The psychosocial school environment

Social barriers to education

Health and education

This brief examines the impact of the psychosocial school environment on student learning outcomes. It provides suggestions of how educational planners and decision-makers can ensure a positive learning environment for all.

A positive psychosocial school environment helps to create a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning. It relates to ‘the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects of our experience (our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors) and our wider social experience (our relationships, family and community networks, social values, and cultural practices)’ (INEE, 2016: 8).

Key elements contributing to the psychosocial school climate include the quality of personal relationships at school, methods used in the process of learning, classroom management and discipline, students’ and teachers’ well-being, prevalence of school-based violence, and social and emotional learning (SEL).

Key aspects for a nurturing psychosocial environment include:

- **People** – friendships and relationships that students create with peers and teachers in schools; this also links to effective parental involvement, positive teacher attitudes as well as collaborative practices.
- **Process** – a fun and engaging atmosphere that allows students and teachers to be creative, collaborative, and free to learn without the fear of making mistakes. This also relates to useful, relevant, and engaging learning content and reasonable workload.
- **Place** – a warm and friendly school environment with more open classrooms and colourful as well as meaningful displays (UNESCO Office Bangkok, 2016) (more on the physical school environment).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) recognizes the importance of the psychosocial school environment. Implementation target 4.a aims to ‘build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability, and gender-sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all’. Thematic Indicator 4.a.2 was adopted in 2018 to measure progress towards this target and to account for the ‘percentage of students who experienced bullying during the past 12 months, by sex’.

What we know

Students’ social and emotional experiences influence learning processes and in turn affect learning outcomes (UNESCO MGIEP, 2020). Schools that prioritize students’ well-being have a higher
chance of improving their academic achievements (UNESCO Office Bangkok, 2017). Numerous variables related to school climate have been positively associated with better student performance in reading in OECD countries (e.g. growth mindset of students, greater support from teachers, teacher enthusiasm, greater co-operation among peers, students’ sense of belonging at school) (OECD, 2019). Attending to the social and emotional needs of students and teachers is key, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many students have missed out on social interactions and support from teachers and peers (Yorke et al., 2021).

The prevalence of school violence (physical, psychological, and sexual), as well as bullying both in-person and online, is a key obstacle to a positive psychosocial school environment (UNESCO, 2017). School violence has a significant impact on the physical and mental well-being of learners, their ability to learn and their educational outcomes. Victims and witnesses of school violence are more likely to miss school, have lower grades, and/or drop out of school entirely. School violence also contributes to their lower self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues (Global Education Monitoring Report team and UNGEI, 2015; UNESCO, 2017; Attawell, 2019). PISA 2018 and TIMSS 2019 data demonstrate that greater exposure to bullying was associated with lower performance in reading and mathematics and science respectively (OECD, 2019; Mullis et al., 2019).

Plan International estimates that at least 246 million children suffer from school-related violence every year (Greene et al., 2013). Studies using Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) and the Global School-based Health Survey (GSHS) estimate that, globally, almost one in three students report having been bullied over the past month (Attawell, 2019), but the prevalence and types of bullying vary between regions. According to the End Corporal Punishment initiative, corporal punishment is still not fully prohibited in schools in 64 countries, and in some of them, it is widespread. A number of surveys established that ‘the proportion of students who had experienced corporal punishment at school was 90% or more in nine countries, 70–89% in 11 countries and 13–69% in 43 countries’ (Attawell, 2019: 20).

Certain pupil characteristics may place them at a higher risk of experiencing school-based violence. These include physical appearance (e.g. being overweight or underweight), nationality, race and colour, socioeconomic status, gender, indigenous status, sexual orientation, disability, migrant status, HIV status, and orphanhood (UNESCO, 2017). Based on GSHS data, globally, physical appearance is the most frequent reason for bullying (with female students more at risk of being bullied for this reason) followed by bullying based on race, nationality, or colour (Attawell, 2019). However, sexual orientation and gender identity/expression is also often a reason for bullying; data show that a large proportion of LGBT students experience homophobic or transphobic violence in school (UNESCO, 2016). Moreover, indigenous children are particularly vulnerable to school-based violence due to ‘a confluence of factors’ associated with the social exclusion of these groups (UNICEF et al., 2013).

Both boys and girls experience school-based violence. However, while boys are more likely to experience or perpetrate physical bullying, experience harsh discipline, and be involved in physical fights, girls are more subject to psychological bullying such as social exclusion and the spreading of rumours (UNESCO, 2017; Attawell, 2019). Some studies indicate that girls are also at greater risk of cyberbullying (Global Education Monitoring Report team and UNGEI, 2015). Comprehensive global data on the prevalence of sexual violence within schools are missing, as related incidents are often under-reported or not disaggregated by sex. Nevertheless, although both female and male children experience gender-based violence, ‘girls are the main victims of unwanted sexual touching and non-consensual sex attempts perpetrated by classmates and teachers, respectively’ (Global Education Monitoring Report team, 2020: 52).
A number of studies proved the effectiveness of evidence-based SEL programmes to support students’ academic achievements (CASEL, 2020) and reduce bullying and violence in schools and communities (INEE, 2016). By developing competencies such as resilience, self-awareness, collaboration, empathy, and respect, SEL also contributes to students’ pathways beyond education (Yorke et al., 2021). SEL programmes may ‘improve school attendance, engagement, and motivation; reduce negative student behavior … benefit the mental health of staff and students by lowering stress, anxiety, and depression; improve health outcomes by reducing teenage pregnancies and drug abuse; lead to better staff retention and higher morale’ (INEE, 2016: 12). School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic proved the importance of SEL in helping students cope with difficult situations, practice empathy, and manage anxiety and loss (CASEL, 2020). SEL is especially important for disadvantaged children who received limited support during the pandemic (Yorke et al., 2021) or to help those in conflict settings to re-engage with learning (EducationLinks, 2018).

**Challenges**

**Lack of governance and accountability mechanisms:** Some countries still do not have comprehensive policies to protect students from school-based violence, while others have adopted these laws recently and many remain poorly enforced. In many contexts, effective channels to report violence are missing (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; Global Education Monitoring Report team, 2020). Legislation to prevent violence occurring online is in even earlier stages of development (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development and UNESCO, 2019).

**Conflicting priorities:** Schools face many challenges in managing logistical, pedagogical, organizational, and technological issues to accelerate academic learning; these issues have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (CASEL, 2020). In the context of an increasing emphasis on academic results, it is difficult to keep the focus on socio-emotional skills and school-based violence (Attawell, 2019).

**Lack of data:** Accurate, reliable, and comprehensive data are needed on the prevalence, nature, and causes of school violence and bullying to inform policy, planning, and budgeting. They are also important to identify perpetrators and hold them responsible for their actions, as well as to protect victims. However, this information is often missing at national and international levels as school-based violence is frequently under-reported and collecting this data is particularly controversial and challenging (Greene et al., 2013; UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; UNESCO, 2017). This is due to the nature and sensitivity of this information, especially when it comes to violence against children perpetrated by adults in a position of power. Consequently, challenges emerge in terms of incorporating related questions into regular school censuses and obtaining reliable national statistics.

There is **limited evidence** on which strategies are the most effective to reduce school-based violence and improve student well-being. Few policies have been evaluated and existing studies differ in their methodology and rigour (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; OECD, 2017; Attawell, 2019).

**Unprepared teachers:** Teachers are often ill-equipped to attend to the social and emotional needs of students, and to manage classrooms and conflicts effectively as well as teach SEL. There is also a lack of teacher development programmes on learner well-being and happiness in education (UNESCO Office Bangkok, 2017; UNESCO MGIEP, 2020).

**Social and cultural norms** might discourage victims of violence from reporting incidents. They also make it more difficult for some actors (e.g. teachers, policy-makers) to openly speak about issues of
violence. Differentiated expected gender roles remain persistent in many contexts, and violence in schools reflects them (Global Education Monitoring Report team and UNGEI, 2017).

**Poor SEL implementation:** SEL programmes are often fragmented, short, and marginalized if not part of the core curriculum. Limited knowledge on how SEL can be infused into academic subjects is also an issue (UNESCO MGIEP, 2020).

**Policy and planning**

**Developing comprehensive national and school policies** or laws on school-based violence as well as codes of conduct, digital safety guidance, or other related frameworks for staff and students is a priority for national governments (Greene et al., 2013; UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; UNESCO, 2017). Policies specifically targeting identity-based bullying (e.g. bullying based on race or sexuality) are needed (UNESCO and French Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, 2020).

**Improving data collection:** Systematic monitoring of the prevalence and type of school-based violence, including violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, is key to addressing related challenges (UNESCO, 2016). This could be done by adding related questions to the annual school census or other data-collection tools that feed into education management information systems (Cornu and Liu, 2019). However, it may be difficult to obtain reliable statistics through this channel, especially when it relates to violence perpetrated by adults against children. Alternative ways to gather this information include large-scale assessments and other specific surveys, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) programmes. Data-collection channels need to be child-sensitive and confidential. Moreover, rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of existing programmes (e.g. anti-violence or bullying, SEL, students’ well-being) is critical in order to adjust activities appropriately (Attawell, 2019). Results from some large-scale student assessments (e.g. Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study on Education Quality, TERCE; Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems, PASEC) could be used to identify the most effective strategies in specific contexts (Dunne et al., 2017).

**Ensuring adequate teacher training:** Teachers need to be prepared to equip students with knowledge on how to prevent and respond to school-based violence (UNESCO, 2017), teach SEL, contribute to students’ social and emotional development, recognize and address schoolwork-related anxiety, and manage classrooms effectively (OECD, 2017). Disciplinary issues in classrooms were associated with poorer reading performance in OECD countries (OECD, 2019). Successful countries focused on preparing teachers to use positive approaches to classroom management (Attawell, 2019) and providing them with a range of alternative classroom discipline strategies (Turner and Hares, 2021). Allocating female teachers was a successful strategy to reduce school-based violence in some Latin America countries (Dunne et al., 2017).

**Developing appropriate curricula:** Specific curricula can prepare students to recognize and challenge school-based violence and act when it takes place (UNESCO, 2017). Curriculum entry points include ‘civics education, life skills education and comprehensive sexuality education’ (UNESCO, 2017: 39). Moreover, life skills education may play an important role in developing the social and emotional skills that students need to prevent violence (UNESCO, 2017). More generally, it is important to define education outcomes that include SEL and overall student well-being and then monitor them from early grades (INEE, 2019). Analysis of a number of SEL programmes found that the most successful among them were sequenced and focused, used active forms of learning, allocated sufficient time, and had explicit learning goals (INEE, 2016). Appropriate textbooks and learning materials promoting healthy, safe, equal, and non-violent relationships should support the
Cross-sectoral approach and partnerships: Collaboration among education, health, and the youth and social welfare sectors is essential to effectively address and respond to school-based violence, and gender-based violence more specifically (Global Education Monitoring Report team and UNGEI, 2015). Addressing school violence also requires coordination among different actors, such as civil society organizations, advocacy groups, academic and research institutions, professional associations, the private sector, and the media (Global Education Monitoring Report team and UNGEI, 2015). At the school level, related programmes need to bring together headteachers, teachers, other staff, parents and students, local authorities, and professionals in other sectors (Attawell, 2019). Incorporating anti-bullying strategies within social programmes proved to be very effective in Latin American countries (Dunne et al., 2017). This kind of collaboration is also key to implementing holistic SEL programmes (UNESCO MGIEP, 2020).

Reporting mechanisms: Clear, safe, and accessible channels for reporting and monitoring school-based violence are key to reacting to the act of violence, assisting victims, and measuring the extent of those incidents (Cornu and Liu, 2019). Examples of reporting mechanisms include ‘telephone helplines, chat rooms and online reporting, “happiness and sadness” boxes, and school focal points such as teachers’, as well as using girls’ clubs as ‘safe spaces’ to report sexual violence (UNESCO, 2017: 45).

Whole-school approach: Anti-bullying programmes that work at multiple levels in the school (e.g. teacher training; school management, rules, and sanctions; mediation training; appropriate curriculum; information-sharing and engagement with parents/communities; counselling for victims, bystanders, and perpetrators) proved successful in developing countries (Global Education Monitoring Report team and UNGEI, 2015). A whole-school approach is also needed to address other types of school violence (Turner and Hares, 2021) and integrate SEL into school operations (UNESCO MGIEP, 2020). Strengthening school leadership and ensuring support from the provincial education authorities is important to make sure policies are implemented, codes of conduct enforced, reporting system monitored, and action taken as needed (Beadle and Bordoloi, 2019).

Plans and policies

- **South Africa**: National School Safety Framework (2015)
- **Seychelles**: National Anti-Bullying Policy and Strategy for Primary, Secondary Schools and Professional Centre (2018)
- **Malta**: Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy (2015)
- **Guatemala**: Protocolo de identificación, atención y referencia de casos de violencia dentro del sistema educativo nacional (2012)
Tools

- Safe to Learn Global Programmatic Framework and Benchmarking Tool (2021)
- UNESCO LGBTQI Inclusion Index (2018)
- Raising voices Good School Toolkit (2014)
- UNGEI A Whole School Approach to Prevent School-Related Gender-Based Violence: Minimum Standards and Monitoring Framework (2019)

References and sources


Dunne, M.; Delprato, M.; Akyeampong, K. 2017. ‘How can learning surveys inform policies to close the learning gap due to bullying?’ IIEP Learning Portal (blog), 9 October 2017.


Turner, E.; Hares, S. 2021. ‘Violence in schools is pervasive and teachers are often the perpetrators. Here are five ways to prevent it’. CGD Blog (blog), 10 May.


UNICEF; UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women); UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund); ILO (International Labour Organization); OSRSG/VAC