

Violence and Schools

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Minister Najjar, Mr Tom McDermott, Dr Ayed, distinguished guests

I am very pleased to be here in Tunisia at this important meeting on dialogue and respect in schools. Both my personal interest, and much of my professional experience have been in understanding what makes the school environment more effective for learning, and how we can improve the quality of education. And it is wonderful to see the leadership provided from this region on these issues.

But one of the clear threats to quality education is violence; Recognising this, the Committee for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, supported by many others, requested the United Nations to investigate the many forms of violence against children, and identify recommendations for action. Hence the United Nations Secretary General's Study on Violence Against Children began.

This Study addresses violence against children globally – in all countries - and focuses on various settings where violence occurs, and where violence can be reduced, prevented, and ultimately eliminated. Schools are one of these very important settings, among others such as the home, institutions, in the community, and in work situations.

Definitions: Violence is defined broadly in the Study - not just physical violence but also psychological - Repeatedly children say that the psychological scars of verbal abuse, harassment, and humiliating and degrading treatment endure long after the red marks and physical injuries fade. While the focus here is on schools, it is also true that violence against children is not only a problem “in” schools. What we are learning through this global study is that violence in one form is usually related to other forms; and seldom if ever do we see one form used in complete isolation from others.

It is also very clear, that violence is not just a local issue, happening only in a few pockets of society or a few countries – all countries are struggling with this challenge. Regardless of the resources available to the country, no country is able to yet say that they have the complete, comprehensive formula for stopping violence. This study shows very clearly that it is indeed very global – with many forms and many targets – and even in the school setting, there is great diversity. We are seeing different forms in different regions and subregions, and we have even seen schools themselves targeted for violence. Eg. LAC - gangs; Africa – links between gender-based violence and increases in HIV prevalence among girls and young women; serious interpersonal violence in North America - against teachers, student harassment; in Asia (and elsewhere) trafficking and serious concerns about the status of the girl child; and “everywhere” corporal punishment!!

Our research shows that corporal punishment stops children going to school; stops them staying at school, and stops them from learning. And it harms the relationship between children and adults – also evident in families. If discipline is the issue, it is clear that there are many other ways to achieve high standards of discipline; if there is a belief that it toughens up the student, the evidence certainly supports this globally – The research absolutely shows that children who are subjected to corporal punishment do get tough – they become less sensitive to violence, empathise less with others who are victimised, and are more likely to use violence against others. In this way, violence is a transmissible disease - it is contagious. But so too can non-violent methods be infectious.

School is where children should be. And schools reach further into our communities than almost any other institution; While it is acknowledged that education is sometimes part of the problem, it is always a big part of the solutions we are seeing through the Study. Teachers are very important people in communities. And what they model at school affects how children behave. Schools can reduce violence, by making clear the expectations of students and teachers, by having policies in place and procedures which respect the integrity and dignity of the child, as well as others. We also know that simply telling teachers vaguely that things must change; or that they must not hit or verbally abuse students is not enough, unless we also provide training in specific alternative methods. Paying attention to how children get to

school, to what happens at home, especially for girls, is essential to understanding who is at school and who will stay.

While it is true that education itself prevents violence – that is, that people with more education are less likely to resort to violence; but still this is not enough. We live in a world of increasing globalisation, and reduced budgets for important social structures such as education. Under these conditions it is critical that we analyse what it is that our children are learning through schools. Schools are central to the setting of social standards and norms, and should take seriously the development of interpersonal competencies and “life skills” related to respect and dignity alongside competencies in mathematics and language.

If all of this sounds difficult, well it is true, that it is certainly not easy. There is no “one shot” vaccination for peaceful and respectful schools accommodated by communities where children grow and develop without hindrance. While I believe that education can be a “social vaccine”, its benefits will not be delivered in one shot.

The fact that some schools are not enjoyable for their clients, or are not safe, is something that adults need to make right, but should involve children to get it right. Internationally, there are many ways that we, as duty bearers, have affirmed our commitment to protect children from things such as violence... CRC... EFA... various conventions and declarations which support women and girls; We do not lack the courage to sign these agreements, but we seem to have trouble with implementation.

This is also why we are here... to listen, to learn from others, and most of all to focus on the solutions and put more of these in place – we are not talking here of small experiments and pilots, but rather large scale innovations. We cannot continue to allow education to be treated as the poor cousin, and to leave the smallest and most vulnerable among us, to last. Children are our most precious cargo, and while we emphasise that they are incredibly resilient, they are also fragile.

I am certain that the UN SGs Study on Violence against Children can make an enormous difference to raising awareness of the issues, and focussing on what can be

done. This meeting is especially important because it helps to balance out the strong bias in available information from industrialised countries – And I am very keen that this network gathering here is able to continue to provide inputs and feedback to the Global Study on Violence Against Children as we prepare our report, and particularly the chapter on schools which will be discussed during our program here – and I hope that our friends at UNICEF can help us with that ongoing linkage.

Some may ask – why are we doing research – part of the reason is because “Data talks”; another part of the reason comes from the word itself – “RE-SEARCH”... which means to search and search again to find better and better solutions... And so I hope that you can use the information gathered here to convince decision-makers, and assist leaders like Minister Najjar, to support more child-friendly policies that improve education for all, and also the child-friendly budgets which allow policy to become routine practice. I encourage you to challenge business as usual... there is no going back; only finding a new way forward... and the need to look at things differently... I leave you with the thought of the word “education” - within this word you see the word “EDUCE”; which means to draw out from within... rather than to force in from outside... let us think more about drawing the talents of the child forward.