Learning from Violence: Middle-School Principals facing School Violence Prevention Programs

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explain, how middle-school principals in the state of Morelos, Mexico, experience, perceive and heed violence that is generated inside and outside school campuses throughout 10 years implementation of the “School Safety Program”. The research is a qualitative study, the tools employed were observation, and a survey with open-ended questions addressed to 82 middle-school principals. The findings show school agents have developed metacognitive security practices for the resolution of contextual problems of school violence likewise, they work collaboratively with parents, teachers, students, and the community.

Keywords: School violence; school safety programs; principals; middle-schools; coexistence; learning; Mexico.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, in Cuernavaca, the capital of the state of Morelos in central Mexico has become common to hear from the implementation of Schools Safety Strategies in Elementary Schools like "Operativos mochila" (Student Searchers), "DARE" (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), “Escuela segura” (Safe School Program) (González & Rivera, 2014) among others. These actions were promoted by crime prevention authorities with the main objective to prevent violence and drug addiction in and out elementary schools due to the proliferation of gangs and parents’, students’ and teachers’ complaints about drug sale outside schools, in addition to the increase of vandalism and criminality in popular communities considered as red spots by government security units.

Thus, in 2005 in the municipality of Cuernavaca, there was implemented the “Mochila Segura” (Safe Backpack Program) (Hernández, 2014), which consisted of having the police surveillance on school campuses with their authority to search student’s backpacks under parent’s and teacher’s approval.

In 2007, began the "DARE" (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), which involved police officers as regular instructors in elementary education classrooms (Nambo, Arredondo & Giles, 2014). Then, in 2008, the "School Safety Program" was implemented (Nambo & Arredondo, 2014), which continued until 2016, after this year the title and the objectives changed to the “National School Coexistence Program” (Secretariat of Public Education, 2016).

In February 2007, the Safe School Program (PES) was inaugurated in a general secondary school in Tlaquepaque, municipality of Jalisco, in northern Mexico. The objective, by then, was to seek solutions to three national public problems that have attracted the attention of Mexican society since the last decade: violence, delinquency and addictions in the school environment.

It took two years for the Rules of Operation that would regulate the way the PES operates to be published in the Official Journal of the Federation and recognized as a fundamental axis of education policy in Mexico (Nambo and Arredondo, 2009).

It is worth mentioning that the objectives of the PES varied significantly until 2016, when it became the National School Coexistence Program (PNCE), consolidating itself as a transversal program by relating coexistence with learning environments and learning in basic education, as shown in Table 1 below.
Table 1. Comparison of the general objectives of the PES and PNCE.

| Year | Program                                      | 2010 Safe School Program (Agreement 29/12/2009) | 2012 Safe School Program (Agreement 27/12/2011) | 2014 Safe School Program (Agreement 28/12/2013) | 2016 National School Coexistence Program (Agreement 27/12/2015) | 2018 National School Coexistence Program (Agreement 25/12/17) |
|------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|      |                                              | To contribute to improving the quality of education offered to students in public basic education schools through the management of safe school environments. | To contribute to educational achievement in basic education schools through the management of safe school environments. | Contribute to strengthening the management of favourable living environments in public basic education schools in order to improve learning for all students. | Favour the establishment of healthy and peaceful school coexistence environments that help prevent situations of school harassment in Public Schools of Basic Education, propitiating conditions to improve school performance. | Favour the establishment of harmonious, peaceful and inclusive school environments that help to prevent situations of school harassment in public basic education schools, contributing to ensuring the quality of learning in basic education and the comprehensive training of all population groups. |

Some studies mention that violence is generated in and out school campuses, also in several cases, it is a product of social factors that go beyond the school as a result of the interrelationships between school and society. In other words, the situation of school violence often depends on the context in which it occurs and on the people who address it (Carra &
Mabilon-Bonfils, 2012; Carra 2009; Debarbieux, 2012; Furlan, 2003; Furlan, Pasillas, Spitzer, & Gómez, 2010; González, 2011; González & Rivera, 2014; Sposito, 2001, 2003).

Hence, the research problem of this work arises from the exploration of the “School Safety Program” (Nambo & Arredondo, 2009) based on the school principal’s opinion about school violence. As Michaud (1999) mentions, that violence is not only the facts but also the ways of apprehending, judging, seeing and not seeing violence. Therefore, a relative dimension of violence is considered the subjectivity, and specific context are determinants of what can be understood by violence, what is violent or not, what is more violent or less violent, and the impact of violence on the person, the institution, and the society. In other words, it is necessary to consider the person who experiences it, the context and the historical-social context of the moment. This allows us to reason that subject’s perspective is imperative.

Risk prevention and safety conditions in educational institutions vary according to the level of studies, the perception of risk teachers have is based on the age group they work with (Nambo, Rivero, & Figueroa, 2015).

There are more prevention efforts made in preschool context with 4 to 5-year-old children and these decrease as school grade increases, the middle school level is the one that remains at constant risk, with few or no actions.

Thus, this paper shows the main findings of the project called The Evaluation of the School Safety Program carried out by the Centre of Interdisciplinary Social Research and Innovation A.C. through the Institute of Basic Education of the State of Morelos (IEBEM). The mains objectives were:

a) To analyze the components of the School Safety Program carried out in middle-schools of the state of Morelos, Mexico.

b) To define actions and strategies to enhance the program.

The evaluation carried out is based on the 84th Article of the Education Law of the State of Morelos (2013) which indicates that the educational authority in the state will inform the education workers, institution, students, parents and society the results and scope of these educational project.

2. Method

This research is a qualitative study (Arias, 2012). A documentary analysis of the coexistence situation in middle-schools was done, as well as
design and interpretation of a measuring instrument addressed to middle-

school principals.

The sample consisted of 30 middle-school directors (14 from
Traditional Public Schools, 10 from Technical Middle-Schools and 6 from
Telesecundary Schools) strategically located in three metropolitan areas of
the state of Morelos, Mexico. Also, the instrument was applied to 52 extra
school directors, giving a total of 82 middle-school directors to strengthen
the sample. The instrument applied was called "Surveys on group and
institutional environment" (General Education Council, 2016). The approach
consisted on an Exploratory Factor Analysis and the software package for
social sciences version 15 was used (SPSS).

3. Results

The results presented as follows: 1) Problems affecting school
coexistence and actions or strategies to address them, 2) School conditions
to promote living environments, 3) Actions to encourage school
coexistence, 4) School participation in coexistence programs; 5) Elements of
success or failure of the strategies pursued.

3.1. Problems affecting school coexistence and actions or strategies to
address them

One of the questions asked to middle-school principals was about
their main problems they have faced in school coexistence. The five most
mentioned answers were: 1) student-to-student aggression, 2) drug
addiction, 3) conflicts between teachers, 4) bullying and 5) family violence.
However, some schools placed attention on risk factors as shown on table 2:

| Strategies                                      | Risk Factor                  |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Extra attention to problem boys                | Difficult school environment  |
| Sports encounters                              |                             |
| Coexistence workshops                          | Narcomenudeo (Small-scale    |
| Film and theater activities                    | drug dealing)                |
| Activities and projects including parents      | Teachers without commitment  |
| “Zero tolerance: free of violence” Internal    | Students without life project|
| school program                                 | Indiscipline                 |
3.2. School conditions to promote living environments

For this study, the infrastructure features were analyzed because they were considered important concerning achieve learning and to school coexistence.

It should be noted that school directors have the responsibility to encourage a healthy learning environment, tolerant, free from harassment, discrimination, violence and addictions based on human rights.

Thus, they were asked about school conditions to promote students’ learnings: natural lighting, artificial lighting, ventilation, auditory conditions, hygienic conditions (cleanliness) and, finally, room size. A multiple response count was carried out which showed that seven out of ten directors indicate...
these aspects are adequate concerning learning and living environment (Table 3).

**Table 3.** The school conditions to favor the environments of coexistence

| Answers          | Cases | Percentage | Percentage of cases |
|------------------|-------|------------|---------------------|
| Strongly inadequate | 28    | 5.8%       | 34.6%               |
| Inadequate       | 119   | 24.7%      | 146.9%              |
| Adequate         | 277   | 57.6%      | 342.0%              |
| Strongly adequate | 57    | 11.9%      | 70.4%               |
| Total            | 481   | 100.0%     | 593.8%              |

Additionally, the interviewees were asked if they had library service in their schools. The answers were notable in the three metropolitan areas of the state of Morelos. In Cuernavaca one-third of the schools do not have a school library, while in the other two there are libraries out of service (Table 4).

**Table 4.** School libraries

| Does the school have a library? | Agree | Disagree | Out of service | Total |
|--------------------------------|-------|----------|----------------|-------|
| Metropolitan area of Cuernavaca | 19    | 8        | 0              | 27    |
| Metropolitan area of Jojutla    | 18    | 4        | 2              | 24    |
| Metropolitan area of Cuautla    | 20    | 4        | 5              | 29    |
| Total                           | 57    | 16       | 7              | 80    |

Informants were also questioned if they had recreational spaces, one in three directors said they did not have these spaces, in the metropolitan area of Cuernavaca and Cuautla (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Recreational areas in schools

| Does the school have recreational areas? | Agree | Disagree | Out of service | Total |
|----------------------------------------|-------|----------|----------------|-------|
| Metropolitan area of Cuernavaca        | 20    | 8        | 0              | 28    |
| Metropolitan area of Jojutla           | 20    | 3        | 1              | 24    |
| Metropolitan area of Cuautla           | 20    | 9        | 0              | 29    |
| Total                                  | 60    | 20       | 1              | 81    |
Moreover, it was explored if schools had a Social Work Area (Support Services), this area facilitates the efforts to develop school coexistence, however, it is the scarcest resource schools have, as shown in table 6.

**Table 6. Social work areas in schools**

| Does the school have social work area? | Agree | Disagree | Out of service | Total |
|---------------------------------------|-------|----------|----------------|-------|
| Metropolitan area of Cuernavaca       | 20    | 8        | 0              | 28    |
| Metropolitan area of Jojutla          | 15    | 8        | 1              | 24    |
| Metropolitan area of Cuautla          | 15    | 14       | 0              | 29    |
| Total                                 | 50    | 30       | 1              | 81    |

### 3.3. Actions to encourage school coexistence

An exploratory factor analysis was applied to a Likert-scale questionnaire, five components or factors were identified extracted at 95% confidence, these were: “Roles and Positive Attitude", "Contact with Civil Organizations and External Projects", "Positive Stimuli and Human", “Innovative and Creative Environment" and "Inclusive Environment” (Table 7).

**Table 7. Categories identified in factor analysis**

| Categories                      | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Roles and positive attitude     | School roles are well-defined students find support on school authority. School time with students is used to strengthen their learnings, and the educational aims have significant content that could enrich their previous learnings. |
| Contact with civil organizations and external projects | There is contact with civil and/or business organizations to develop school projects. There are call and management capacity to achieve these projects with the school community. We permanently seek advice, courses, spaces for reflection so that these projects can be carried out. |
Individuals are known as persons, not only as roles: students, teachers, parents; positive stimuli are offered when the objectives are achieved, improved or successful; people are accepted with their qualities and limitations. Doubts, questions and criticisms of what is done in the institution are allowed to be expressed; and the adequate expression of feelings and moods is favoured.

The school’s educational proposals arouse in the students; the school’s proposals generate a critical review of prejudices and beliefs. In the school there is an innovative and experimental environment.

School announcements are accessible, they are not preselected, the decisions that affect all are consulted.

Figure 1 shows the factors of components with the highest score “Inclusive Environment” and “Roles and Positive Attitude”.

**Figure 1.** Components on the actions implemented in schools.

Note: The components are “Roles and Positive Attitude”, "Contact with Civil Organizations and External Projects", "Positive Stimuli and Human", “Innovative and Creative Environment" and "Inclusive Environment".
3.4. Comparison of indicators (ANOVAs)

The analysis was made of the comparison of means between the five components extracted with the fixed factors of the sample, those are sex, seniority, and area.

Concerning the sex factor there is no significant difference with four of the five components (Roles, Stimuli, Innovative Environment, and Inclusive Environment), on the other hand, there is a significant difference with the factor “Contact with Civil Organizations and External Projects”, indicating there is a correlation between maintaining contact with other sectors of the Society also with sex factor, in other words, women are more likely to maintain contact with other civil and business organizations to develop projects, unlike men, as shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Sex factor with contact with civil organizations and external projects factor.

|       | Hombre | Mujer |
|-------|--------|-------|
| Sex   | 2.90   | 3.10  |
| Note  | The factors are men and women. |

There is also a significant difference between contact with civil organizations and external projects and the metropolitan area to which the school belongs. Figure 3 shows there is a greater influence in the area of Cuernavaca towards participation with other sectors of society, then Cuautla and Jojutla.
This indicates that in the municipality of Cuernavaca has greater coexistence networks, in other words, middle-school directors are organized with the Community and Social Organizations to improve coexistence and security issues in their schools.

**Figure 3.** Metropolitan area to which the school belongs with Contact with civil organizations and external projects factor.

Note: The variables are: Metropolitan zone in Cuernavaca, Metropolitan zone in Jojutla and Metropolitan zone in Cuautla.

### 3.5 School participation in coexistence programs

School directors were asked about school participation in living programs and the type of activities they carried out on their campuses.

93.3% of them responded positively to this program by naming activities such as reading and cultural activities, the National Program of Coexistence School (before School Safety Program), promotion of values, as well as the collaboration between parents, teachers and students.

On the other hand, 6.7% of the remaining directors argued they did not have coexistence projects or programs in their schools. In addition, they mentioned the School Board is linked to school coexistence (table 8).
Table 8. Schools with a coexistence program

| Frequency | Program                                      |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------|
| Agree     | *Reading and cultural activities             |
| 93.3%     | *Safe School Program                         |
|           | *Daily Coexistence                           |
|           | *Values Promotion                            |
|           | *Collaboration between parents, teachers and students |
| Disagree  |                                              |
| 6.7%      | Does not apply                               |

3.6. Elements of success or failure of the strategies pursued

When asking the interviewees about the elements they considered influence success and or failure strategies used to improve school coexistence the majority noted actions related to good management, communication, respect to standards, listening to students and willingness for work. While failure is attributed to the lack of parental support, director’s apathy and social networks, as shown in table 9.

Table 9. Elements that influence the success or failure of strategies for school coexistence

| Success                                                                 | Failure                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. One of the main success elements is that students perceive we care for them not just wanting to punish them. | 1. Lack of parental support, social networks, television, lack of teacher training on coexistence topic, conflict management, and emotions. |
| 2. Communication, responsibility, participation, availability, commitment, and implementation of respect, humility, love, justice, and tolerance. | The Medias such as television and social networks denigrate teachers and make them look inept and display them in a denigrating way even when much is done with few resources and commitment |
| 3. Shared decisions                                                     | 2. There is little parent’s participation attendance to workshops and conference addressed to them |
4. Educate by example, find virtues and not defects and enhance positive aspects.

5. There is participation from teachers, students and parents in the activities proposed in School Board; the freedom of action and support necessary for the activities.

6. It is a cultural process, so progress is very slow. However, there are changes such as greeting or celebrating birthdays that were not done before at school. These actions show us an attitude change, but there is still resistance.

7. School directors and teacher’s commitment. School director’s attitude facing students conflict situations.

3. Do no track punitive actions

Lack of resources.

4. Inflexible staff and students who resist limits.

5. Lack of attitude of some parents, students, and teachers.

4. Conclusions

In the metropolitan areas of the state of Morelos, Mexico the school directors have taken many decisions to prevent school community members from violence, however, many of these decisions could represent an act that violates student’s, teacher’s and even parent’s integrity due to the lack of Information and for not considering the social capital with which it is counted.

The situation with the multiplicity of violent forms in school and its context can lead to concrete, specific strategies, or the perpetuation of violence through illegality or inaction, and thus, reach normality.

In this sense, Adams (2012) proposes a collaborative initiative that combines the efforts of international, national and local actors to develop more effective approaches through research, public policy reform and social action to avoid what it points out as chronic violence.

Likewise, Tabares-dos-Santos (2009) affirms that to make efficient the different actions that have been developed in school it is necessary a multisectoral action of the public administration, municipal and state.
In Mexico, school community members have developed metacognition of violence by reflecting and learning from different strategies to avoid being affected by the violence experienced in the school environment.

There are actions to avoid insecurity that has not been part of a specific policy, but to survive in a community considered dangerous. Actions such as belonging to a specific social group or maintaining a bond with classmates may suggest greater safety among students.

The results show that school directors work collaboratively with parents, teachers, and neighbors in solving problems in the local context with a global vision, influenced by the knowledge society (Tobón, González, Nambo, & Vázquez, 2015), in this way, social agents appropriate and resignify the existing cultural resources and orientations rather than to watch over those who may be dangerous in school.

At a time when everything seems to be getting worse in terms of insecurity, mainly due to the spread of direct, explicit violence in the media, it is pertinent to ask ourselves how to prepare elementary students to exercise their rights and the fulfillment of their civil and social duties?

In addition, one could also question whether violence prevents the actions of the school? Contrary to what might be expected, the school’s efforts go beyond the risks generated by social insecurity environment by providing students skills to learn how-to live-in society, and to learn about their environment, in a way that allows them to be aware of what is happening around them, and to assume themselves as part of a society, besides to analyze the functions and actions that corresponds to each one to solve violence, that is, they are consciously formed as citizens.

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