CHAPTER
14

VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Peter K. Smith

*Goldsmiths College,
University of London,
United Kingdom*

Abstract: This paper presents the CONNECT UK-001 initiative on violence in schools in European Union countries. It describes the organisation and structure of the project's country reports, and summarises the reports' main issues and findings. Also examined are the comparability of definitions of "school violence", the nature and availability of data sources, and local, national and other initiatives to reduce violence. The paper discusses how project evaluations, financial support and the use of cross-disciplinary approaches could improve knowledge and action in this area.

Background to the CONNECT UK-001 study

Violence in schools is recognised as a major social problem that not only affects the well-being and educational achievement of students, but can undermine democratic values and education for citizenship. Since 1998, the European Commission (EC) has supported a number of initiatives that address the problem of violence in schools. This is part of its programme of research activities aimed at assisting European integration by linking different European partner groups and enhancing the nature of education and educational opportunities in states in the European Union. The CONNECT UK-001 project was one of six school violence-related activities funded by the EC between 1998 and 2002.

The main objective of the CONNECT UK-001 project was to produce *country reports* on the situation regarding violence in schools in the 15 EC member states and two associated states at the time of the study (2001). Thus most European states participated in the project, with the exception of Liechtenstein, which was not included in the study due to its small size, and non-member or candidate-member states such as Malta, Switzerland and the eastern European countries. This coverage afforded a good view of activities across 17 countries in north, west, south and central Europe.

The project also selected *three existing intervention projects* in different member states – peer support schemes in Italy, a broad approach used in the Gran school in Norway and the "Checkpoints for Schools" initiative in the United Kingdom – for enhanced support and independent evaluation. The projects were evaluated by partners in Finland, Ireland and France, respectively.[1]

Preparation of country reports

Organisation of reports

To facilitate the compilation of country reports, each country organised two partner teams. In most cases, the first team comprised an academic department or research institute; while the second team consisted of teachers, parent-teacher organisations and government department officials. Reviews of other national or European-level work on school violence, such as the report compiled for the Council of Europe on school violence by Vettenburg (1999), were also conducted.

In April 2001, a symposium was held at Goldsmiths College in London. Draft country reports were circulated and discussed in small groups in order to obtain consistent reporting formats across countries. The reports were finalised in August 2001, and posted

on the project Web site in largely unedited form, in English, with summaries (and a few full reports) in French, German and Spanish.

Structure of reports

A standard format for country reports was used:

- *Background*. This section provided the context for the report. It contained a brief description of the country (*i.e.* population, major regional areas, major languages, major ethnic groups and minorities); school system (*i.e.* ages of compulsory and optional education, organisation of schooling by age and type of school, length and organisation of the school day, special schools and ways of coping with children with behavioural disturbances at the school level, relevant curricular information); linguistic/ definitional issues; and relevant historical background (*i.e.* developments relevant to current understandings, actions and policies concerning violence in schools).

- *Knowledge about school violence*. This section included recent national or regional statistics on the incidence of violence in schools; information on different types of violence, according to different dyads (*i.e.* student-student, student-teacher, teacher-student), age trends and gender differences; effects of factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status and special needs; and information relating to variations by school type and school ethos.

- *Action to reduce violence in schools*. This section covered national-, regional- and local-level policies on school violence and bullying. Countries were asked to provide information on the nature of the initiative or programme; evaluations carried out to assess the programmes' effectiveness; and school or other small case studies that demonstrate interesting or successful approaches to the problem, which may be applicable on a wider scale.

Main issues and findings from reports

All reports were edited to ensure consistent coverage, updated until the end of 2001 or early 2002, and published in *Violence in Schools: The Response in Europe* (Smith, 2003). In addition, commentators from Australia, Israel and the United States were invited to respond to the country reports, in the light of the situations in their own countries. Some of the main issues and findings are presented below.

Definitional issues

In order to compare issues across countries, it was important to reach some consensus on what constitutes "school violence". The study covered thirteen different languages, each of which had slightly different understandings of the term. The English word *violence*, for example, is similar to the Italian *violenza*, but very different from the Greek β*i*α or Icelandic *ofbeldi*. Interestingly, the report from Spain highlighted a concept opposite to violence, *convivencia*, which means living together in harmony. In the background section of country reports, countries were asked how "school violence" was defined, described or

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delimited, for example using national statistics or school regulations.

The initial definition proposed in this study was that used by Olweus (1999), who defined "violence" or "violent behaviour" as "aggressive behaviour where the actor or perpetrator uses his or her own body or an object (including a weapon) to inflict (relatively serious) injury or discomfort upon another individual". Thus, violence refers to the use of physical force or power; it *does not* include verbal aggression or relational/indirect aggression, such as rumour spreading or social exclusion (Underwood, 2002). It *does* include physical bullying, in which the aggression is repeated against a less powerful individual, and fights between equals, which is not considered bullying. Some report authors, such as Denmark and Germany, were satisfied with this definition.

Broader definitions of violence are also widely used. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines "violence" as "the intentional use of physical and psychological force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation". The emphasis on threatened *and* actual violence justifies the inclusion of *feelings* of insecurity, which is used in France.

Some definitions include institutional violence and violence due to inequalities. Thus, school violence – as defined in France, Greece and Italy – can be seen as retaliation. In addition, although both the Olweus and WHO definitions imply that the consequences of violence can be harmful, reports from Belgium and France made a strong case for including incidents of "micro-violence" or "incivilities", which are relatively minor incidents of impoliteness and infringements of rules that might not count as "violent acts" according to the usual definition, but which may be important in understanding the origins and nature of school violence.

These differences were discussed at the symposium in April 2001, but no consensus was reached. It was recognised that disciplinary and country differences account for the different definitions of "violence". Each team was asked to clearly explain definitions used, particularly for reported data on violence.

Data sources and availability

The most common type of data collection instrument is the student self-reporting questionnaire. A well-known example is Olweus' bully/victim questionnaire (Olweus, 1999). Other data sources include victim surveys, structured interviews, teacher reports and observations of violent behaviour. Although statistics on violence in schools are available in most countries, many reports cited a lack of systematic data gathering and time series data. Other countries reported the absence of data on violence: in these cases, countries provided data that fell outside the accepted definition, for example on physical types of bullying (*e.g.* Greece, Iceland, Ireland and Italy); accidents caused by violence (*e.g.* Denmark); criminal statistics based on legal definitions, such as "anti-social behaviour", "juvenile delinquency" and "vandalism", which included damage to property, drug taking and other activities that are not necessarily considered "violent" (*e.g.* Belgium, Iceland, Italy and Norway); and school exclusion data (*e.g.* United Kingdom).

Most countries provided data on student-student violence, although other dyads were reported less frequently. Austria, Germany, Ireland, Norway and the United Kingdom did provide some data on student-teacher violence. With the exception of Ireland, few data were reported on teacher-student violence. Similarly, limited data were available on adult-adult violence, although statistics in Ireland and the United Kingdom were collected from research conducted on workplace violence.

Many reports discussed the influence on school violence of factors such as the region of the country and socio-economic circumstances; the type of school; and student characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, social class, family background and special educational needs. While the likelihood of being a victim of violence often decreases with age – perhaps as potential victims become stronger and more skilled at avoiding encounters – the age of perpetrators of violence increases in mid- or late adolescence, as norm-breaking and risk-taking behaviours generally become more common and more sanctioned by the peer group (Arnett, 1992). Gender differences are also evident, especially when statistics are restricted to physical forms of violence, as boys have much higher levels than girls. Some statistics are available on sexual harassment.

The opening sections of most reports mentioned the increase in the number of students from immigrant groups over the last decade. Racial tensions are prominent in many countries, and these can be reflected in schools. Ethnic minority and immigrant children can experience racial harassment, and young people themselves may bring different expectations and experiences of deprivation and frustration into the school.

Those countries reporting time-series data were able to address the common and often incorrect perception that violence is increasing over time (Pearson, 1983). Some countries reported little change or only a slight increase in violent incidents in schools (*e.g.* Germany and Norway), others a curvilinear increase then decrease (*e.g.* Italy), and others mixed findings, depending on type of violence (*e.g.* Austria).

Initiatives to reduce violence in schools

Most national education ministries require that schools provide "an environment of respect for others". However, only Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden and the United Kingdom have specific legal requirements to prevent violence or bullying on the school premises (Ananiadou and Smith, 2002), which may involve developing a whole-school approach or policy to deal with violence or bullying. While such pro-active policies can provide a framework, assign responsibilities, and suggest sanctions for non-compliance, they may be ineffective in preventing violence unless combined with other initiatives. A number of national, regional, local and school-level initiatives are also described in the reports.

Large-scale actions are often well-developed programmes that may include curriculum work, individual work with at-risk students and other measures (Smith, Pepler and Rigby, 2004). For example, the Olweus anti-bullying programme, which is widely used in Norway together with other initiatives, has also been implemented in Austria, Finland and Germany, and is being considered in Iceland; the Safe Schools Programme has been used widely

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in Portugal; the SAVE programme has been developed in the Andalucia/Seville region of Spain; and the Farsta programme is often used in Sweden. These programmes are well documented and have a standardised format, with booklets and materials for teachers and students. Many other reported initiatives to reduce violence are less standardised.

A number of initiatives reported do not focus directly on violence, but on other related factors:

• *General preventative approaches.* A number of initiatives aim to improve preventative factors, such as a good school climate and a sense of student responsibility. The report from Denmark, for example, describes a Parliament Day, in which students can discuss and vote on school-related concerns, what to improve and how. Such activities can encourage a general sense of participation and citizenship, and provide some practical suggestions on addressing issues of school violence. Parliament Days have also taken place in France and Sweden.

  o *Promoting a good school climate.* Some country reports describe general work to improve the climate of schools and classes through teacher education, peer support systems, and enhanced personal and social education. The Life Skills programme in Iceland is one example. Some trends in the Netherlands and Norway suggest that a general programme approach may be more promising than programmes that focus specifically on bullying. Measures to improve the school environment, including the physical environment, were discussed in the report from Luxembourg. Smaller class sizes, smaller schools and greater provision of (non-competitive) sports facilities were also suggested.

  o *Encouraging a sense of student responsibility.* Some preventative interventions focus on individual students. Austria reported on a social competency training programme, and Belgium described a Positive Report Card scheme. A number of countries are developing peer mediation and conflict resolution skills (*e.g.* Austria, Italy and the United Kingdom) and finding ways of raising students' self-esteem (*e.g.* Pathways Programme in Ireland). The Nuutinen slide show in Finland aims to change attitudes by "shocking" students about the acceptability of violence.

• *Security approaches.* Some initiatives focus more on dealing with violence when it happens, or providing less opportunity for incidents of violence. In several countries (*e.g.* Austria, Spain and the United Kingdom), telephone help lines have been set up so that students can seek advice anonymously. In other countries, vulnerable students have been issued with alarm bracelets, which can be activated if threatened or attacked (*e.g.* Finland); a rapid response system has been established to deal with violent incidents when they occur; school guards have been employed (*e.g.* Safe Schools Programme in Portugal); and general school security has been strengthened regarding weapons and unauthorised entry, often using video surveillance. These "security" responses may be necessary in some situations, but risk being counter-productive in efforts to improve school climate and *convivencia.* The report from Portugal on the Safe Schools Programme describes how an early security-based focus evolved into a more pedagogical approach that encourages students' self-esteem and responsibility.

- *School-based approaches.* In some countries, (*e.g.* Austria and the Netherlands), class rules have been written to deal with violence and to foster positive behaviours. Other reports (*e.g.* United Kingdom) place greater emphasis on whole-school policies. Teachers have a vital role in developing class rules and school policies. Support for teachers is an important theme in intervention work. Although all members of the school community share the problem of school violence, teachers are generally in the forefront of dealing with actual incidents or reporting of student-student violence. A good whole-school approach would clearly define the role of the teacher, other school personnel and parents.

- *Training.* A number of countries report organising specific teacher training to deal with violence (*e.g.* Ireland and Spain) and providing information and materials for teachers (*e.g.* anti-bullying pack in the United Kingdom). Other countries provide teachers with education assistants, such as *aide-éducateurs* (*e.g.* France) or learning mentors (*e.g.* United Kingdom). However, little attention has been given to the role of non-teaching staff – such as playground supervisors, janitors, cooks and school nurses – and parents in reducing school violence.

Evaluations of actions to reduce school violence

A recurring theme in many reports was the lack of evaluation of many initiatives: the Austrian report noted that there are "a wealth of materials but [none] are based on empirical research", the Swedish report described the lack of independent evaluation of the Farsta method, and the Portuguese report cited that no independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the Safe Schools Programme had ever been published. The few evaluations that were completed contained basic data on percentage reductions, and no analysis on the cost-effectiveness of interventions.

The quality of the evaluation can be influenced by a number of factors:

- *Evaluation team.* Independent evaluations of actions to reduce school violence are highly desirable. Usually, evaluations are completed by those who designed the intervention (Smith, Pepler and Rigby, 2004). However, evaluations are best undertaken by an objective third party that does not have a vested interest in the outcome of the evaluation.

- *Data sources.* Some evaluations are based on teacher reports. While these reports have some value, data can be subjective and provide only an indication of what the students themselves may be experiencing. Other evaluations based on school discipline records, expulsions and incident reports may appear more objective, but a number of factors also influence incident reporting. Evaluations based on student reports (*i.e.* self reports, victim reports, reports of peers) can have greater validity. Observational data is also more reliable, although time-consuming and expensive to obtain on a large scale.

- *Scale of the evaluation.* Some evaluations are large-scale, covering many schools and thousands of students. These studies allow for the analysis of variation between schools and school classes, and can provide an indication of the likely effectiveness of the

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intervention in other schools. If documented sufficiently, the cost-effectiveness of the intervention can also be estimated. However, unless multi-level analysis is undertaken and more qualitative evidence obtained, it is difficult to understand the processes that contribute to an intervention's success or failure.

- *Use of quantitative vs. qualitative methods.* Large-scale, multi-level, pre-post test designs could be supplemented by more qualitative approaches and single-participant designs. Qualitative methods, such as detailed interviews and focus groups, may better elucidate the reality of violence as perceived by different actors, the different pathways in and out of violence, the timing of involvement in violent behaviours, and the motivations behind them. Such insights are not unavailable to quantitative researchers, but they are often neglected. Quantitative analysis aggregates different types of individuals and can thus produce a misleading null result if certain individuals or sub-groups are not distinguished.

The author and his colleagues (Cowie, *et al.*, 1994) have combined quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the effects of co-operative group work curricula in middle school classrooms. Formal pre- and post-test procedures and open-ended interviews were conducted with individual students and teachers. Results were mixed: students either actively liked or disliked co-operative group work. While victims of bullying and aggression often gained confidence and made friends, aggressive and bullying children disliked group work for these same reasons. The latter group also felt that their actions might be challenged and often tried to "sabotage" group work. The point here is that some overall trends (*e.g.* for liking of co-operative group work, or reduction in aggression) might be concealed or oversimplified if different individuals' experiences are not recognised; this is an area where qualitative methods have a particular strength. Similarly, "single-participant research design" (Morgan and Morgan, 2001) investigates the experiences and process of change in students on a case-by-case basis. In effect, this may involve case studies of highly aggressive students, their experiences of school and how school-based interventions impact on them.

Ways forward

What are the ways forward? The CONNECT UK–001 country reports highlighted a number of areas for improvement.

- *Definitions.* Agreement is required on the range of actions and behaviours that constitute "violence". Comparative statistics could be collected on the basis of definitions that are based on *behaviours,* rather than words on which there is only partial agreement, such as "violence" or "bullying".

- *Data.* A database of evaluated interventions in European Community countries – which, despite differences, share some cultural heritage and are working towards economic and educational integration – would be an invaluable resource for the future. The establishment of "observatories of school violence" (*e.g.* France and the United Kingdom) has afforded a broader database on the problems of school violence generally.

• *Financial support.* While there are many examples of good practice in some countries, in others the problem is largely ignored. In all European countries, regional and national authorities need to provide resources for schools to tackle violence, especially for teacher training initiatives, which have been largely neglected at the national level. Although helping teachers and schools is important, providing support for the communities in which schools are located is also a critical part of the solution. While the extent to which "walled-in", school-based solutions can work independently of the wider community and society is a matter of debate and research, there is little doubt that broader factors do have an impact.

• *Evaluation.* All initiatives should include an evaluation component. Funding needs to be provided for researchers to evaluate initiatives, and teachers, head teachers and education advisors must facilitate the evaluation process.

• *Cross-disciplinary approaches.* To achieve a greater understanding of the issues, researchers need to cross disciplinary boundaries. A psychologist, for example, would consider individual factors such as violent peers, temperament and family factors. While there is some utility in this approach, it is easy for psychologists to ignore the wider social factors. More sociologically-oriented perspectives, for example, argue how violence could be perceived as justified if society, the community, and the school itself are also violent. Changes over time and differences between countries in rates of violence may reflect not only changes or differences in school systems, but also in patterns of violence in society, and the attention and respect given to violence in media presentations.

In many countries, rates of school violence are not increasing, and serious violence in schools is infrequent. Often, rates of violence are higher outside than inside school. Nevertheless, schools should be safe places. The reports from the project described here show that many schools are not as safe as they should be. Much can be done to improve the situation, making school life safer and happier, and increasing *convivencia*. In recent years, knowledge of this problem has advanced considerably, and with organisation and funding, even more can be accomplished.

Note

1. For details about the five other projects on school violence and the CONNECT initiative in general, including evaluation reports, see the Web site *www.gold.ac.uk/connect/*, the FI-006 *CONNECT Proposal for an Action Plan to Tackle Violence at School in Europe* (*www.health.fi/connect*) and the European Observatory of School Violence Web site at *www.obsviolence.pratique.fr.* The UK Observatory is at *www.ukobservatory.com.*

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