Predicting violence in schools in cameroon using an ecological and health-based model: Implications for peaceful school climates

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ABSTRACT:

Violence and aggression in schools are global phenomenon of growing concern. Recently violence in schools in Cameroon has gained attention by media, teacher's union, the clergy and researchers. Problem statement this article is about predicting violence in schools in Cameroon. The presence of violence in schools creates significant individual, social and economic issues. Therefore, predicting the occurrence of violent behaviours in schools should consider a whole school, ecological and health promotion approach. Methodology Desk methodology was used in this work. The digitalization of school services as an important tool to prevent school violence was highlighted as well as enhancing mental health promotion in schools. Conclusion predicting violence unavoidably implies that information about students should be recorded effectively and used for the purpose to enhance effective decisions making processes by learners, and school administrators.

INTRODUCTION

Violence and aggression in schools are global phenomenon of growing concern. Recently violence in schools in Cameroon has gained attention by media, teacher's union, the clergy and researchers. In one of its headlines on the 13th of April 2022 Cameroon Tribune Online in its French edition read: Violence en milieu solaria la cote d'alerte. Violence in schools a call for serious concern. The federation Camerounaise des Syndicates de education, la Federation des Syndicates de Enseignement et de la recherche et le Syndic at des Travailleurs des Establishments Scolaires Privets du Cameroun, Cameroon's Federation of Teachers' Union is unanimous No teacher in Cameroon "feels safe anymore, not only on school campuses but, more generally, in the job today" . Catholic Bishops in a collective message, have decried the increasing cases of drug abuse and violence in schools in Cameroon (Allen JJ,2017).

During the Cameroon Psychological Association Annual Conference held in 2017 in Buea, Daru argues that "there is an increased occurrence of violence in schools and the causes range from mild teasing, belittling someone, verbal insult to bullying to more severe acts of gang violence". Edjenguele and needed affirms that violence in schools in

Cameroon have become recurrent and this has implications for social cohesion, making the phenomenon of school violence a social fact.

In the vast array of violent behaviours occurring in schools in Cameroon, the media portrays violence in schools only from the student perpetrator perspective. The idea of the school being violent to the learners is not addressed. Moreover, the complexity of violence in schools phenomenon has become evident in recent years with the anglophone crisis which started in 2016. Where schools have been targeted during the conflict and have become sites of psychological violence's, mass killings involving members of the educational community that is teachers and students been killed and kidnapped. For instance, Violence in Cameroon impacted over 700,000 children shut out of school. The most horrible been the massacre of 13 adolescents on the 24 October 2020 in Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Fiango Kumba in the South West of Cameroon. This new type of violence that schools have been experiencing notably in the South West and North West Regions calls for a fresh way in understanding the concept of school violence and develop strategies for schools to face this atypical form of school violence. It becomes important at this level to answer the question does school violence originate from within or without the school (Encinar PE, 2017).

This article is about predicting violence in schools in Cameroon. The presence of violence in schools creates significant individual, social and economic issues. It is imperative to curb violence in schools so as to engage learning communities, educational communities to be healthy, productive, and performant. Seeing schools as

social organizations which can be healthy or unhealthy and enabling environments for children development sets the pace for this present analysis. Moreover, a whole school approaches to wellbeing leads to engaging all school stakeholders in building and creating a positive culture in which each and every individual feels a sense of belonging. In this paper we see violence in schools as originating both from students and other components of the school itself (school administration, school staff, school environment). This violence extends its origin to outside the school. Therefore, predicting the occurrence of violent behaviours in schools should consider a whole school and ecological approach.

This idea could be a way to create a sustainable school environment and maintaining healthy schools so that learning in children, and adolescents can be enabled. It is important to clarify a few concepts so as to set the pace for common understanding. In fact, to understand violent behavior, violence most be distinguished from aggression (Greene MB, 2005).

WHAT IS AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE: The concepts of aggression and violence are related but distinct. Understanding their differences has an important role in prevention of school violence. On the one hand and from "a social learning perspective, aggression is defined as gestural, verbal, and physical behaviors that result in physical, material, or psychological pain or injury to another person". On the other hand, "any behavior directed toward another individual that is carried out with the proximate (immediate) intent to cause harm. In addition, the perpetrator must believe that the behavior will harm the target, and that the target is motivated to avoid the behavior". However, violence is as an extreme form of aggression that whose intention or goal is to cause physical harm, pain or death. In sum, as Allen and Anderson state "aggressive and violent behaviors are best conceptualized as being on a continuum of severity with relatively minor acts of aggression (e.g., pushing) at the low end of the spectrum and violence (e.g., homicide) at the high end of the spectrum. Thus, all acts of violence are considered instances of aggression, but not all acts of aggression are considered instances of violence". The nature of aggression and violence in Cameroonian schools has changed markedly climaxing with killings in schools in just the recent seven years. For example, the Regional Delegation of Secondary Education in the North West region has reported in 2021 that both students, teachers and infrastructures have been violated by external forces; 289 students kidnapped and tortured four years back, a year after it dropped to 24, 10 students this academic year have been violated not leaving out a student who died last academic year after being kidnapped and tortured.

The imperative of eradicating violence in Cameroon's schools poses a certain number of conditions. Firstly, understanding the cause of the aggression and violence perpetrated by students unto other students or schools' staffs.

Likewise, the violence school staff perpetrate unto students. Secondly, determine the mechanism through which violence is been perpetrated within schools (Haber J, 2020).

IS SCHOOL A REFUGE FOR EVIL DOERS OR A REFUGE FOR PEOPLE TO FOSTER GOOD: Schools are social organizations. Therefore, the school thus mirrors society. In this line, schools can also be thought to be healthy (healthy schools) or unhealthy (unhealthy schools) depending on how it functions. Hoffart argues that a healthy school may manifest itself in observable characteristics such as: productivity, very low rates of deliberate absenteeism, positive achievement test results, accomplishments in sports, attracting and retaining the best people; the smiles on the faces of the staff and students, a willingness to care for others and a desire to refrain from negative and dehumanizing behaviors.

As an agent of socialization, the school contributes to build up the character of people. Values from the family infiltrate into the school milieu and values from the school normally should add to family-based values. Thus, shaping how a person should live. Stories of violence in schools in Cameroon is informative of the nature and types of violence as well as the state of values in schools. From students stabbing, killing staff, to teachers kicking students till the point of affecting their health, to massive killings in schools. Yes, schools have people who can inflict pain and even death to other human beings. As social organization schools also have people who through psychosocial competences (that is designates the individual's ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Psychosocial competencies enable the individual to maintain a state of mental well-being and to positively adapt to the situations they encounter, while interacting with others and with their culture and environment in a constructive way can nurture a whole environment where teachers and learners can thrive (Hoffart G, 2003).

WHY DO VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS STEM FROM STUDENTS AND STAFF OR WHAT CAUSES SCHOOL VIOLENCE: We argue that violence in schools stems from internal and external factors. That is individuals on the one hand which could be students or educational staff within the school milieu perpetuates acts of violence on other members of the educational community. On the other hand, individuals which are found out of the school environment come to create acts of violence (gangs, terrorists) in the school. Finally, mediating factors such as the consumption of psychoactive substances in schools and their abuse and their role in school violence should be mentioned. The consumption of drugs in Cameroonian schools is an increasing. According to statistics from the National Committee for the Fight against Drugs (CNLD), "21% of the Cameroonian population of school age has already used drugs. 15-year-olds are the most affected with a prevalence of 15%, higherin school settings. In the

consumer community, 10% are regular consumers, while 60% are young people whose age varies between 20 and 25 years old"(Ramorola MZ, 2014).

School violence or violence in school can be understood in two ways. Firstly, violence perpetrated against students by the school's structural and functional elements (school climate as an element of school administration and teachers). Then violence that students do within the school against themselves and against the school administration. The semipermeable or permeable child environments in which the child lives makes school violence likely to come from anywhere. There is a controverse that has set in and which has become the problem in our society. As Tangwe points out, albeit the prohibition of violence in schools in Cameroon following art 35 of the law of Cameroon National Educational Guidelines No: 98/004 1998. Statistics dating back to 2006 by UNICEF revealed that 87 % of children aged 2-14 years' experience physical aggression and other forms of violence. This shows instead that the reality of violence against students in school is serious. For reasons due to cultural shifts in parental practices and roles there seems to be a focus or fixation more on the violence perpetrated by students. This has consequences and implications for our society.

School violence "includes a wide variety of acts, such as physical assault and battery, physical aggression, noncontact aggression (e.g., throwing things), broadly defined externalizing behavior, bullying, fighting, robbery, unwanted sexual contact, weapon possession, and verbal threats" . In other words, "school violence is defined broadly as the threat or use of force with the intention of causing harm, either at school or during school-related activities". In spites of the growing cases of school violence nationwide, it is possible to reduce or hope to eradicate the phenomenon by preventing it from happening (Ryan DP, 2001).

PREVENTION OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE FOR PEACEFUL SCHOOLS: As organizational entities, schools are a reflection of how they are managed and the product of the context in which they operate. Therefore, a strong cooperation and partnership needs to be established between each and every members of the educational community. With the sole objective to enable schooling to benefit the learners and the educational community. As Demassosso posited as recommendations in a study titled mental health of secondary school students and subjective wellbeing as a factor of their academic achievement in the Center Region: The Ministry of secondary education has an important role in enabling schools to promote mental health and wellbeing.

Violence in schools can be prevented and greatly reduced. From an ecological perspective in trying to understand the child and adolescent development and the consequences of violence in schools, the genesis of violence in schools can be considered also to be external to the school milieu as well as internal. Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory (see diagram below) looks at a child's development within the context of the system of relationships that form his or her environment. According to Bronfenbrenner complex layers of environment have an effect on the child's development. Recently this model has been renamed the bioecological systems theory. This means that the child is considered as an environment per se thus capable of interacting or been affected by other environments. Moreover, "The ecological framework treats the interaction between factors at the different levels with equal importance to the influence of factors within a single level (Figure 1).
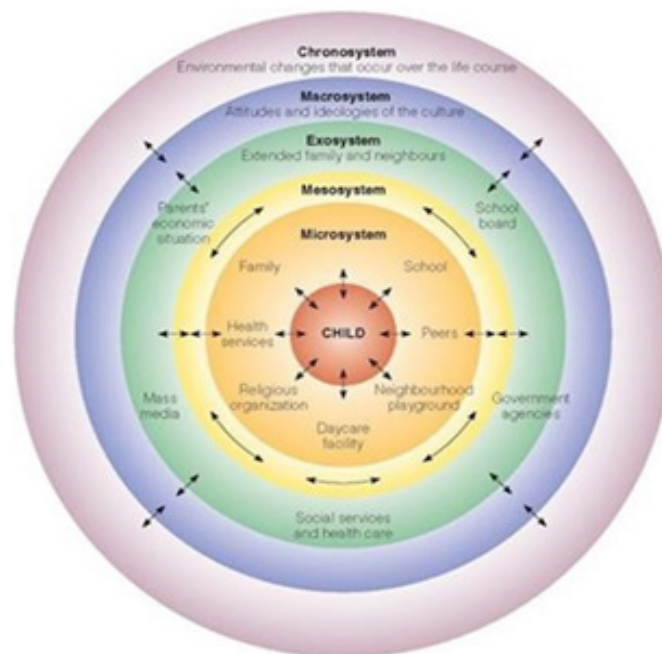
Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (adapted from 12- Dede Paquette and John Ryan (n.d).

The ecological model enables us to understand that violence from and surrounding children and adolescents can originate from anywhere were a child or an adolescent's lives. Knowing this enables us to make inferences of these adverse child environments on children and adolescent development and therefore deduce the possibility of the effect of these adverse experiences lived by children and adolescents on their development, functioning including health, mental health and wellbeing. The educational community requires to opt for new attitudes which collectively and collaboratively should lead to positive school climate and healthier schools. Schools because of their organization cease only to be learning communities but also health promoting environments. This idea is key to enable violence prevention and prediction to be possible (Singh TB, 2014).

GUIDELINES TO ACCELERATE THE IMPLEMENTATION TO ENHANCE THE ERADICATION OF VIOLENCE IN CAMEROON'S SCHOOLS:

➢ There is need to change conceptualizations of the school. Schools need to be thought now not only as learning environments but as well as environments capable of supporting both learning and teaching. This because of the role schools can play in wellness, health and mental health.

➢ Creation of peace and mental health clubs to foster wellbeing and healthy schools through value driving activities and the promotion of life skills and psychosocial competences activities is key to support learners to be equipped to meet the challenges of life in and out of school

➢ The digitalization of school services as an important tool to prevent school violence. Background information about students and staffs should be recorded systematically (psychosocial history, psychiatric and medical history, school related indiscipline for students or work-related aggression for staff). Guidance counsellors because of their pivotal role in school management should be granted access to these data for inference when need be. The need to make informed decisions in school administration should rely on reliable data.

➢ Equip, build capacity of guidance counsellors, discipline masters and teachers in working and understanding child and adolescent functioning and building relationships to foster the uptake of psychosocial competences and life skills

➢ Health and mental health in all policies should be enabled so that health and mental health should be a common and public good. This implies increasing multistakeholder and multisectoral initiatives and engagements (Tangwe AT, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Violence in schools in Cameroon is increasing and we should expect it to increase as a result of structural changes in living contexts of children and adolescents. However, eradicating violence can be possible if prevention of school violence is enhanced. The author argues that prediction of violence in schools can be a cost-effective way to eradicate school violence. This entails understanding adverse child environments, fostering learners themselves in the fight against violence in schools by equipping them with psychosocial competences on the one hand, and on the other hand this also implies enhancing socialization agents to work in the promotion of safe and mentally healthy schools. There is also an urgent need to digitalize school services especially those of the guidance and counselling services and discipline masters so that information about students and staff should serve the purpose of informed decision making. Predicting violence unavoidably implies that information about students should be recorded effectively and used for the purpose to enhance effective decisions making processes by learners, and school administrators. For example, systematic records of the type of violence and aggression made by students could serve to predict future behavior and develop preventive measures. A multisectoral approach could foster health promoting and peaceful schools.

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