School Violence:
What can schools do about it?

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Introduction

School violence is a sensitive subject that touches current students, alumni, school workers, and the parent in all of us. A recent Quebec survey (Beaumont, Leclerc, and Frenette, 2014) of 57,000 elementary and high-school students, 9,000 parents, and approximately 5,000 school staff members revealed that most respondents have a positive outlook of the school climate. Sometimes, however, students (especially in elementary school) are subject to insults, beatings, exclusion from their group of friends, theft, or demeaning words online. For most victims, the incidents occur a few times a year, but others suffer repeated attacks from their peers. Often living with anxiety, loss of self-esteem, or depressive symptoms (Graham and Bellmore, 2007), it is difficult for these victimized students to continue their education in such a harsh environment[2]. Moreover, the researchers report that school violence can also lead to absenteeism and higher dropout rates[5].

Two years ago, a new law aimed at fighting school violence and bullying was enacted by the Quebec government and demands that all schools implement an action plan. According to scientific literature, school-based interventions are the most effective in preventing violence in schools[4]. We must first define what constitutes violence so that schools can successfully prevent or reduce it. The way students, stakeholders, and parents perceive violence and bullying is so varied that researchers cannot agree on a universal definition. Under these circumstances, how can we ensure that everyone is working in the same direction, are engaged, and mobilize around a common goal—to develop healthy interpersonal relations? How do we build a safe school environment and organize our actions so that they can continue beyond the sensationalized phenomenon of school violence?

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Violence or bullying?

To avoid debating over definitions, Gittins (2006)[3] proposed to adopt the concept of *convivencia*, which means the capacity of different human groups to live together in harmony within a local, national, federal, and community entity. More positive a word than *violence, convivencia* encourages us to organize our actions according to a comprehensive and positive approach, while striving to establish an interesting and safe learning environment where everyone finds their place and succeeds. In this context, any behaviour that interferes with harmonious coexistence (e.g., damage to the physical or moral integrity of others) requires adult intervention to rectify the situation or prevent it from worsening. Is the objective of continuously improving *convivencia* in schools likely to stand the test of time? All schools aim for this goal, even though some still claim to be free of violence.

Intervention philosophy

According to research findings, schools that adopt a comprehensive and positive approach obtain better results than those using scattered strategies unrelated to institutional objectives. This intervention philosophy aims to help us live together in harmony and is based on a positive school climate that makes negative behaviours such as violence and bullying unacceptable for students and adults[6]. By relying on social norms (politeness, rules of civility, etc.) to regulate our common life, the socialization of children becomes an integral part of school learning activities.

Therefore, actions are systematically implemented on the individual, classroom, school, family, and community levels while taking into account all aspects of school life (programs, teaching practices, policies, and procedures) in order to engage the entire educational community. This intervention philosophy assumes that decisions regarding student behaviour are consistent and reflect what is already provided for these children in other contexts. This is a positive approach that promotes inclusive education for all students and advocates the use of educational methods to address their relationship problems; it is in line with the threefold mission of the Quebec education system, which is to educate, socialize, and qualify. Moreover, the approach considers existing complementary community programs—thus avoiding the proliferation of interventions; it is based on concerted action between school staff and family; and draws on community resources.

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The more we invest in instilling a positive climate, the more we reduce the appearance of problems (e.g., violence, school dropout, delinquency, and absenteeism) as well as the number of additional interventions required at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. A positive and collaborative approach increases the "quality time" spent between students and teachers at school, and reduces the number of minutes spent punishing and reprimanding students, or communicating their negative behaviour to parents.

Organization and planning for sustainability

Research shows actions that only address violent incidents are not effective in bringing about a culture change. For long-term results, interventions must be preventive, based on learning strategies, and integrated into daily routines. Although establishing a positive and inclusive culture seems like a daunting task for schools, certain conditions can contribute to achieving a climate of *convivencia*:

- Leadership of the administration;
- Positive (educational) behaviour management;
- Inclusion and participation of all students in school life;
- A school program that integrates social learning;
- Clear policies and procedures;
- Continuous staff training;
- Timely detection of problems and response, as well as forming partnerships with families and the community[1].

These fundamental prevention conditions not only have the potential to reduce victimization risks, but they can also prevent other school-based problems that adversely affect the perseverance and success of students.

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