OPERATIONAL CULTURE AT SCHOOLS: AN OVERARCHING ENTRY POINT FOR PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AT SCHOOL

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Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is an entrenched problem that manifests in many ways throughout the world (Pinheiro, 2006). More than a billion children experience it every year and therefore, a large number of adults and peers perpetrate it (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014). While its manifestation may range from extreme physical punishment to chronic and menacing psychological pressure (United Nations Children's Fund, 2010), all of it is injurious and has far-reaching consequences (Widom, 2000, Lansford et al., 2002). From mental health (Riggs, 2010, Riggs and Kaminski, 2010, Chapman et al., 2004, Spertus et al., 2003), learning outcomes and resiliency (National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC), 2013, Macmillan and Hagan, 2004, Slade and Wissow, 2007, Leiter, 2007, Huang and Mossige, 2012) to long term development of the child (Holt et al., 2008, Lupien et al., 2009) all are profoundly influenced by the childhood experience of violence.

All forms of VAC should be prevented. However, preventing VAC at school presents a unique opportunity to influence children’s experience of childhood and their future trajectory. Schools are a place where children spend a high proportion of their time (UNESCO, 2011), and therefore, school-based interventions present a path to influence many childhood experiences at a relatively modest cost. Schools are governable by external policies and therefore its operational culture is open to scrutiny and influence. Schools are formative spaces where an early intervention would be deeply beneficial for the child as well as the entire society (Widom, 2000, Lansford et al., 2002). Given such compelling reasons to intervene, it is surprising that very little investment has been directed at addressing this problem.

This paper articulates a case for addressing VAC at schools. It further maintains that we should begin this work at the level of the operational culture of the school. The paper is organised into three sections. The first section articulates a rationale for prioritising prevention of VAC at school, why it has not happened in a meaningful manner so far, and why now might be an opportune moment. The central argument is that schools provide an exceptional entry point into a vast number of childhoods, and if we do invest in schools, the outcomes will pay dividends well beyond the original investment.

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1 While much of the literature uses the word ‘climate’, we have chosen the word ‘culture’ to refer to the same phenomenon. This is to distinguish between a prevailing condition as a result of factors beyond oneself (climate) to expression of values, beliefs, creativity, norms and more’s (culture). We believe that the reality of a school should be conceptualised as a creation and expression of its members rather than a condition that has befallen them and is beyond their control.

2 Most of the discussion in this paper will be addressing the reality of schools in low and middle income countries.
The second section discusses the operational culture of a school and why it is an important overarching entry point for preventing VAC at school. We describe the underlying complications of adopting such a strategy and how it is possible to adopt a pragmatic approach despite these complications. We describe a rigorously evaluated practical intervention (The Good School Toolkit) that has experimented with this approach and how it has enabled protagonists at schools to change the operational culture of their school. This section provides an examination of The Good School Toolkit, including a discussion of practical entry-points and structuring the intervention.

The third section explores preliminary ideas that might be useful to programme designers aiming to influence the operational culture of a school. We discuss conceptual and analytic tools that might be useful to bear in mind at the outset rather than the conclusion of the intervention. We discuss the importance of inclusive framing of the problem and for finessing the right balance of aspirational and practical design for the intervention. In essence, through the framework of the operational culture, this section maintains that preventing VAC at school is not only about preventing the incident but also addressing the culture that tolerates, incubates and perpetuates the violence. Sustained solutions have to grapple with underlying drivers of VAC at school rather than just addressing the visible symptoms of the problem.

In conclusion, we maintain that there is a compelling case for addressing VAC at schools and to do so through the operational culture of schools as a first step. All additional and context specific interventions should build on this foundation. We adopt that position for the following reasons. First, addressing the operational culture may be a powerful strategy in its own right that leads to a whole range of desirable outcomes (National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC), 2013, Huang and Mossige, 2012, Leiter, 2007, Macmillan and Hagan, 2004, Slade and Wissow, 2007). Secondly, there is convincing evidence that this strategy is effective at creating conditions that lead to reduction in multiple forms of VAC at school (Devries et al., 2015). Thirdly, addressing the operational culture of the school may also be an important precondition for leveraging and synergising specific interventions aimed at preventing specific forms of VAC (such as bullying, sexual harassment) (Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Violence against Children, 2012, Hong and Espelage, 2012). Finally, the strategy is cost-effective (Greco et al., 2017) and feasible at a practical level. For these reasons, we call for increased focus and investment in this strategy for preventing VAC at schools.

**Section 1: Why Prevent VAC at School?**

There is now wide acceptance that experiencing violence at any point in a person’s life is deleterious (Veltman and Browne, 2001, Lansford et al., 2002, Riggs, 2010, Michau et al., 2015, Heise, 2011). There is an even stronger consensus that the violence experienced during childhood can have a profound and long term consequence on the identity (Lansford et al., 2002), self-image (Riggs, 2010, Paolucci et al., 2001), development (Holt et al., 2008, Leiter, 2007) and, therefore, the potential of that child. Loss of such potential is consequential not only for the child but their
families, communities, and the wider society (Gelles and Perlman, 2012, Currie and Widom, 2010, Naker, 2005). Therefore, preventing violence against children is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic imperative for the entire society.

Children experience violence in all spaces and settings (Pinheiro, 2006) and it is critical to develop a comprehensive response to this issue. However, there is pragmatic benefit in assembling resources behind approaches that present a compelling opportunity and a strategic rationale while also continuing investment in a broader strategy. Within this context, we outline seven compelling reasons why we should invest in preventing VAC at schools as a priority, beginning with the broader operational culture of the school and working to build additional context specific interventions based on needs.

Firstly, the school provides a natural opportunity to influence the experience of childhood. It is a space where, according to UNESCO, more than a billion children convene on any given day and spend a large amount of their time (Kaftarian et al., 2004, UNESCO, 2011). While experience varies based on context, school is also a space where a large number of children experience violence at the hands of teachers or peers (United Republic of Tanzania, 2011, Kenya Violence Against Children Study, 2012, Devries et al., 2014a). Most schools would concede that the adults within this environment have a duty of care towards children and are seen as custodians of children’s potential. Therefore, such a space provides an opportunity to both minimise the exposure to violence and to mitigate some of the effects of the violence experienced elsewhere. There is no other equivalent opportunity to influence development of any individual as there is at school.

Secondly, the school operates as a distinct system with a formal structure that is administered through policies and established practice. Schools are therefore governable, open to scrutiny, and held accountable to a collective aspiration. Unlike a home environment that asserts a certain level of social autonomy and sovereignty of domain, a school is amenable to a planned and systematic intervention and is already primed to materialise the highest aspirations of the community. Thus, a systematic, at-scale intervention is much more likely to find traction within the school environment.

Thirdly, multiple stakeholders have a vested interest and a mandate to influence what happens at the school in their community. Every government has a mandate to influence what happens at schools and therefore levers pulled at policy level have an impact on the reality at school. Every parent has a stake in what the school offers their child. Every teacher has a role to play in creating such schools, not only by virtue of proximity but also by choice of agency. Every student’s quality of life depends on the quality of their school. Thus, such converging and intersecting set of priorities give rise to a collective impetus to act on ideas that could leverage common interests. In such a fertile environment, if prevention of violence against children is crystallised as an effective catalyst of these collective aspirations, it stands a particular chance of gaining traction.
Fourthly, the school’s primary purpose is to nurture cognitive development of children. Schools are one of the few spaces where children are primed to learn and adults are mandated to teach. Therefore, furnishing students with the basic building blocks of conceptual architecture is a fundamental task of any school. As a global community, we have reserved a substantial portion of society’s resources in this longer term objective for humanity. Yet, compelling evidence is emerging that suggests that childhood experiences of violence threatens this most ambitious of our projects (Huang and Mossige, 2012, Leiter, 2007, Uwezo East Africa at Twaweza, 2014, Pratham, 2014). Allowing VAC at schools to continue unabated undermines our investment (Gelles and Perlman, 2012) and denies society the intellectual capital that will ensure its survival and success.

Fifth, regardless of the pedagogical philosophy a school espouses or the pedigree it boasts, a school is more than a location for transferring information. It is a place where countless children lay the ethical foundation of their identity (Baker, 2006, Hamre and Pianta, 2001, Jones and Bouffard, 2012). Children absorb important lessons from the environment and the institution of school, such as how the world works, who succeeds, who fails and why reality is so. They learn to discern right from wrong by observing and listening. Whether by design or chance, a school provides data to the child about how to navigate their basic drives. By tolerating unjust practices that culminate in violence, we signal to the child that such ways of behaving are acceptable and set in motion a destructive pattern of behaviour that perpetuates itself throughout the life of that individual.

Sixth, pervasive violence against children and the fearful environments they generate curtail children’s capacity to develop their authentic social identities. School is a place where through trial, error, engagement, withdrawal, sheer chance and countless other mechanisms, children discover their social selves (Cassidy, 2009). They locate themselves within the social spectrum and discern where they belong, what they are capable of, and their ‘station in life.’ Violence and fear edits this emerging self and locks children in a poverty of imagination regarding their self-definition and their options for how to navigate the world they emerge into, to the detriment of the entire society.

Last but not least, it is in our collective interest to create the best possible learning environment for every child (Beyond 2015 Campaign, 2013) so that they may thrive and discover their own gifts and potential. This is not a sentimental plea but the basis of most successful societies and enshrined in international agreements such as UN Child Rights Convention, Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. Every global policy framework articulates a desire for a dynamic society with active and powerful citizens. If we desire socially responsible individuals who see themselves as custodians of wider interests beyond their own, it is critical that we develop interventions that prevent violence against children at school and influence children’s experience of schools. The relatively small investments now are likely to yield substantive dividends in the form of economic, health and social outcomes whose ultimate value may be well beyond quantification.
Reasons Why VAC in Schools Has Not Been Addressed So Far

In the segmented silos of development planning, what happens at school has customarily been delegated to the education sector. The education sector has been slow in recognising the importance of preventing VAC in schools partly because the problem is an ‘inherited’ one and not exclusively of the school’s making. Violence against children existed long before schools were invented, and its level and prevalence at school is influenced by what happens beyond the school. Although the structured and formal environment of the school may exacerbate the problem, and the compacted social proximity increases opportunity, the antecedents that lead to violence at school first emerge in homes and the society within which the school is embedded (Heise, 2011, Michau et al., 2015). The teachers and the students are products of the culture and environment they are immersed in and the interpersonal violence is one manifestation of it. In contemporary schools the problem therefore persists for multiple reasons including:

- **VAC is normalised.** Children are exposed to a high level of violence at home and in their communities (Pinheiro, 2006, United Nations Children's Fund, 2010). By some estimates more than half of all the children worldwide (more than a billion children) are exposed to some form of violence every year (United Nations Children's Fund, 2010). In 2011 alone almost half of the children (48 percent) in USA were exposed to some form of violence (Finkelhor et al., 2013) and in a multicounty study, almost two-thirds (63 percent) of caregivers said that physical violence was used to punish children (Lansford and Deater-Deckard, 2012). In such a culture, violence against children is normalised and has become a way of relating to children. This normalisation has established an operational culture at schools in many parts of the world that is resistant to change and has gained currency as the default mode of operation.

- **Children as semi right-holders.** Despite the rhetoric, many adults see children as right holders in waiting. Thus, many adults focus mainly on protecting and controlling children rather than fostering and nurturing their evolving agency (Lansdown, 2005). As a result of this preoccupation, we undervalue their priorities, overlook the depth of their experience and underinvest in understanding their perspective (Naker, 2007). Parents often pressure teachers to adopt an authoritarian pedagogical approach. Most teachers have emerged from such a system and have never been exposed to an alternative. Thus, the school continues to perpetuate what is familiar.

- **VAC as context versus incident.** There is a significant divergence between children’s conception of violence against them and the adult’s justification of the violence. Children see violence in the context of their relationship with the adult and process its impact into the world view they construct; through this process, they develop a working knowledge of how the world works and how to get their needs met in such a reality (Naker, 2007). Adults on the other hand often have an instrumental view that sees the violence as a means to an
end, and reduce it to an act, rather than its longer term impact on the child’s development. Many explicitly believe that in some controlled manner, the limited use of violence is legitimate and useful for instilling discipline in children (Naker, 2005). This disjuncture in views has been the basis of much fear, anxiety, passivity and ultimately withdrawal of children from the learning process.

- Intellectual neglect of school as an idea. While schools are envisioned as an altruistic institution, in many parts of the world, they have suffered a profound intellectual neglect. Thus it is not uncommon to find schools where large numbers of children fail to acquire even the most fundamental cognitive skills the school is mandated to impart (Pritchett, 2013, Pratham, 2014, Uwezo East Africa at Twaweza, 2014). Such schools are focussed on intimidating students to learn by rote and will do all that is necessary to ensure compliance. Such environments are rife for VAC to emerge and become entrenched.

- VAC seen as lower priority. Policymakers rarely consider children’s priorities when developing education policies. Thus on the hierarchy of problems related to education that need solutions and investments, violence against children does not even appear on the list. Take for example the Education for All movement that assembled in 1990 and at that time consisted of 164 government parties that committed to provide quality basic education for all the children of the world. In the six priority goals that emerged, violence against children at school does not emerge as a priority issue and is not explicitly cited in the text of the goals (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990).

- Scarce resources. Despite education emerging as an important global priority and garnering priority in the national budget allocation process, often the amounts available are insufficient. To make matters worse, a substantial portion of the resource evaporates en route to schools due to corruption (Wood and Antonowicz, 2011, Gill, 2013). Resource deprivation of the system reverberates throughout the school, from the quality of facilities to attitudes of and opportunities available to every stakeholder at the school. Such resource poor environments, make it easier for VAC to emerge, be tolerated, justified and become entrenched.

- Socio-economic pressures. The social status of teachers has collapsed in many communities (Symeonidis, 2015) and many find themselves in the profession as a default rather than choice. Teacher salaries are often near poverty line, fraught with insecurity as they may not be paid on time, and many are required to live far from their families when teaching in government funded schools. Additionally, training often does not prepare teachers for situations they are likely to face at school and on-going capacity building is virtually non-existent. In such circumstances, it is much easier to adopt an authoritarian attitude, release frustrations on children, and demand absolute obedience to a prescribed
way of thinking. In this context, violence becomes the most efficient mechanism for enforcing compliance.

The cumulative effect of these and other context specific factors has meant that that the violence against children in schools has become entrenched. A dysfunctional ‘ecosystem’ has established itself and attempts at addressing aspects of the problem in isolated manner have had limited longer term impact. The problem has become immense and ubiquitous and therefore daunting. However, global momentum is beginning to emerge that is beginning to develop diverse and longer term responses to the status quo.

**Why Now Is an Opportune Moment?**

Several independent forces have converged to create an unprecedented opportunity for registering progress on the issue. The advent of UN Child Rights Convention (CRC) and its unprecedented global acceptance ushered in an era of emphasising children’s priorities within the framework of their rights. Article 19 of the CRC specifically articulated the right to live free of violence and abuse and created an impetus on the duty bearers to act. The Millennium Development Goals followed by the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly Goal 16.2) have created a global standard that all member countries aspire to. UN Secretary General’s Study (Pinheiro, 2006) marshalled considerable evidence to galvanise action. The appointment of Special Rapporteur on Violence against Children as well as global campaigns such as WHO’s Global Campaign to Prevent Violence and Plan International’s Learn Without Fear Campaign added to the momentum.

The education sector has developed a parallel but connected trajectory by developing Education for All (EFA) goals and establishing universal access to education policy worldwide (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990). The emergent focus on outcomes as opposed to just inputs led to the realisation that quality of education is as important as access (Beyond 2015 Campaign, 2013) and thereby developing a direct intersection with the prevention of violence at school.

The scholarship, advocacy, leadership and practical work on the issue of violence against women has brought global attention to bear on the consequences of interpersonal violence on a whole range of development outcomes (Heise, 2011, Michau et al., 2015, UN General Assembly, 2006, World Health Organization, 2002, World Health Organization, 2013). The experience of violence in childhood and its link to adult perpetration of violence (Kalmuss, 1984, Abrahams et al., 2006, Fehringer and Hindin, 2009, Kishor and Bradley, 2012), the consequences of intergenerational cycle of violence (Ehrensaft et al., 2003, Abramsky et al., 2011, Contereras et al., 2012, Jewkes et al., 2013) and nuanced analysis of intersection between violence against women and that against children (Guedes and Mikton, 2013) has created substantive investments on the prevention of interpersonal violence from bilateral donors, private foundations and governments. Advances in the field of neuroscience and visualisation of the effects of interpersonal violence on the neurobiology of the developing brain (Shonkoff et al., 2009, Gunnar and Barr, 1998, Osofsky, 2001)
1995, Holt et al., 2008, Lupien et al., 2009) have provided convincing stimulus to act. Recent leadership from UNICEF (2010), CDCs investments in VAC Surveys (Injury Prevention & Control: Division of Violence Prevention, 2015) and nascent initiatives such as Know Violence in Childhood have created opinion and investment infrastructure for an unprecedented opportunity. These and many other converging influences create a unique opportunity to leverage synergy and take significant strides in addressing an entrenched problem.

Section 2: Addressing Operational Culture of the School as an Overarching Strategy

The practice of VAC prevention at school is still in early stages and there is considerable interest in identifying risk factors that lead to VAC at schools (Benbenishty et al., 2002). However progress has been slow due to the complexity of the problem. Part of the complexity emerges from the widening of the conception of VAC beyond simple acts of commission, to also include acts of omission (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011). In this context, the work of preventing VAC evolves into a more subtle intervention of influencing the child’s experience of school rather than just elimination of certain practices such as corporal punishment.

A child’s experience of school may be influenced by multiple factors. The policy climate and broader economy within which the school system is embedded may play a role. The vision and the attitude of the school administration may determine what acceptable behaviour is at their school. The skill, attitude and experience of teachers may determine much of what happens in the classroom and in the interpersonal relationships with their students. The beliefs and educational levels of parents, and social norms within the community may influence what they expect of the school, and the behaviour and life experiences of peers and siblings may also color experiences of each child. In addition to these surrounding influences, the subjective characteristics of the child such as age, sex, cognitive capacity, health, nutritional status or history of violence at home may establish a personal vulnerability through which the child navigates the school. The interplay and aggregate effect of all of these and other such components contribute to the emergence of the operational culture or climate³ of the school. In this sense the operational culture of the school may be thought of as the manner in which stakeholders experience, behave and feel at their school (Cohen, 2006). It is fueled by socio-economic pressures, values and social norms that individuals bring to the school and express in the school’s traditions, practices and governance.

³ For a discussion regarding the distinction between the two see Domotrovich, C. et al. (2008) page 15.
A broad consensus is emerging that the operational culture of the school may have a deep relationship with the level of violence children experience at school (Gottfredson et al., 2005, Freiberg, 1999). There is also some evidence that influencing the operational culture of a school may be a powerful strategy, not only for overall prevention of VAC at school, but also for leveraging the impact of other interventions aimed at influencing the experience of school (Kasen
et al., 2004, Johnson, 2009, Steffgen et al., 2013, Karwowski, 2008, Devries et al., 2015). Thus, addressing the operational culture of a school may not only be instrumental in preventing VAC but may also influence the learning, health, economic and social outcomes for the child.

However, when confronted with such a complex set of interdependent factors that contribute to the emergence of an operational culture at school, it is tempting to define the problem of VAC narrowly and attempting to solve it sequentially, such as beginning with issuing prohibitions on corporal punishment or investing in developing classroom management skills or establishing child rights clubs with the aim of progressively building on these interventions over time. Indeed, in practice that is what has been happening. However, when a system is beset with multiple and fundamental problems, sequential problem solving (i.e. compartmentalizing problems and addressing them one by one) may be an inefficient strategy. By conceptualising the problems as coexisting within an ecosystem that is out of equilibrium and designing structural interventions aimed at restoring the equilibrium of the system maybe a more fruitful and a foundational approach.

Such a strategy transcends narrow objectives that aim to bring about specific outcomes. Instead it generates synergy by identifying entry points to the system up stream and introduces practical ways for those interventions to influence experience of school downstream. It directs influence at the root causes rather than focussing only on the visible symptoms of a specific problem. Such an intervention weaves in layers of activities that work at multiple levels simultaneously. Although it is likely that such an overarching approach is not sufficient to end VAC at school, we may find that addressing the operational culture of a school is a necessary precondition for all subsequent violence prevention interventions to take root at school.

This approach, however, is not without complications. There are contested views on what components influence the operational culture of the school (Cohen, 2006, Freiberg, 1999) and there is a bewildering array of structural, environmental, interpersonal and economical components that may be at play, and could make a comprehensive intervention daunting. Fortunately, several interventions have found that to influence the operational culture we may not have to address every component that contributes the aggregate effect. We may only need to create a sufficiently receptive operational culture for additional ideas and interventions to take root. Such interventions (e.g. Plan International’s Learn without Fear Campaign, Save the Children’s Violence-free Schools, and Raising Voices’ Good School Toolkit) are inspired by a taxonomy proposed by Moos (1979). In this approach, the operational culture of the school can be conceptualised as consisting of three key domains: relational (children’s interpersonal relationship with the teachers and peers), psychological (attachment, belonging, identification with school) and structural (policies, administrative infrastructure and capacity) (Moos, 1979). This conception allows for the development of practical entry points for intervening within schools (teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, student participation, and school governance. See Diagram 3 below).
These interventions are based on a systemic design that begin from a student’s experience of school and work outwards from a child-centric point of view on what a high quality school experience would look like. The design of such interventions hinge on tracing how influence flows towards the learner based on their individual characteristics, the nature of their interpersonal relationships, the socio-economic character of their community and the societal infrastructure that exists to enable a successful navigation of the learning experience. The multiple layers of influence flowing through the ecological framework surrounding the learner (Atkins et al., 1998, Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Domitrovich et al., 2008) form the basis for the design of the intervention.
An example of such an intervention is the Good School Toolkit (GST) (Raising Voices, 2013), currently being rolled out at scale in Uganda. GST is a school-wide intervention led by two teachers, two students and two school affiliated community members who aim to influence the operational culture of the entire school through four entry points:
The activities are sequenced into a six step process based on transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997) that encourages the school to involve a wide range of stakeholders including community members, local leaders and parents.

- Step 1 aims to identify key protagonists at school and build school-wide support for the process (pre-contemplation).
- Step 2 begins with baseline measurements with the aim of gathering information and views regarding where the school is starting from and helps leaders within the school to develop an outreach to parents, the local community and local officials in charge of managing the delivery and oversight of education in their area (contemplation).
- Step 3 introduces a school-wide reflection on the teacher-student relationship (preparing for action).
- Step 4 introduces a school-wide reflection on how violence manifests at the school and explores practical alternatives to violent forms of discipline (action).
- Step 5 provides an opportunity to reflect on what a good learning environment looks like and what role each stakeholder, including the school administration, can play in protecting all its stakeholders (maintenance of action).
- Step 6 consolidates the work of the preceding steps through reflecting on what has been learned and achieved (consolidation of gains).

The GST methodology enables leaders at their school to create a school-wide culture where violence is not tolerated and generates opportunities for students to participate in the decision-making processes that affect them. Through colorful and accessible learning materials, GST offers ideas for a range of activities that facilitate learning about gender, sexuality, disability, positive discipline and creating violence-free classrooms. The protagonists leading the process at their school engage the entire school and the surrounding community in a reflection about what is a good school, what a good teacher is, and how students learn to participate. The overall aim is to foster egalitarian relationships and a safer psychological environment within which students are likely to invest in their school, form attachments to their teachers, identification with their peers, and develop a sense of belonging.

A randomised and controlled evaluation of the methodology found that GST reduced the risk of physical violence from teachers to students by 42 percent within 18 months of the intervention (Devries et al., 2015). GST is effective at increasing attachment of students to their school and reducing peer violence (Raising Voices, 2017). The intervention is effective for all students including those who are marginalized such as children with disability (Devries et al., 2014b). However, whether these impressive effects are sustained beyond the intervention period or whether such a methodology can be implemented at scale requires further evidence. GST is currently being rolled out at scale in Uganda, with a view to exploring these questions.
Section 3: Guiding Ideas for an Effective VAC Prevention Intervention Aimed at The Operational Culture of the School

Interventions designed to influence the operational culture of schools are few in numbers despite the idea having been around for more than a hundred years (Perry, 1908). Given the emerging momentum and converging influences, it is important to begin the work of developing guiding ideas about how such work should be curated and marshalled.

The following are some preliminary suggestions emerging from the work of implementing the GST over the past seven years:

1. **Locate interventions in a larger theory of change.** The intervention should be built on an astute and critical understanding of why the form of VAC is manifesting, tolerated and perpetuated in the schools you are working in. Invest in creating a model and a hypothesis of how change will emerge, including what preconditions need to be in place and what actions need to be taken, by whom, and in what sequence (Hernández and Seem, 2004). While this may seem daunting, even a modest investment in developing predictions about how change will manifest will make an intervention much more deliberate and accountable. This process will also embed the intervention in the local reality rather than the predictions of a distant programme designer who may not have access to the critical information about specific context.

2. **Recognise that VAC is a systemic problem.** School is a distinct system; consequently, if we address the underlying beliefs and forces that influence the system, then the dividends will manifest in places beyond our original intention (Freiberg, 1999, Heise, 2011, Hernández and Seem, 2004). Addressing the overarching operational culture that condones, or provides tacit consent for behaviours and ways of thinking that ultimately manifest as VAC is a prerequisite for any intervention that hopes to create a sustained effect. For example, if a school establishes standards that it expects all the stakeholders to uphold (e.g., respect and dignity for all its members, taking pride in the school environment, complexity of the learning process, celebrating achievement, involving parents) the cumulative effect is likely to generate synergy. In this culture, specific interventions aimed at curbing VAC are much more likely to take root.

3. **Acknowledge that VAC is a social problem.** This means recognising that there are socio-economic reasons for the existence of VAC and the practice is upheld by deeply held beliefs. Such problems are unlikely to be solved by a single intervention or even a single set of interventions (Espelage et al., 2004). Even if the proposed intervention is narrow in scope, linking it to the broader social ‘ecology’ of the school system will allow key actors to have a context within which they can locate their action. Understanding that complex realities such as VAC do not exist in a vacuum but emerge from communal beliefs,
administrative collusion and overall lack of an analytic lens, could give rise to a perspective that inspires rather than overwhelms. If a teacher understands the underlying beliefs that give rise to a particular reality, they are much more likely to develop insight-based interventions rather than those based on fear or punitive repercussions.

Such an approach requires analyses of the interpersonal space between adults and children (Espelage et al., 2004), politicising imbalance of power and status, and creating viable alternative models of adult-child relationships that resonate with this ethos. The approach also involves analyses of the political economy of action as multiple actors, resources and ideas need to come together in the right order, be directed at the right actor and originate from the right person for them to gain traction. Such an approach, accompanied by credible practical suggestions, could give rise to increased agency in individuals creating school-based protagonists for disrupting the status quo.

4. **Expand role of school.** As part of our interventions, we must encourage expansive understanding of the role of the school administration and teachers in a child’s development (Naker, 2009). Such an understanding creates imaginative discussions about the powerful roles teachers and schools in general can play in children’s lives, leveraging values and traditions as well as personal beliefs about the importance of education as a lifelong enterprise beyond the immediate economic utility. If teachers are reduced to a mere conduit for information transfer, they are much more likely to take refuge in apathy. Conversely, if teachers recognise that they are custodians of children’s development then they are much more likely to accept the responsibility for creating a more expansive system.

5. **Expand conception of violence against children.** It is important to recognise that physical violence is just the visible end of a spectrum that includes acts of omission as well as commission (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011). It includes psychological violence such as threats of withdrawing affection or economic support as well as systematic violence, withdrawing from school or discriminating on the basis of gender. As has been discussed before, the consequences of violence travels with children well beyond the time of the act, traumatising and brutalising repeatedly. Promoting a conception of violence that goes beyond the physical act to recognising the psychological impact, humiliation, and influence on identity development is much more in tune with children’s experience. Acknowledging the multi-layered effects of violence enriches the conceptualisation of preventing violence against children as not only absence of certain kinds of acts but the presence of certain types of relationships.

6. **Focus on creating a good school.** Frame interventions as contributing to the creation of a good school rather than just a safe school (Naker, 2009). A good school is a universal aspiration that is likely to elicit broader and more aspirational participation compared to a
‘safer school’ that is premised on solving a problem. This framing may also have the added advantage of creating easier access for parents who may believe in controlled use of corporal punishment to still identify with the thrust of the intervention. It may also galvanise a broader constituency of actors, such as officials who see themselves as working in the education sector rather than the field of violence prevention, which is sometimes seen as the purview of law enforcement or medical practitioners.

7. **Meaningful roles for all, coordinating role for some.** The problem of VAC manifests in schools because it is tolerated and perpetuated by the society surrounding the school. Therefore, VAC can only be solved when there is diverse commitment and widespread practice that challenges the status quo. The broader the ‘buy-in’, the greater the likelihood of the idea gaining traction and sustaining over time. Thus, we must create opportunity for every stakeholder to play a meaningful role in manifesting the intervention in their school. This requires involving parents, local leaders, and the local officials responsible for overseeing the delivery of education in their community. Developing an organic link between the home, the school and the community (local and national governance) builds into the approach sustainability and diversity of solutions.

Such diversity of involvement, however, can also diffuse the responsibility for, and erode ownership of, specific outcomes. It is therefore critical that at every school, there is a specific group of teachers, students, parents and administrators who assume the responsibility for coordinating the process for their school. Creating a group of key protagonists who assume responsibility for the intervention builds the ownership necessary to implement changes and foster acceptance of the intervention. We must insist in multiple ways that schools are primarily doing the intervention because they want to, not because we are asking them to. Our role is to inspire the desire to create the change that they really want to see at their school. They are the custodians of the ultimate outcome.

8. **Carve a meaningful role for students.** We must build into the intervention meaningful roles for students that go beyond simplistic participation. Reserve part of the school-wide outreach for students. Experiment with delegating real power and responsibility to students. Build processes that teach about broader concepts such as justice and equity with encouragement for application to VAC prevention. Such experiences of contribution create the belief that students’ input and participation is meaningful and matters.

9. **Balance broad with specific.** It is important to balance system-level investments with specific activities that lead to disaggregated, specific, visible and measurable outcomes. A broad intervention will evaporate after the initial thrust, but if it is linked to specific and tangible outcomes then it is likely to grow roots and become integrated into the fabric of the school. Thus, simply imploring parents to get involved without providing specific avenues and opportunities for participation is unlikely to find traction. Similarly, imploring
teachers to create a more egalitarian relationship with students without specific ideas for how to do it, or encouraging children to invest in their school without proposing practical mechanisms for doing so is unlikely to lead to a sustained change.

10. **Think big, think beyond.** It is critical to be aware at the design phase that the intervention must be executable at scale. From the outset we must strive to avoid exotic, labour intensive, resource-heavy interventions that only highly skilled individuals can execute. Instead in the early phase, we should invest in measuring progress, delineating pathways through which observed outcomes may be emerging, and pruning unnecessary parts. Focus on processes and people who will help to identify the easiest and most cost-effective path to the minimum acceptable standard rather than a perfect intervention that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

**Conclusion**

As global momentum for preventing VAC gathers pace, choices will inevitably have to be made in terms of where to apply resources and how to prioritise investments. There is a compelling case for addressing VAC at schools as a top tier priority. Such a strategy has at least four distinct advantages. Firstly, creating a more imaginative and just operational culture is a powerful aim in its own right and leads to a whole range of desirable outcomes in multiple domains (National Children's Advocacy Center (NCAC), 2013, Huang and Mossige, 2012, Leiter, 2007, Macmillan and Hagan, 2004, Slade and Wissow, 2007). Secondly, there is convincing evidence that this strategy is effective at reducing multiple forms of VAC at school (Devries et al., 2015). Thirdly, an expansive and just operational culture may be an important precondition for leveraging and synergising other standalone interventions aimed at preventing VAC such as bullying, challenging sexual harassment (Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Violence against Children, 2012, Hong and Espelage, 2012). Finally, preliminary indications suggest that there are cost-effective (Greco et al., 2017) and feasible ways of implementing the approach at a practical level and the cost of not investing now may well be incalculable. For these reasons, we call for increased focus and investment in this strategy for preventing VAC at schools.
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