Violence against children and education

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In most countries around the world, children and adolescents spend more time in school than any other single location besides the family home. Whether or not children and adolescents are able to attend school, whether they are safe in school and whether they leave school with necessary learning and skills, are affected by their experiences of violence—at home, at school and in the community.

Before children get to school, they are often exposed to violence at home. Analysis of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys data from 28 countries shows that 43% of children aged 2–14 years in African countries, and 9% in 'transitional' states, have experienced severe physical violence from caregivers.[1] There are a host of negative health and social consequences associated with exposure to physical violence in childhood, especially during this early period. These include increased risk of depressive disorders and suicide attempts,[2] poor educational attainment[3] and increased risk of perpetrating or experiencing intimate partner violence in later relationships.[4, 5]

Particularly for children who have also experienced violence at home, first experiences of the school environment are likely to be important in determining whether they are shunted down a trajectory towards later poor outcomes, including use of violence in their relationships, or if they are able to overcome negative exposures in their early childhood. Yet, school itself can also be a violent place. Levels of peer violence are high with 5–45% of boys and girls reporting bullying across 40 countries mainly in Europe.[6] Recent national surveys suggest that, at least in some settings, violence from school staff may be an important but overlooked contributor to the overall health burden associated with violence against children. More than 50% of men and women reported physical violence from teachers when they were aged 0–18 years in Tanzania,[7] and in Kenya more than 40% of 13–17 year olds reported being punched, kicked or whipped by a teacher in the past 12 months, versus 13–15% for parents.[8]

For many adolescents, secondary school is a time and place where they will initiate their first romantic relationships. Unfortunately, recent analysis of Demographic and Health Survey data show that intimate partner violence also starts early—on average, first incidents of intimate partner violence among girls occur at 22 years of age, within 3 years of union formation.[9] This implies that adolescence is a key period for prevention and secondary schools are a location where effective prevention might occur. In general, interventions for school-aged children are likely to be incredibly important not only for reducing violence at schools, but also mitigating the effects of experiences of violence at home and outside schools.

In this issue, we are fortunate to have a number of novel studies on violence against children and education. These and other studies show us that children can experience very high levels of violence before they get to school, while they are at school and after they leave. The studies also show us, at every stage of life, violence experience relates to differential outcomes in education—often, children who experience more violence are more likely to do poorly in school. The studies also suggest some opportunities for intervention. Sherr et al's analysis (p.36–43) suggests that interventions to reduce violence at home may have knock-on effects by increasing school enrolment and improving progress;[10] similarly, Fry et al's paper (p.44–52) also shows that reducing violence inside and outside school may improve educational outcomes.[11] Knight et al's analysis (p.27–35) clearly points toward interventions to improve school connectedness as a potential strategy to reduce violence at the school level.[12] Shamu et al's work (p.18–26) underlines the importance of addressing violence both in school and in the home to prevent the development of intimate partner violence behaviours, and suggests that addressing inequitable gender violence attitudes between peers in the form of bullying and alcohol use may be promising strategies to try.[13]

The new Global Goals clearly underscore the importance of both improving education and in eliminating violence against children (http://www.globalgoals.org/). Goal Number 4, Quality Education, focuses on ensuring access to quality primary and secondary education, and contains specific provision for non-violent educational environments. Goal 5, Gender Equality, aims to eliminate all violence against women and girls. Goal 16, Peace and Justice, pledges to 'end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.'

These are laudable goals and the articles in this issue illuminate the potential synergies of addressing violence in and out of

educational environments. Homes, schools and communities must be made safe for children in order to ensure equitable access to education for all.

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