Improved safety and wellbeing of learners

Information brief

Understanding violence in secondary schools

Photo: Leh Wi Lan

Introduction

Leh Wi Lan commissioned research on school exclusion, perceptions of violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) education to inform the design and implementation of its work to:

1) strengthen responses to School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) and challenge harmful gender norms and;

2) increase access to quality Child and Adolescent Health Skills education and remove barriers to school retention for adolescent girls.

The research was carried out in 11 schools and their communities in Western Area Urban, Western Area Rural, Koinadugu, Bombali, Bo, Karene and Falaba. It was designed to generate evidence on the complex factors that shape violence, exclusion or the successful delivery of SRH education, by learning from lived experiences, and to provide recommendations and potential strategies for addressing these challenges faced by Sierra Leone's learners.

This information brief explores findings from the research process and presents a summary of types of violence found in schools, with a focus on how this violence is perceived and responded to, as well as potential strategies for addressing it.

Summary of findings

- Violence is widespread across Sierra Leone's secondary schools in all its forms: physical, economic, emotional and sexual.

- School staff have increased awareness that violence is a problem the Code of Conduct needs to be better understood, and to be enforced by the Teaching Service Commission (TSC).

- Despite common understanding that violence against learners is prohibited, it is often tolerated and accepted as normal across most schools.

- Schools are better at preventing violence than responding to it, though tend to focus on behaviour from learners not teachers.

- Learners and parents are reluctant to report violence due to: lack of confidentiality, fear of retaliation, belief that nothing will happen after a report (especially if the perpetrator is school staff), limited understanding of rights.

School staff behaviour and awareness

Violence perpetrated by teachers was found to be widespread across all schools in various forms: from corporal punishment and verbal abuse to sexual and financial exploitation. The most common type of violence was found to be corporal punishment, which largely takes the form of flogging. Stakeholders also reported sexual harassment and exploitation being widespread, with girls often coerced into sexual relationships with teachers in exchange for money or good grades, or because they fear reprisals. There were also many reports of economic exploitation by teachers who make constant demands for money, charge illegal fees or engage learners in unpaid physical labour.

Although there are signs that attitudes and behaviours towards the various types of violence are shifting, most stakeholders still view it as normal and acceptable. Stakeholders particularly believe that corporal punishment is a necessary form of violence and school staff have limited awareness of alternative discipline methods, and many are concerned that not beating students results in teachers losing control.

While teachers mostly know of the existence of the Code of Conduct, many have not read it and this lack of awareness undermines efforts to reduce violence by teachers, particularly untrained teachers. There is also a limited understanding of, or respect for, confidentiality within schools, which is a major disincentive for learners to report cases of violence.

'Staff now have increased awareness and understanding of the problem of violence in school'
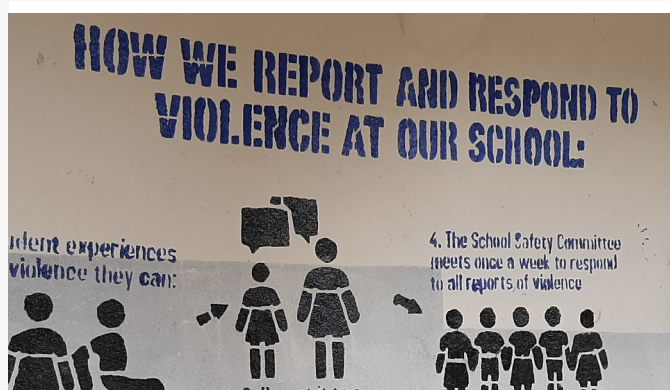

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More generally, it was reported that school staff now have increased awareness and understanding of the problem of violence in school, and that this problem is being taken more seriously. However, the extent to which schools respond with appropriate action to an incident of violence was very mixed. The performance of schools in responding to violence by teachers appears to be much weaker than dealing with violence by pupils, which often includes bullying of children with disabilities, children from deprived households and pregnant girls or pupils who are mothers.

Sexual harassment and exploitation: Most stakeholders reported being disapproving of teachers coercing students into sexual relationships, and stated that teachers behaving in this way should face sanctions. Yet sexual harassment and exploitation was reported across all the schools where research was conducted, with teachers regularly making inappropriate comments, touching learners inappropriately, and demanding sex for good grades, money or material items.

While there seems to be a shared understanding that this behaviour is prohibited and cannot be openly condoned, the fact that it is in effect ignored and tolerated in many contexts suggests that there is a gap between the beliefs people express and the underlying norms that inform their behaviour.

Systems and structures for dealing with violence

Weak systems of oversight and accountability of school staff, including both principals and teachers, create conditions in which some teachers can act violently with impunity.

Some schools have functioning mechanisms in place to report violence, such as suggestion boxes, but the extent to which they provide safety and confidentiality varies significantly, which results in a lack of trust and a fear of reprisals amongst learners. Learners and their parents don't see the point in reporting acts of violence, as they fear reprisals and lack of confidentiality across systems, while also having previously seen that reports against perpetrators tend to be met with inaction and indifference.

School Safety Committees are responsible for recording and addressing any violence reported in the school, but they are not active across most schools and there seems to be little awareness of them. Some reported violence to school mentors or guidance counsellors, who do tend to be seen as trusted adults within the school, but there was limited evidence on whether reports made in this way resulted in action. As a result, learners and parents tend to believe the most effective way to report violence is to do so directly to the principal.

While schools are often weak in their response to incidents of violence, it appears that they are stronger in their efforts to prevent it through a variety of awareness raising and sensitisation initiatives. These include activities such as the formation of School Safety Clubs, learning circles and Community Teacher Association (CTAs).

Views of parents and communities

Social norms within the wider community influence the incidence of, and response to, violence in schools. For example, many parents support the use of corporal punishment and have been unhappy where teachers have stopped using it. Meanwhile, discriminatory attitudes, behaviours and norms drive much of the sexual harassment, violence and bullying experienced by schoolgirls, learners with disabilities, and learners who are pregnant or who are mothers.

Growing availability and use of drugs within communities, and particularly the widespread use of Kush by young men, is also clearly a key driver of violence by male students, directed both at peers and at teachers.

Only cases of severe sexual violence or beatings would be reported to authorities outside the school, including to the Famliy Support Unit (FSU). Reporting teachers to the police was often a last resort, as value is placed on resolving conflict within communities, learners and parents fear a lack of confidentiality leading to repercussions, and those from marginalised backgrounds feel inferior to teachers. Many are also unaware of their rights. FSU officers also reported that some students do not know about reporting channels.

Recommendations

Build the skills of school leaders to deal with violence-related issues and raise staff awareness of the Code of Conduct, including positive teaching methods that promote alternatives to flogging and the consequences of breaching confidentiality.

Improve oversight of teachers' conduct via school structures and external mechanisms and strengthen the capacity and functioning of structures such as the CTA, Board of Governors, School Management Committee and School Safety Committee.

Work with communities to challenge social norms impacting on violence in school.

Build closer relationships between school and parents with regular communication.

Raise parents' awareness of techniques for positive parenting at home.

Raise learners' awareness of their rights and processes for reporting violence and abuse in school.

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