



School Violence in Context

Culture, Neighborhood, Family, School, and Gender

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School Violence in Context

*This book is dedicated to all schoolchildren and educators in the world.
May peace be with you.*

Foreword

We have all witnessed the consequences of missed signals or indications of trouble, the reaction of disbelief, and the damaging, often tragic consequences of school violence. Dr. Rami Benbenishty and Dr. Ron Astor's *School Violence in Context: Culture, Neighborhood, Family, School, and Gender* offers an in-depth, intellectual look at how violence presents in a school setting, factors that contribute to violence, and how the information presented may be transferable across cultures and national boundaries.

In the United States, it seemed for a time as if school violence were the only topic on the national news. Americans were shocked but fascinated. Due in part to the media attention and the sheer magnitude of some of the episodes, the American public was no longer lulled into thinking that violence took place only in inner-city schools, in a drug deal gone wrong, or among rival gang members. Suddenly, rage had no color, no location, no community, no socioeconomic ties. Fear knew no boundaries. Bullying had an effect more serious than the loss of some lunch money. The country woke up to the seriousness of violence among its youth in their schools.

Sensationalistic media coverage of high-profile acts soon gave way to a sort of acceptance, perhaps even apathy. However, just because there are no images of children flooding out of a school building to escape the horrors inside doesn't mean that school violence has been eliminated. School violence is not just a picture of shooting victims on the 6 o'clock news, it is also real-life assault, sexual harassment, rape, and intimidation. Continuing incidents across the nation attest to the fact that this is a critical issue facing our children, their parents, our teachers, and our society.

The violence among youth that we experience in the United States tends to be a consequence of alienation. Youth who are disenfranchised, discounted, frustrated, or fearful strike back against those whom they perceive to be the oppressors. Conversely, Americans, unlike citizens in many countries, are rarely exposed to daily

incidents of violence as a consequence of war. The same media outlets that looped continuous coverage of school shootings sanitize or guard us against the horrific images other nations are exposed to firsthand, war being an unavoidable part of their everyday life.

One such nation experiencing ongoing unrest is Israel. Arab and Jewish communities in Israel each have their own culture, their own identity, and their own schools, all in a comparatively small geographic area. The continuing turmoil often heightens the sensitivity to their differences rather than magnifying their similarities. It is the commonalities and uniquenesses of these cultures that provided Drs. Astor and Benbenishty an unprecedented opportunity to study the effects of school violence on Israeli youth, who exist together in one nation yet are apart in belief and culture.

Drs. Astor and Benbenishty forged new research territory when they responded to the call from the Israeli government to more closely investigate violence in the nation's schools. Although organizationally dedicated to both preventing and confronting incidents, the government did not truly have the up-to-date and accurate data needed to inform and advise about the state of violent incidents and interventions in the schools or what issues needed to be addressed. In response to this call, Astor and Benbenishty conceived of a large-scale, comprehensive, cross-cultural study of Israel's schools, in which they would examine the experiences and attitudes of the three distinct cultures of Israel: Arabs, secular Jews, and Orthodox Jews—the first national study to include these groups.

Astor and Benbenishty approached the study with a distinct insight and a well-designed and thoughtful methodology: Using a “contextual nesting” approach to examine violence where it occurs, teachers, students, and administrators were all surveyed, all forms of school violence were assessed, and a hypothesis was rendered and subsequently tested against empirical evidence. Benbenishty and Astor asked vital questions: To what extent does culture factor into school violence? Does gender, either of the offender or the victim, matter? What role does the social hierarchy inherent in all schools play? What effect does parenting have on offenders and victims? Does the school context perpetuate or shield students from violence? They subsequently offer conclusions rich in theory and epidemiology and firmly based on solid and credible data on the determinants of school violence.

Do not make the mistake of thinking this book is only about the Arab-Jewish conflict, or that the research does not translate to other countries or cultures. Astor and Benbenishty refer to the “transferability of theory,” the identification of universal variables that can apply equally to schools in Colorado, Michigan, and Japan. This research, in fact, has the potential to have a far-reaching effect on future exploration into the areas of culture, victimization, and acts of violence, whether by serving as a model or as a comparison.

Presented in a way that is accessible to anyone who is in the position to understand or prevent school violence, the information contained in this book is essential for social workers, educators, psychologists, sociologists, and those in the field

of public health as they approach the considerable task of defining, identifying, and dealing with violence in an educational system. In addition to practitioners, researchers and policymakers should take note of the authors' conclusions as they approach new and more effective solutions to the threat of school violence. In their thorough treatment of the subject, the authors have built a solid foundation on which educators, parents, students, and other professionals can base their discussion and plans to address the problems and together work toward a meaningful educational experience for all involved.

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U.S. database, which helped illuminate some of the more important issues in the book. It is on this kind of sharing that scientific progress is based.

Most important, we'd like to thank our wonderful family members, who endured the many years, hours, days, and minutes that this project consumed. In Israel, Ruthy, Inbar, Rowee, Amit, Yaara, and Mocca deserve our gratitude and thanks; in the United States, Gina, Sheva, Maya, Roe, Shachar, and Carmi. The thoughts, support, feedback, love, ideas, pride, enthusiasm, and company of family and friends were the key ingredients in allowing us to pursue this work.

We wish to note that the order of authorship does not signify the level of contribution to this book. We contributed equally to the intellectual development of ideas presented and in all other aspects of the book. We have been good friends and close colleagues for many years. It is through our friendship and continual collaboration that the ideas in this book emerged.

Preface:

Exploring the Meaning of School Violence in Geopolitical Conflict

It is virtually impossible to live in the Middle East and be unaffected by geopolitical violence. This morning CNN, the *New York Times*, and most other international media outlets reported the capture of yet another terror cell that was planning to commit another tragedy against innocents. For the past few years there have been almost weekly, if not daily, tragic losses of innocent Jewish and Arab children's lives due to political violence. Adding to the existing stress, while this book was being written, the United States was conducting a massive war in Iraq. Early in the war, the Israeli Jewish and Arab public were concerned about possible use of biological or chemical weapons by Iraq; every family in Israel was issued gas masks and biological weapon kits, and each house prepared a special room in the event of a chemical weapon attack. The continual painful images of victims portrayed by the media following a terror attack permeate the daily emotional and psychological lives of all children who are potential targets of political violence. Suffice it to say that in Israel, terrorism and war are constant variables in the psyche of each individual.

Now, this societal concern about terrorism and random political violence extends beyond Israel. It seems as though most of the Western world is living in a post-9/11 awareness that peace and safety are intermittent and fleeting qualities—that politically motivated terrorism can impinge on the day-to-day lives of people anywhere and everywhere. Clearly, we live in a globally dangerous era, and there is heightened awareness that the terror threats are real.

Nevertheless, coexisting with this heightened awareness and almost paradoxically, the day-to-day lives of most children and the interpersonal transactions in families and schools (at least at the most proximal levels) do not always mirror the horrid images seen in the media, even in the most threatening and seemingly dire geopolitical climates, such as the Middle East. For example, today, after hearing the lachrymose CNN report about potential chemical attacks from Arab countries on

Israel, I (Astor) went on a long neighborhood walk (in Reut, Israel, less than one mile from the border with the West Bank) and observed hundreds of ordinary-looking students walking to school, taking buses, and discussing their personal events of the day concerning family, friends, and teachers. I have also observed this in schools in Israel during high-tension political periods.

In many ways, Israeli schools and the students in them continue to function with day-to-day routines and transactions similar to those in California or Michigan. The students' behaviors are connected to their relationships with other students and with life in the school itself. The images of student interactions with teachers and other students are strikingly similar to those I observed in Los Angeles and Ann Arbor a few weeks and months earlier.

Even in our (Astor's and Benbenishty's) respective families, our school-age children are keenly aware of political events, yet they are emotionally and socially heavily involved with the life and interactions in their schools and associated peer groups and school-oriented events. For example, this past weekend, both our teenage daughters (one in the United States and the other in Israel) spent the vast majority of their time at friends' houses, at sleepovers, talking to friends on the phone, attending informal youth gatherings and formal youth groups, participating in sports events, doing homework, complaining vociferously about specific teachers or classes at school, and talking—in great detail—about their relationships with other students.

Coming from the United States and given the tragic images of the political crisis in the Middle East, I was struck by the extent to which Israeli teenagers are socially interwoven, active, and involved when compared to their U.S. counterparts. I expected a more concerned and constrained peer social environment similar to the one I experienced in the United States shortly after 9/11. Instead, on Friday night, I observed scores of students out in the streets, socializing with their friends and hanging out until the early hours of the next day.

Ironically, although the threat of terrorism-related violence is real in Israel, the threat of random violence due to crime is relatively low. Thus, at face value, the students in Israel appeared socially freer, in many respects, than their U.S. counterparts. In any case, it seems possible that in both cultures the dominating influences revolve around the proximal relationships students have in the contexts of family, school, and peer group.

This does not imply that children and youth don't have concerns or stresses about geopolitical violence. Clearly, we know they are worried and stressed about potential violence directed at them or their group. We know that there are children in high-violence war zones whose lives are thrown into turmoil by geopolitical conflict. However, the vast majority of students in the United States and Israel (Jewish and Arab) are not going to school in these environments. Many, if not all, of the images seen on Western television occur in specific locations in the West Bank and Gaza. A comparable U.S. situation was the Washington, D.C., sniper shootings. We are certain that the sniper shootings affected thousands of students who attended schools in the targeted areas. How did these widely publicized acts of terror, shown

continually on CNN and other news channels, affect the school behavior in Kansas City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Boston, Seattle, Tampa, New Haven, Ann Arbor, and Phoenix? How did the bombing of the World Trade Center or the Murra Federal Building in Oklahoma affect students' school behaviors in areas not immediately targeted by the terror acts?

As researchers, we are not entirely clear if or how school violence rates were influenced by any of these U.S. events. From an empirical perspective, it is not directly obvious how geopolitical events impact students' daily transactions with peers, teachers, and family members. Perhaps fears are most evident in settings that have a higher likelihood of violence (on the bus or other forms of public transportation, in malls or shopping centers, driving through dangerous areas, in restaurants, and with air travel). But do children have these same worries, and do they act them out through violent behavior in the classroom or at school? The answer is not clear. Are incidence levels of bullying, school fights, weapon use, sexual harassment, and other forms of interpersonal school violence influenced directly by these terror events? If so, how are they influenced? More international studies on school violence and geopolitical violence need to be conducted before we can make strong assertions about the relationships between political and interpersonal violence. However, preliminary evidence from multiple sources provides indirect support that more proximal and context-oriented relational violence (e.g., school violence, community violence, family violence) is a somewhat different phenomenon that is not causally or directly affected by geopolitical terrorism.

Data collected in scores of studies over two decades suggest that varying rates of interpersonal violence in schools, families, and communities in Israel are influenced primarily by socioeconomic and socially hierarchical relationships in these social contexts. Furthermore, the wide variance in school violence among schools in Israel (which share the same sociopolitical environment) is a strong testimony to the operation of these other important factors. Our three waves of national data provide evidence that school violence in Israel, as is the case in Western countries, is influenced largely by student individual characteristics and by proximal issues such as the sociodemographic composition of the student body, poverty and crime in the community, school climate, effective school leadership, and other such factors reported in the literature.

Other evidence that questions the link between geopolitical violence and school violence is that in the midst of Israel's greatest escalations of terror (between 1999 and 2002), national school violence rates across many categories actually showed significant reductions for students; some school violence rates stayed stable. This reduction is evident in the face of huge unemployment rates and a growing number of families struggling with poverty. Given current conceptions, escalations in political violence and criminal violence along with deteriorating economic conditions should increase rates in interpersonal violence, yet we find that the data refute these assumptions. We believe it is possible that reductions in school violence are responsive to regional interventions and policies implemented at school or

community levels. Because Israel has been very active in creating antiviolence policy in schools during the same period, the reductions may be due in part to these changes in norms, training, policy, and interventions.

One way to think of this issue is that the social dynamics of schools behave somewhat like a semi-permeable membrane against more macro and geopolitical types of violence. That is, distal events can occasionally filter through and influence feelings, thoughts, and behaviors at the proximal levels. However, we suspect that the dynamics of the proximal context dominate the majority of transactions that later become the sources for different types of school victimization. In essence, we suspect that it is the climate, policies, and interactions in the students' school environments that are mediating the outside influences and creating the greatest opportunities for school violence, as well as barriers against it. Looking at school violence from this perspective, it is not surprising that there are many cross-cultural commonalities. We explore this issue in depth in Chapter 4.

THEORETICAL APPLICABILITY: CROSS-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

There are many commonalities among cultures, and each culture has unique aspects as well. In our research, we use the phrase *transferability of theory* rather than *generalizability*, which connotes a very specific epidemiological relationship between the data collected and the population for which these findings can be generalized. Even within a single country or culture the word *generalizable* is often misused at the local or regional level. For example, a careful reading of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publications on school violence in the United States provides ample evidence of high variance *among* states as well as *within* them. Thus, one cannot generalize from the findings regarding prevalence of guns in schools in rural North Dakota to rural Washington State. Even within the state of California, San Francisco has a unique set of circumstances that lead to prevalence rates that are not generalizable to Fresno or Los Angeles. Thus, researchers ought to be very careful when generalizing epidemiological prevalence rates from one region to another, even when they appear to be similar cultures and political contexts. We think it would be inappropriate to generalize the prevalence of violent acts and the levels of teachers' support and school policies from any one culture to another (although comparisons are potentially informative and interesting).

Given this caveat, our study does not focus only on epidemiological rates (which are important in and of themselves), but instead focuses mainly on the relationships among theoretical concepts that we believe are functioning in many countries. We describe the theoretical underlying structures and mechanisms that reflect community and school organizational issues that impact or lower rates of school violence. We examine these in three diverse cultures in Israel and hope to find a common core of variables that cut across the three. The relationships among

these variables are likely to be common to many other cultures and contexts as well.

The bully/victim literature (which is quite extensive and includes studies that were conducted across many countries over the past 30 years) shows strong similarities between forms of school violence and dynamics in schools across seemingly diverse educational systems and cultures, such as Norway, Japan, Ireland, the United States, Scotland, Israel, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, and Denmark. Moreover, interventions that were developed originally in Norway appear to have strong effects in reducing bully/victim rates and other forms of aggression in these other countries.

Our current work, presented in this book, is another testimony to common cross-cultural patterns. Our findings on the prevalence of violent acts describe the Israeli context and are slightly different from findings in the United States and Europe. However, the structure of the findings and relationships among variables are quite similar. Thus, the relative rankings of the various violent acts in Israel replicate almost exactly the reports by Furlong and associates (1998) on school violence in California. That is, if we sort the violent acts that occur in California schools by their frequency, the order is approximately replicated. We explore this issue in depth in Chapter 4.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE AS A TOPIC OF RESEARCH— IN ISRAEL? HOW THIS STUDY CAME INTO BEING

In Israel there is a long-standing national interest in dealing with school violence, and it has been a topic of research in Israeli academia for over 30 years. Scholars such as Tamar Horowitz, Yossi Harel, Tom Gundle, Mirta Forman, Salman Elbedour, Gad Yair, Avi Assor, and Amos Rolidor are some of the early pioneers and current researchers exploring aspects of school violence in Israeli society. Similarly, since the late 1970s the Ministry of Education and the Knesset subcommittee on education have been discussing issues of school safety and creating educational code surrounding the problem. At least three major divisions in the Ministry of Education deal with certain aspects of school violence on a national level. A special office in the Ministry devoted entirely to school violence and safety has been in existence for close to two decades.

Nevertheless, even with this kind of infrastructure, there was strong consensus in the field and in Israeli educational policy circles that the topic of school violence was only being given lip service by the Ministry of Education. In large part, this view was perpetuated by the fact that the Ministry did not have accurate national epidemiological or outcome intervention data on school violence. Many in Israeli society were not entirely sure that school violence was in fact a serious national problem. Some felt that Israeli schools were much safer than their European or U.S. counterparts and that the interest in school violence was conjured up mainly by distorted media coverage on sensational cases. Until the late 1990s there were no national data

that could be relied on to help define the problem. During this period, whenever a tragic violent event occurred, the Ministry would rely mainly on police youth crime statistics as estimates of school violence (this is common practice in many countries). Thus, Knesset members, municipal policymakers, and school safety advocates really had no direct estimate of the kinds of school violence problems Israel was facing and subsequently what kinds of interventions or laws would work best to address the problems. This kind of situation persisted with waxing and waning public interest from the late 1970s to the late 1990s.

During the mid- to late 1990s a series of national and international events co-occurred that increased the interest in the issue of school violence in Israeli society. First, and perhaps most important, the Israeli mass media began reporting more frequently and more intensely on an array of interpersonal forms of violence, including family violence, sexual harassment, child abuse, gangs, and sexual abuse and incest. This process is very similar to the role the media played in raising awareness of these issues in most Western countries a decade earlier (see Olweus, 1993; Smith, 2003; Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999, for the role of the media in heightening awareness of bullying issues in Europe, Japan, Australia, and other countries). The intense coverage of these forms of interpersonal violence raised the awareness of the general public and politicians and created political pressure to deal with the perceived problem.

The second important event that occurred involved an international health behavior survey sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO) that included issues of youth violence. During the early 1990s, WHO invited Israel to participate in this survey, Israel's first opportunity to have internationally comparative information on school safety issues. Yossi Harel and the Brookdale Institute led this study (Harel, Kenny, & Rahav, 1997). Released in 1997, the results shocked the Israeli public. The findings showed that Israel had a measurable school violence problem that was comparable to and in some respects greater than the problem in many other industrialized countries. The amplified coverage of results created a national environment wherein school violence issues were discussed in many sectors of Israeli society. The Ministry of Education was in the position of needing to answer to the Knesset, the media, and the general public on issues of school safety. Specifically, the office of the chief scientist (at the time, Nora Cohen and Zmira Mevarech) and the office of psychological services (Bilha Noy and Rachel Ehrhard) of the Ministry began asking detailed policy and training questions.

Unfortunately, because of the parameters imposed by the WHO survey, the Harel study had several limitations impeding its use for the creation of new policy on school violence. The WHO study was a broad-spectrum survey that explored many public health issues; there were only five questions related to youth violence. Moreover, those questions were not worded to highlight the context of the school, so the violence reported could have occurred outside the jurisdiction of the school and spread over an array of social contexts. Furthermore, Arab students were not included in

the first Harel/WHO survey; hence, no inferences could be made about Arab schools. The study also did not examine primary schools.

In the midst of the national heightened awareness and public pressure created by the media surrounding the WHO study, key Israeli policymakers were frustrated by the lack of national data on this issue. Yet, despite the public pressure, many researchers believed that given the overall political problems Israel faced, the government would not allocate funds to conduct a large-scale national survey on school violence.

During the 1997–1998 academic year, I (Astor) was visiting Hebrew University on a Fulbright Fellowship and U.S. National Academy of Education/Spencer Fellowship designed to study school violence in different cultures. I was working with professors Muhammad Haj-Yahia, Rami Benbenishty, and Anat Zeira to adapt an existing U.S. survey instrument on school violence (the research version of the California School Climate and Safety Survey [CSCSS], developed by Furlong and associates) to the Israeli context. This included translating the CSCSS from English to Hebrew and Arabic in two versions (primary and secondary). The survey was then piloted on a large Jewish and Arab sample of close to 7,000 primary and secondary students.

This large-scale pilot study caught the attention of Ministry officials because the overall survey had 105 questions (compared to WHO's five). Furthermore, the survey instrument could provide the Ministry with policy and practice direction. During his year in Israel, I presented multiple workshops and lectures at the Ministry, highlighting the need for a comprehensive national survey on school violence. Among senior staff in the Ministry's chief scientist office there was a growing consensus that a national monitoring survey was the best direction for the Israeli educational system. Still, there was a feeling that there was not enough political interest by the Israeli superintendent of schools and by the Knesset subcommittee on education to move forward.

Nevertheless, early in 1998, a series of attempted murders (with knives) on school grounds in Israel coincided with unprecedented intense international media coverage on the rash of school shootings in the United States and Europe. These events, along with international concern, elevated school safety/violence to the top concern in the Israeli Ministry of Education (as it did in the United States and in many countries in Europe). I was invited to the Knesset subcommittee on education (along with other academicians from Israel) to propose next steps in the effort to stem school violence. In that meeting I suggested that Israel take the international lead in creating a comprehensive, national monitoring system that included surveys of students, teachers, and principals from the same schools. The committee was very receptive to this idea. The Israeli public and many politicians were primed to address school violence in a serious way that would put Israel at the forefront of scientific inquiry on this issue.

The last important factor that moved Israel to address this issue was a very supportive minister of education, Yitzchak Levy, who earlier in his career was a school