violent acts or behaviors in schools? According to the studies by Ortega (1995–1996 and 1997), three dimensions should be considered:

1. **Developmental:** This refers to the socio-emotional development process, related to the types of relationships students establish with their peers.
2. **Psychosocial:** This includes interpersonal relationships, the socio-affective dynamics of the communities and groups in which students live, the complexities of the socialization process for children and young people, and, lastly,
3. **Educational Dimension:** This includes the setup of scenarios and activities in which peer relationships take place, the effect of different teaching styles, school discipline models, communication systems within the school and classroom, the use of power, and the socio-affective climate in which school life develops.

In summary, we can talk about internal and external variables in the school that produce violent or antisocial actions. Among these are:

- **Individual Variables:** These relate to personal characteristics of students and teachers. For example: What causes a teacher to adopt violent behavior toward children? These could be issues with training, an inability to resolve conflicts, dissatisfaction with salary and living conditions, or low tolerance for diversity.
- **School and Classroom Variables:** These relate to internal school factors and specific violent phenomena. For example, there is a direct relationship between the school curriculum, evaluation systems, group organization and dynamics, student enrollment issues, the effort to fragment society, the teaching methods implemented, value-based training programs, discipline models, and the likelihood of violent phenomena or behaviors occurring in the classroom or school.

- **Social and Environmental Variables:** These include the influence of the family, peer groups, and society at large. Some major external variables to the school include:
  - Structural violence resulting from social structure and organization, which conditions and filters into schools.
  - Violence in the media, which omnipresently affects students, especially those more vulnerable due to being in a formative stage.
  - Family violence experienced by students within their families and community settings.
  - Violent models that children and young people observe and learn from their environments.

**Teacher-Student Relationship** According to Hugo Torres (2005), the starting point for valuing the role of the teacher in student formation should come from analyzing the teacher's own resources as a subject—his or her personal history—the histories of the individuals interacting with them—the students—the story they contribute to the classroom, and the socio-historical conditions in which the adventure of the educational process takes place. The teacher-student bond is influenced by the characteristics of the social and institutional environment, and these bonds define the type of behavior structure that will manifest in the classroom. The teacher's way of being and how they teach are highly significant, not only for academic learning but also for the socialization learning that the student will register and project in their relationships with society. The philosophy behind the educational process will determine the type of classroom dynamics developed because the methods used will depend on what is expected to be achieved: a mechanistic education creates vertical, authoritarian, paternalistic relationships with repressive control norms in the classroom, which can lead to spaces prone to conflict or school violence. In contrast, a constructivist philosophy will foster horizontal relationships, where the teacher is not only seen as a bearer of knowledge but also as a generator of attitudes and promoter of social interests. The interaction between the teacher and students is one of the most important social influences determining the direction of the student's personality development as well as the effectiveness of learning. Thus, the act of educating involves very complex interactions involving values, emotions, communication, and symbols. A poor teacher-student relationship can cause depression and anxiety in students, which may affect their performance and how they relate to others. Teachers can also suffer a loss of confidence in their professional abilities, and the number of work absences can increase. The teacher-student reference framework creates conditions that allow the child or young person to reflect on the world and their ability to operate within it, creating awareness.

***Strategies for Preventing Violent Behavior and Promoting a Culture of Peace and Coexistence:***

- Make the school a comfortable, safe place where good interpersonal relationships are practiced—positive teacher-student relationships.
- Proper conflict management (training teachers and students for these purposes).
- Work with parents and the community.
- Develop cooperative group work.
- Value democratic management of coexistence.
- Promote dialogue and cooperation.
- Educate for respect and tolerance.
- Educate for participation.
- Educate for solidarity.
- Institutionalize values education for students, teachers, and parents.
- Focus on conciliatory, assertive, and prosocial behavior rather than hostile behavior.

According to Juan Manuel Moreno Olmedilla (2000), one of the first difficulties faced by those analyzing violent phenomena in schools is the imprecision of language. Insults, acts of vandalism, physical aggression with weapons, among others, should

not be considered within the same category. This author states that "there is a clear tendency in public opinion, and perhaps among many teachers (who, let us not forget, are the main opinion-makers about teaching and schools), to 'lump everything together' and to simplify that these are different manifestations of the same violent disorder that characterizes today's children and young people."

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach with an exploratory design, as it seeks to understand the phenomenon in its real context without manipulating variables. It focuses on collecting information through focus groups and exploration interviews, which allows for an in-depth understanding of the studied issue.

### ***Research Design***

The design is observational and cross-sectional, as the data is collected at a specific point in time without the researcher intervening in the variables.

### ***Population and Sample***

#### ***The population of the study includes:***

- Students: 7,500 students from five schools in high-risk areas.
- Teachers: 250 participants.
- Administrators: 10 principals and 15 vice-principals.
- Support staff: 75 counselors and administrative personnel.

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

Focus groups were used, a qualitative technique that allows for analyzing participants' perceptions and experiences. To structure the discussion, a question guide was designed, based on the study objectives and previous interviews with counselors from the participating institutions.

### ***Instruments***

- Question guide for focus groups.
- Exploratory interview with counselors.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

- Participants selected for the study had to meet the following criteria:
- Be teachers, students, counselors, or administrative staff from the educational institutions included in the research.
- Belong to one of the five schools located in high-risk areas.
- Be available and consent to participate in the focus groups.
- Have experience or knowledge of the phenomenon under study.

### ***Exclusion Criteria***

- The following factors determined the exclusion of potential participants:
- Individuals not affiliated with the five selected institutions.
- Teachers, students, or counselors unwilling to participate in the focus groups.
- Members of the educational community with no relation to the phenomenon under study or whose information would not contribute to the research objective.
- Participants who did not meet the ethical criteria established for the research, such as informed consent.

### 3. RESULTS

**Table 1 Violence Incident Record**

Category	Research Findings	Previous Studies
Types of violence	Fights, verbal and physical aggression, conflicts between teachers, incidents with bladed weapons, theft, and external violence.	Huang, Eddy & Camp (2020); Peist, McMahon, Davis-Wright & Keys (2023) highlight the negative impact of school violence on safety and well-being.
Landmark cases	Principal assaulted, student murdered in front of the school, bladed weapons being made.	Espelage et al. (2013) emphasize the need for intervention strategies.

**Table 2 Incident Frequency**

Category	Research Findings	Previous Studies
Number of incidents	5 to 8 events daily in both shifts.	Jiménez et al. (2021); Varela et al. (2020) report high recurrence in schools with weak institutional climates.

**Table 3 Classroom Climate**

Category	Research Findings	Previous Studies
Classroom environment	High indiscipline, verbal and physical aggression, theft, attacks on teachers.	Varela et al. (2020); Espelage et al. (2013) show how community violence affects the school climate.

**Table 4 Most Common Expressions in the Classroom**

Category	Research Findings	Previous Studies
Offensive language	"What do you care?", insults, obscene gestures.	Jiménez et al. (2021) highlight how an aggressive verbal environment increases physical violence.

**Table 5 Physical Infrastructure Deterioration**

Category	Research Findings	Previous Studies
Infrastructure	Theft of sanitary facilities, damage to furniture and walls.	Nkuba et al. (2018) confirm that deteriorated infrastructure contributes to a perception of insecurity.

**Table 6 Physical Aggression during Recess**

Category	Research Findings	Previous Studies
Violence during recess	Fights, injuries with stones, and bites.	Nkuba et al. (2018) and Espelage et al. (2013) suggest intervention strategies to reduce conflicts.

**Table 7 Prevention Strategies**

Category	Research Findings	Previous Studies
Prevention programs	Psychological and educational approaches.	Nkuba et al. (2018) highlight the effectiveness of teacher competency programs.
Institutional policies	Lack of resources limits implementation.	Espelage et al. (2013) suggest comprehensive research and public policy approaches.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show a high incidence of violence in schools located in high-risk areas, with conflicts between students and aggression toward teaching and administrative staff being frequent. These results align with those of Huang, Eddy, and Camp (2020) and Peist, McMahon, Davis-Wright, and Keys (2023), who emphasize how school violence affects the safety and emotional well-being of the educational community.

The frequency of violent incidents, averaging 5 to 8 events daily, reflects a highly conflictual school environment. Jiménez et al. (2021) and Varela et al. (2020) have identified similar trends in institutions with weak institutional climates, suggesting that school management and educational leadership play a crucial role in regulating student behavior. Regarding the attitudes of counselors and principals, there is concern about indiscipline and theft within schools, which aligns with studies by Espelage et al. (2013) and Varela et al. (2020), who state that community violence can permeate the school environment, making it difficult to manage relationships within the classrooms. Another relevant finding is the deterioration of school infrastructure, characterized by the theft of sanitary facilities and damage to furniture. Nkuba et al. (2018) indicate that the perception of insecurity increases in deteriorated environments, which can exacerbate school convivencia issues and hinder the implementation of prevention strategies. The intervention strategies, although implemented in some schools, are insufficient due to the lack of resources. Previous studies, such as those by Espelage et al. (2013) and Nkuba et al. (2018), suggest that prevention programs should be part of comprehensive educational policies that include teacher training in conflict resolution and school mediation strategies. In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the need to strengthen school management and implement preventive strategies with institutional support. It is recommended to develop teacher training programs focused on conflict mediation and promoting a culture of peace within schools.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

School violence is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood in isolation, as it results from multiple interconnected factors, including power dynamics within the classroom, the conditions of the school environment, and the students' family and social background. The findings of this study show that classroom disruption, bullying, and violence between teachers, students, and administrative staff are recurrent issues in the analyzed institutions.

Specifically, it was found that bullying and victimization among peers occur systematically through insults, social isolation,

and emotional or physical mistreatment. Furthermore, verbal and physical violence extends beyond interactions between students and reaches the relationships between teachers and educational staff, worsening the institutional climate. The lack of empathy, low self-esteem, academic failure, family abuse, and the absence of appropriate sanctions emerge as factors that promote the reproduction of these behaviors.

Since the schools investigated are located in high-risk areas, an integrated approach is needed that links the family, school, and community in preventing violence. It is essential to strengthen education in values, promote a safe school environment, and improve conflict resolution mechanisms. Additionally, future research could delve into effective intervention strategies to reduce violence in vulnerable educational environments.

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