



Evidence-based Programming: Incorporating Baseline Findings into Immediate Program Interventions to Reduce School-Based Violence in Honduran Schools

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Summary

The findings from the USAID-funded Asegurando la Educación project's school safety study conducted in 66 Honduran schools have provided a unique opportunity for school officials, parents, and teachers to develop immediate policies and practices in and around schools to mitigate violence. This article provides examples from schools in Honduras, in which the school communities developed immediate, cost-effective policies and practices to reduce school-based violence, all in the span of a few months after learning of the survey findings.

Keywords

School-based Violence Prevention
Survey
Safe Learning Environments
Honduras
Research-Practice Divide

Introduction

The findings from the USAID-funded *Asegurando la Educación*¹ (*Asegurando*) project's school safety study on school-based violence (SBV) in 66 Honduran public schools is a rare case where findings from a baseline survey have immediately informed practice and policy decisions to reduce violence. Connecting research findings to practice remains a challenge for many reasons, including the fact that findings are not made available to key education stakeholders. In their 2004 article, Gore and Gitlin referenced the research-practice divide in science education. This divide, however, is also a challenge in other fields within the education sector, including school safety. Working with the study findings at the school-level has become a unique opportunity for school officials, parents, and teachers to develop immediate policies and practices in and around schools to mitigate violence. In a country that experiences one of the highest homicide rates in the world and with high levels of other forms of violence, such as sexual aggression and extortion, promoting school safety is both a challenge and a priority.

This article provides examples from schools in Honduras, in which the school communities developed immediate, cost-effective policies and practices to reduce school-based violence, all in the span of a few months after learning of the survey findings. The project is also sharing its findings with national authorities, such as the ministries of education and security. We believe these findings will result in a stronger collaboration between the education and security sectors and a smarter allocation of resources to promote safer learning environments.

The Study

Conducted in April and May of 2018, the study asked over 7,000

educators, principals, and students from 4th to 9th grades in 66 Honduran schools across five cities their perceptions of security, their first-hand knowledge of the types and intensity of violent incidents in schools, and their knowledge of external factors contributing to school-based violence, such as arms and drugs.

Beginning in August 2018, just three months after the completion of the study, the Asegurando team began to present the findings to the school community.

At the national level, 24% of Honduran students had experienced some type of physical aggression committed by their peers. Just over 46% had experienced some type of emotional aggression, while 36% reported that within the previous 30 days, they had felt sad, hopeless, and had thoughts that life had no meaning.

When the school communities learned of the school-specific findings, they often developed preventive measures. The following are concrete examples of how school safety data were turned into cost-effective and sustainable practices to promote safer learning environments.

Physical and Verbal Aggression and Self-inflicted Violence

Parents and teachers at a primary school in Tela learned that 60% of boys and 33% of girls had fallen victim to verbal assaults, and 40% of boys and 24% of girls had been slapped or struck with a fist. In addition, 47% of boys and 24% of girls had performed some type of self-mutilation while 47% of boys and 29% of girls had felt that life was not worth living, all within the previous 30 days.

The school principal said that the findings were eye-opening. “Students don’t usually share thoughts of suicide or incidents of physical violence with teachers”, she said (personal communication, October 9, 2018). Supported by Asegurando’s university fellows, the school committee and teachers conducted the school’s first anti-bullying workshop in October 2018. Later that month, the school community conducted a school-driven anti-bullying awareness campaign, including an anti-bullying film, followed by discussion groups to attempt to confront the causes of, and offer solutions to, bullying.

In a primary school located in Choloma, 23% of the children had reported falling victim to physical aggression in the 30 days prior to the study. 52% of children reported having been insulted, and nearly 44% had personal items stolen, hidden, or broken. For minority students, the findings were much worse. The sole ethnic Lenca member reported suffering physical and emotional some of the time. Disabled students reported emotional bullying all of the time and half of them suffered physical aggression in the previous 30 days.

As a result of these findings, teachers incorporated anti-bullying messages through art and sports activities in the school’s existing clubs. They invited student anti-bullying champions from other school shifts to attend the clubs and promote teamwork, tolerance, and social inclusion. The teachers also invited Ciudad Mujer (Women’s City)—a women’s protection organization—to hold talks with students to raise awareness about gender-based violence and discrimination. Since taking these actions, the teaching staff has observed a reduction in bullying.

High Perceptions of Insecurity

Across all five cities, the study found that restrooms are where students experience the highest insecurity and fear. In another elementary school in Choloma, some 77% of girls expressed insecurity going to the restroom. In response, parents from the school community committee worked with school officials to change the restroom monitoring policies and practices to ensure restrooms were locked at all times and keys managed by adults—parent volunteers during recesses and the security guard during classes. Improved control of these individual unit facilities and better key management and accountability ensure that now only one student at a time can enter.

Upon learning that 87% of boys and 74% of girls felt unsafe going to the restroom in one San Pedro Sula school, teachers could not believe this was accurate. “We were shocked to hear about some of these incidents”, said a fifth-grade teacher. But some students confirmed the findings. “We will take action with the administration and parents to mitigate these instances”, the teacher said (personal communication, August 27, 2018). Indeed, teachers increased bathroom monitoring and began sending students to the restrooms in pairs. “I feel better now that the teachers understand what happens in the bathrooms... Going to the bathroom in pairs will help,” said the student (personal communication, August 27, 2018).

External Contributing Factors to School-Based Violence

At a secondary school in Tegucigalpa, 85% of teachers reported that drugs like marijuana or crack cocaine could be found just outside the school. Three out of seven said that drugs were available inside the school while four out of seven said alcohol was available at the school. And three out of seven said that they had witnessed students taking drugs or alcohol at school, all in the first three or four months of the school year. Although school officials knew about the drug problem, they feared broaching the subject of substance abuse because the students who sell illegal drugs often misinterpreted the counseling as law enforcement.

After Asegurando shared the baseline results, school officials approached the National Directorate of Social Intervention

(DINIS)—the government agency responsible for social protection—for help. DINIS has since launched an initiative at the school to train teachers on how to conduct practical lessons on substance abuse without raising the suspicions of drug dealers. DINIS is also now providing clinical therapy to students most affected by substance abuse. “We will now be able to give talks to the students on the dangers of drug use,” said the teacher (personal communication, October 10, 2018).

Conclusion

The fact that school communities responded so quickly after seeing the findings from the baseline survey—establishing cost-effective policies and practices to reduce violence in their schools—has demonstrated the commitment that educators, parents, students, and authorities have to making schools safe spaces for learning. These measures—monitoring restrooms, sending students to the bathrooms in pairs, police patrolling school environs at peak hours, anti-bullying campaigns, and engaging government social protection support, among others—also represent low-cost, sustainable models that the public education system can replicate in other schools.

With the start of the 2019 school year in February, in partnership with the Secretariat of Education, Asegurando will expand its school safety study to 125 new schools. The project will work with teachers, parents, and students to systematically address the findings with responses for converting uncertain environments of fear, violence, trauma, and bullying into safe learning spaces. The project is also sharing the findings with other key stakeholders such as the Secretariat of Security and USAID, to strengthen protocols and systems that can make all Asegurando intervention schools safer and to develop guides and policies with national coverage. We believe these policies and practices will result in a stronger collaboration between the education and security sectors and a smarter allocation of resources to promote safer learning environments, not only for Asegurando partner schools, but for the more than 23,000 Honduran public schools.

Endnotes

1. Asegurando is a five-year USAID-funded project designed to improve access to quality education—retention, completion, and student performance—by reducing school-based violence in five major cities with the highest incidence of gang- and drug-related violence: Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Choloma, Tela, and La Ceiba.

References

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