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Community participation in the development and validation of a school violence observation instrument

N. Medina¹, G. Fernández², T. Cruz³, N. Jordán⁴, and M. Trenche⁵

¹School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universidad Del Este

²Amalia Expósito School, School Violence Prevention Committee

³School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universidad Del Este

⁴School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universidad Del Este

⁵School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universidad Del Este

Abstract

Background—School violence is a worldwide public health issue with negative effects on education. Official statistics and reports do not include daily occurrences of violent behavior that may precede severe incidents.

Objectives—This project aimed to engage school community members in the development, validation and implementation of an observation instrument to identify characteristics of school violence.

Methods—The role of members of each participating school community in all phases of the research is described.

Results (or Lessons Learned)—The input of community members contributed to enrich the process by providing insight into the problem studied and a more informed framework for interpreting results.

Conclusions—Taking into account distinctive features of each particular school made results meaningful to the school community and fostered a sense of empowerment of community members as they recognized their knowledge is essential to the solution of their problems.

Background

School violence is a world-wide public health issue that has a negative impact on the educational process. Current research in neuroscience is helping us understand how early experiences, such as exposure to violence, shape brain development and may make it susceptible to physical and mental health challenges. In Puerto Rico, from 2006 to 2008 there was an increase in simple assault, peace alteration, as well as illegal appropriations perpetrated in schools. In addition, severe bullying incidents have been frequently reported by the media. These statistics and reports provide some evidence of serious incidents that

disrupt the educational experience of teachers and students. However, the statistics available are not consistently updated and they tend to focus on isolated situations of extreme violence where weapons were used or property was damaged or destroyed. In addition reports lack information of daily occurrences of less severe violent behavior that may precede more acute incidents. This lack of information makes it difficult to understand this phenomenon and design effective prevention strategies. New tools are needed to identify the characteristics of school violence. Moreover, the exclusion of school communities in the development, implementation and evaluation of these strategies affect their efficacy and sustainability. Efforts must be made to develop ways for community collaboration to design prevention programs and strengthen their short and long-term impact.

Through an academic-community partnership, VIAS Project (Violence and Asthma Health Disparity Network) strives to develop new ways to address school violence. VIAS is funded by the National Institute on Minority Health Disparities through a grant from the Research Infrastructure in Minority Institutions Program (P20MD003355). VIAS' aims to strengthen the university's research infrastructure while studying health disparities and their impact in surrounding school communities using a Community Based Participatory Research Approach (CBPR) approach. CBPR partnerships have been increasingly used to mobilize and empower communities to address health disparities issues such as violence prevention , and mental health. VIAS' Violence Prevention Component (VPC) researches school violence through the development of prevention strategies based on community participation including capacity building activities, data gathering to understand the problem, development of community-based interventions and public policy efforts (see Figure 1).

Following CBPR principles of equitable involvement of all partners in research and recognition of their collective strengths to contribute to the improvement of their own community , VIAS facilitated the creation of School Violence Prevention Committees (SVPCs) in participating schools. Development of these committees was instrumental for community leaders and researchers to get together and equally participate in definition of problems to be addressed and assessed, intervention planning, implementation, and evaluation. In this case, the committees are composed of members of the school community such as teachers, principals, parents, students, support staff (social workers, counselors, librarian, etc.) police officers and community leaders, as well as members of the VPC including research professors, the project coordinator and undergraduate and graduate university students in research training.

Recruitment to participate in the SVPCs was accomplished by different means. Initially members of the VPC approached school principals and support school staff, such as school social workers and counselors, to help promote the development of the committees. They in turn contacted teachers and other school personnel to participate. Parents were recruited during regular parent meetings in which the project was presented and discussed by the researchers and school staff. Community leaders and representatives were approached directly by school personnel, since they were previously involved in other school initiatives.

Typically each SVPC is composed of approximately 12 to 15 members. During the first meeting of the semester, meetings are set up for a specific date, time and place each month

(e.g., second Friday of each month at 2pm in the school library) in agreement with all members. The VPC coordinator and a committee liaison, selected by SVPC members, are in charge of following up on all committee matters including reminders of upcoming meetings and activities.

SPVCs share a common goal: prevention of school violence in their particular school. These committees are important because they help develop an environment in which everyone's voice can be heard and respected as decisions are made about research strategies and future interventions. They are essential to establish and maintain an effective and mutually beneficial partnership. It is in this context that a study to develop a school violence observation instrument was carried out.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to engage school community members in the development, validation and implementation of a school violence observation instrument designed to gather information about the characteristics of school violence. This information may serve as a basis for the development of prevention strategies that respond to the needs and characteristics of each school community.

Methods

This research, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Ana G. Méndez University System on March, 2012 (IRB AGMUS - 02-093-12), consisted of three phases: development, validation and implementation. Efforts were made for each participating school community to play a central role in all phases of the project including planning activities. For instance, during the first phase, the **I**nstrumento para **o**bservaciones diarias de **v**iolencia **e**scolar (INOVE) was developed with input from members of the school communities and VIAS research team. Initially a group of principals and teachers of VIAS participating schools developed a list of violent behaviors frequently observed in their schools. This allowed researchers to gather first-hand information about daily occurrences of violence in each school and make comparisons among them. Later when the SVPCs were created, they proposed to use the list as the basis to develop a mechanism to register these occurrences, explore the characteristics of school violence, and have a solid base from which to develop prevention strategies. The VIAS research team developed the instrument, but it was modified with input of the SVPCs over several meetings. The agreed upon categories that were included in the instrument are: physical violence, verbal violence, physical and verbal violence and violence against property (see Table 1). In addition, SVPCs strongly recommended that all members of the school community be observed (not only students) in different school areas (not only classrooms) and at different times of the school day. Research members took on this challenge during the validation phase.

The second phase or validation process involved: training student observers, performing observations in a non-VIAS participant public school (or pilot school) that had similar geographic, educational and socioeconomic characteristics, and modifying the instrument and the observational process with input from student observers, VIAS research team,

external evaluators and the SVPCs. The SVPCs were particularly involved when observations in the pilot school were completed, as they reviewed the recommendations made by student observers and VIAS research team. As each one was presented (detailed analysis and justification), members decided whether or not to adopt them. Discrepancies were respectfully discussed and decisions were made by consensus. Once all changes were made, two external researchers evaluated the instrument with expertise in violence prevention and methodology, one from the University of Puerto Rico and another one from the University of California-Santa Cruz. Their recommendations were discussed with the SVPCs for their approval before new modifications were made.

Once this process was completed, the third phase of the research was conducted. This involved the implementation of the validated instrument in VIAS participating schools to collect information regarding the characteristics of school violence in each school. The data collected and analyzed by research members included information about the most common types of violent behaviors observed, the school areas where they most frequently occurred, as well as descriptions by age and gender of the people involved in the observed incidents. This information was presented to the SPVCs to be discussed and interpreted by all members. The final reports for each school, including SPVCs input and recommendations were presented orally to different groups within each school community (faculty, parents, etc.). In addition, written reports were submitted to school administrators and public education officials. Many of the recommendations have been recently implemented including, for instance, changes in school organization and more parental involvement in school activities, among others, which are expected to help diminish the amount and severity of violent incidents in these schools.

Community participation through the SVPCs

As mentioned earlier, SVPCs were instrumental during all phases of this research project. Attendance to committee meetings throughout the process fluctuated between 90 to 100%. Meeting minutes attest to the active participation of all members in discussions regarding violent incidents in schools. In particular, school community partners were able to convey to university research partners the negative impact daily occurrences of school violence have on the educational process by recounting their own first-hand experiences as teachers, parents, as well as support and administrative personnel. In addition they commented on the way the school community struggles every day to try to reduce incidents in spite of limited resources available. These discussions provided researcher partners important information regarding school culture and dynamics that they might not have obtained following traditional research methodology. Many researchers have addressed this as one invaluable benefit of community involvement in research. - In this particular research, it was especially important to operationalize the behaviors to be included in the instrument for accurate identification by the student observers who were not familiar with each particular school context. For instance, in one of the schools there was a particular way to greet friends among the student population that outsiders may have perceived as physical violence, but was not considered so by the observed.

Moreover, community research partners expressed their satisfaction with their participation in the SVPCs. They stressed their belief that their role in the research process was critical to the successful completion of the study. They also commented informally to other members that, during the meetings, they felt free to express themselves because their opinions were respected by all partners. In particular, they stressed that the positive attitude of researchers led to an open and pleasant environment that encouraged mutual learning. They particularly appreciated the emphasis made by research partners that the results of the study would be beneficial to all partners, researchers and school community members. This in turn helped create a productive environment in which all ideas were listened to and were integrated into a final product after careful evaluation by all members.

By including the participation of people with substantially different assumptions, perspectives, bodies of knowledge, and those who are intimately familiar with the subject of study, research members could then avoid the trap of their own limited *a priori* notions regarding what may be important and relevant to the phenomenon being studied, as originally pointed out by Lewin. In this case, community input was invaluable in the development of the instrument to make it a culturally appropriate tool to understand the nature and characteristics of school violence. In sum, involvement of school community partners in this process illustrates how community involvement through CBPR enriches all aspects of research in a way that traditional approaches cannot while leading to sound research.

Results (or Lessons Learned)

There were many challenges, as well as benefits, regarding community participation in this research. One of the main challenges was the need for all school community members to understand the research process in order to make informed evaluations and decisions about it. Some members (school personnel in particular) have had some experience in this regard as part of their higher education academic background. However, other members (parents, community leaders, etc.) did not. University research members had to take this into account when discussing the rationale and procedures of different research activities to be performed such as literature review, specific aims, methods and techniques for gathering data, training of observers, data analysis and interpretation, among others. Moreover, the VIAS research team collaborated with the university's compliance office in order for school community members to receive a one-day training regarding ethical issues in research with human subjects for them to be aware of confidentiality and privacy concerns, among others topics. In fact, the university's IRB and VIAS team engaged in capacity building activities as well regarding CBPR and ethical issues to respond to the challenges of having community members as research partners. These activities helped to facilitate and support the researchers especially at the implementation phase of the study when observations to gather data were performed in each of the schools.

The school environment itself provided its set of particular challenges, especially because it has a well-established power structure that tends not to encourage participation. For instance, research activities could not begin as originally scheduled because of delays

acquiring the necessary authorizations from public education officials, even with letters of support from participating schools.

In general, school administrators supported the committees by providing time and place for SVPCs meetings and allowing school personnel to participate. However, in some instances school policies concerning time and decision-making, as well as, contextually established social norms regarding power relations had an impact on community participation. - For instance, sudden changes in school itineraries, as well as increasing responsibilities of school personnel had a negative effect on SPVCs meetings' calendar and agenda, as they sometimes had to be rescheduled in order to maintain a good level of participation of school personnel. As such, students' school days are strictly scheduled, making it difficult for student members to participate in some of the meetings. In addition, some teachers who were not supportive of student participation in the committee would use their position of authority to actively try to discourage them. This is especially significant because, even when community members are involved in the research process, they may become frustrated with the demand on their time and resources, if they and others do not see the importance of their participation. -

Furthermore, the composition of the committee was altered when there were changes in school personnel or some parents stopped attending because their children had graduated. Even when other parents stayed as members of the community component, they were not as aware of daily occurrences, since their children were no longer attending the school.

As stated by Richardson, Gauvin-Racine, Jobson, Sasseville & Simard , another challenge to CBPR is presented by the position of the researchers themselves, who sometimes, as in this case, are not physically located in the community and do not have the time or resources to conduct more in-depth ethnographic work. Such constraints made it difficult to observe a representative cross-section of the school community.

Still, even in the short term, the benefits of CBPR can be very positive. One of the most important was to provide the school community with evidence-based information about the characteristics of school violence in each one of the participating schools. This led school's administrative and support personnel to make changes to target the problem (in school schedules, organization, and facilities, among others) with the input of school community members represented in the SVPCs.

Of extreme importance was the essential role of the committees in developing a sense of empowerment in school community members. The climate developed within the SVPCs in which all voices were heard and respected, supported the notion that they could make a difference in their community and that their first-hand knowledge about the problem was important for the research process. It was precisely the fact that all members got together to agree on defining daily occurrences not generally considered in official school violence statistics and that observations included all school community members and facilities, what makes their input invaluable for research members. For them, the knowledge about school culture and dynamics acquired by using a CBPR approach was perceived as crucial in order for the research to record occurrences that may precede severe incidents. As previously

mentioned, this information is crucial to understand school violence and design effective prevention strategies.

Conclusions

In this article we highlighted the importance of community participation in research to develop a school violence observation instrument. On the one hand, the input of school community members was extremely valuable for research members since it provided insight into the problem studied and a more informed framework for interpreting results. On the other hand, their contribution made results obtained more meaningful to the school community because the distinctive features of each particular school were taken into account in all phases of the research process. This in turn helped develop a sense of empowerment of community members as they recognized their knowledge as essential for the solution of their problems. In fact, this collaboration is recognized in this article, which was written by research and school community members of one of the SVPCs. We hope our experience helps other researchers adopt this approach that integrates the strengths of community and research partners to acknowledge the needs of their surrounding communities.

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Figure 1.
Model for school violence prevention through CBPR developed by VIAS' Violence Prevention Component

TABLE 1

BEHAVIORAL CATEGORIES*

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE	VERBAL VIOLENCE	VIOLENCE THAT CAN BE PHYSICAL AND/OR VERBAL	VIOLENCE RELATED TO THE PROPERTY (AS PART OF HARASSMENT)
Physical Threat - Convey with actions, not words that s/he wants to inflict physical damage. Example: Show your fist directly to a person.	Verbal threat - Convey with words that s/he wants to produce physical damage. Example: “I’ll hit you”, “I’m going to kill you”, etc.	Marginalize or exclude - Purposely ignore, isolate, reject or fail to take into account a person in order to do harm.	Steal or hide property -Take possession of other people’s property against their will. Also hide something and/or place it where the owner can’t find it.
Mockery (physical) - Movements used to ridicule others.	Mockery (verbal) - Use words or sounds to ridicule others. (Does not include nicknaming).		
Hitting/Punching - Give a blow to another person using any part of the body. E.g., pummel, fist or slap, kick, etc. (Does not include pushing.) Do not include hitting as part of a fight; it should be counted as a fight.	Nicknaming - Appoint or classify contemptuously one person or more for the purpose of ridiculing or making them feel bad.		Property damage -Damage or ruin someone else’s property on purpose.
Pushing - Force someone to move in order to do harm. (Does not include hitting/punching.)	Insults - Use words to offend others in a way that is generally considered contrary to social conventions of the community. (Must spell out in the comments the words used and why it was considered offensive.)		
Scratch – Use nails to tear skin			
Biting - Sink teeth on any part of the body.			
Hair Pulling - Firmly grab hair.			
Touch private parts - Touching breasts, rear or sexual organs of another person.			
Throw objects to another person - Tossing objects toward another person in order to do harm.			
Fights - Physical struggle between two or more people.			

* The instrument includes an open area to include other behaviors where force is used, physical or verbal intimidation to get something is used or physical or emotional harm is done, that do not fit the existing categories.