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Community interventions needed to prevent violence in schools

Estimates show that annually more than a billion children experience some form of violence and a significant proportion of that happens at schools in the Global South, according to a report co-authored by Professor Shanaaz Mathews, the director of the Children's Institute (CI) at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Whole community interventions are essential to sustainable prevention strategies, she said.

it is important to recognise that schools reach large numbers of children daily with great potential to deliver large-scale interventions with sustained effects to prevent violence against children, said Mathews. Violence against children is a complex problem that occur in the home, community, online, in schools, and takes many forms – from corporal punishment to bullying – and includes gender-based violence.

"Violence against children is a serious public health problem with long lasting intergenerational consequences," Mathews said. Implementing evidence-based sustainable interventions is critical. "Children's exposure to violence isn't once off. It's often through multiple exposures in multiple settings. And when we think about developing interventions, you've got to consider how you target those risks and enhance protective factors for children."

Multicomponent strategies are essential to sustainable solutions, said Mathews. "Violence is such a complex area. When I talk about multicomponent interventions, I mean strategies that addresses the whole system: the child, the parents, the school, the community. You have to think of it as an ecosystem." Strategies must therefore address the child at individual level, and how they're embedded within the community as well as the school.

Policies are not enough
Interventions must also tackle structural changes that encourage the development of a favourable school climate that encourages learner participation in developing school safety plans through inclusive development of policies and governance structures. Corporal punishment, for example, is still widespread in African schools in the Global South. Here policies and practices and school values are prime targets for intervention purposes, but teacher support is also vital.

"How do you support teachers to use non-violent forms of discipline within the school? In South Africa, for example, we've had corporal punishment legislation for more than 20

years, Yet surveys show that 50% of children in schools will experience it. Policies on their own are not going to make a difference. It's about how you change the culture and behaviour – and that's the challenge that we all face." Here 'whole school' approaches work best, said Mathews.

"You're not just targeting learners but teachers, governing bodies, as well as parents and communities." Involving parents is key to sustainable solutions, she said. "As children are exposed to programmes, you've got to take your parents with on the journey as far as possible, or else you're not going to have the sustained effect of your programme. And I think that this is one of the most valuable lessons that we've learned from the review."

Group-based education can also impact behaviour and empower learners, creating resilience among learners, and building peer support. But safe spaces are critical, even in group settings. It's crucial that the group setting is a safe space where students can express themselves and ask questions without fear of being judged. "It's also essential to equip teachers to move away from current teaching practices of teaching which are often "patriarchal and power-ridden".

However, creating safe schools is part of a larger societal challenge, she said. Citing South Africa as an example, Mathews said that this needed to extend to communities as part of the solution. "Our communities have gang violence and just stepping out of school is not always safe. We've got to be thinking about how we create an intervention that interfaces with all the risks that the child could be exposed to in their life. Interventions must include multiple stakeholders, such as community and religious leaders. The more comprehensive the approach, the better the outcomes."

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News.

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