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# Handbook of School Violence and School Safety

International Research and Practice

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# Making the Case for an International Perspective on School Violence

Implications for Theory, Research,  
Policy, and Assessment

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## Abstract

Based on review of empirical data on school violence internationally, the present chapter proposes a global perspective. Cross-country comparisons could help gain a perspective on how extreme the school safety situation is in a given country. Further, a cross-cultural perspective of school violence provides a rich source of insights about effective policies and interventions. Theories advanced to explain school violence in one culture can inform and stimulate comparative research in other countries to examine theoretical issues such as the relative influence of student characteristics and school context on victimization and perpetration of school violence. Finally, the chapter proposes an international study on school violence, discusses conceptual and methodological challenges in such a global collaboration, and suggests ways to overcome these challenges.

Concerns about school violence are shared around the world. Although lethal shootings in the United States have attracted most of the international media coverage (Herda-Rapp, 2003), reports from other parts of the world reveal that school violence is a serious global problem (Due et al., 2005; Due, Merlo, Harel-Fisch, & Damsgaard, 2009). Time and again the public in countries with cultures as diverse as Japan, Jordan, Brazil, Norway, Israel, Malaysia, the United States, and Ethiopia are alarmed by acts of senseless violence in their schools. Data suggest that an array of violent acts occur across all segments of U.S. society and in many countries across the globe,

including decapitations in Japan, hangings in Norway, and group stabbings in Israel (Kachur et al., 1996; Smith et al., 1999).

Akiba, LeTendre, Baker, and Goesling (2002) also put forth a global perspective stating: "... school violence is a global phenomenon that affects one of the core institutions of modern society to some degree in virtually all nation-states" (p. 830). Based on the current review of empirical data on school violence internationally, we strongly support a global perspective on these phenomena.

This chapter is based on a review of numerous empirical studies and publications that examine school violence in a wide range of countries (e.g., Akiba et al., 2002; Akiba, 2008; Chen & Astor, 2009a; Currie et al., 2004; Eslea et al., 2003; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Obeidat, 1997; Ohsako, 1997; Smith, 2003; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefvooghe, 2002; Smith et al., 1999). The chapter discusses the potential contributions of international and cross-cultural perspectives and presents a range of questions and challenges that should be addressed by international studies. Finally, this chapter includes recommendations for a conceptual and methodological framework to design an international monitoring system for school violence.

### **Why an International and Cross-Cultural Perspective?**

There are many reasons for advocating a perspective on school violence that incorporates the examination and comparison of multiple national and cultural contexts.

#### ***Raising National Awareness and Providing International Context***

One important function of examining school violence in different countries is to develop cross-country comparisons. Such comparative data could be used to gain a perspective on how extreme the school safety situation is in a given country. Such international comparisons have a strong impact on the public within countries and greatly facilitate policy creation surrounding school violence in specific countries.

For instance, Menesini and Modiano (2003) report that comparative research showed that school violence in Italy was reported at a higher level than in other European and Western countries (being about as twice as high as in England and almost three times higher than in Norway). The authors claim that there was a major response by newspapers and television programs to these data that brought about awareness of the problem in Italian schools. These cross country comparisons prompted school principals and staff to become more interested in Italian-based interventions and to study school safety issues in-depth. This type of narrative has been repeated in other countries across the globe when the media has reported high rates of school violence compared with other countries (Astor, Benbenishty, Vinokur, & Zeira, 2006).

From a different perspective, in the United States, Akiba and associates (2002) examined the data of an international study (TIMSS) and made the argument that many other countries are experiencing either similar or higher levels of school violence than the United States. This kind of global contextualization helps countries situate their standings independent of media stories associated with school violence.

#### ***Creating a Global Inventory of Interventions and Policies***

A cross-cultural perspective of school violence provides a rich source of insights about policies and interventions. In a recent special issue of *Educational Researcher* on school safety (Mayer & Cornell, 2010), Astor, Guerra, and Van Acker (2010) provided examples as to how learning from empirical approaches developed around the world could improve school violence research.

Countries across the globe could learn from each other's experience in terms of the effectiveness of policies and interventions (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2007). To illustrate, the United States has invested billions of dollars in recent decades to address school violence. In fact, rates of serious school violence are on a steady decline for more than a decade (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009). During this period many interventions were created and evaluated, and major policy guidelines were put in place in order to prevent school violence. Similar progress has been made in other countries (e.g., Australia; Slee, 2006). Further, international collaborations were created to develop training programs to build capacity in schools to prevent school violence (for instance, VISTOP, <http://vistop.org/>). The wealth of knowledge accumulated in these countries can help inform other countries which are facing similar issues.

To illustrate, the awareness to school violence in France has increased significantly in recent years. Dissatisfaction with current levels of violence, existing policies, and interventions has led to a new national initiative to address this social problem, headed by a school violence scholar, the president of the International Observatory of School Violence, Eric Debarbieux. As an important step in this national effort, an international scientific advisory board was assembled. The aim is to tap into the lessons learned in other countries and to examine their relevance to the French context.

The deliberations in this international advisory board highlight the complexity of transporting interventions and policies from one context to another. As the recent burgeoning literature on translational science amply demonstrates, interventions and policies developed and proved effective in one context may not translate well to other contexts (Brekke, Ell, & Palinkas, 2007; Glasgow & Emmons, 2007). For instance, evidence-based interventions that were developed in the United States to address school violence in urban schools with a large number of minority African American and Latino/a students may not be successful when implemented in French urban schools with a large number of Muslim North African students or with a significant proportion of Roma children. This challenge requires international collaboration to identify the factors that promote transporting school safety interventions and policy from country to country.

Understanding why certain cultures endorse or reject specific interventions may provide insights as to the likelihood of success of programs transported from another context. For example, mediation programs are mentioned in almost every U.S. national school safety report. By contrast, Olweus and Smith's anti-bullying programs are common in Europe, the United States, and Australia. Programs of restorative justice are common in Australia and New Zealand. Zero-tolerance policies and the use of electronic security (i.e., video cameras, sensors, metal detectors, and professional guards) are more common in the United States and England (e.g., Taylor, 2010).

An important step toward clarifying some of these issues would be systematic reviews that would compare the relative success of specific school violence programs across contexts. Thus, for instance, Farrington and Ttofi (2009) reviewed the literature on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs across many countries. The findings indicate a wide variability in the outcomes of these programs. For instance, of ten U.S. studies included in the analysis only half had strong effect sizes and close to half were more marginal. It is helpful to have these outcomes seen from a comparative interventional perspective. How is the cultural and social context of the country associated with the relative success of the program? The review suggests that programs implemented in Norway seem to work best. This could be related to the long Norwegian tradition of bullying research. It could also be associated with the fact that Scandinavian schools are of high quality, with small classes and well-trained teachers, and there is a Scandinavian tradition of state intervention in matters of social welfare.

### **Theoretical Issues Amenable to a Global Perspective**

An international perspective can contribute significantly to theories of school violence. On the most basic level, theories advanced to explain school violence in one culture can inform and stimulate comparative research in other countries. For instance, Yoneyama and Naito (2003) advanced the theory on factors contributing to bullying by examining Japanese literature on school factors that contribute to *ijime* (bullying). Their analysis connects aspects of the role and structure of the Japanese educational system and characteristics of bullying behavior. They identified a relationship between class in Japan as a social group and the fact that most bullying behavior is carried out by a group of classmates against individual students. Also, they analyzed role expectations of Japanese teachers and showed how teacher–student interactions contribute to both teacher and student bullying behaviors. Such hypotheses and theoretical propositions advanced in the Japanese context should inform and enrich theory development in other countries that may differ in specific characteristics of their educational systems. For instance, one might expect to find different patterns of bullying (i.e., more individuals bullying other individuals) in educational systems that emphasize more individualistic ethos rather than the collectivistic ethos of the Japanese system.

The following sections present examples of how an international perspective can contribute to exploration of important theoretical issues.

#### ***The Relative Influence of Student Characteristics on Victimization and Perpetration of School Violence***

An international perspective is needed in order to determine whether student characteristics are universally associated with school violence, or the nature of the relationships is sensitive to social contexts. To illustrate this issue the following sections will examine briefly two basic characteristics: gender and age. Smith, Madsen, and Moody (1999) reviewed the literature on bullying and demonstrated a clear decline in victimization as students grow older. These findings were replicated in several studies conducted in Western countries (Craig & Harel, 2004) and in Asian cultures (Chen & Astor, 2009a, 2009b). Still, the question remains whether this pattern is true in other parts of the world. The volume edited by Ohsako (1997) provides indications based on research in countries such as Ethiopia and Malaysia this age pattern may not hold in non-Western cultures.

Age may be connected to cultural norms surrounding bullying. For example, where the culture emphasizes the importance of seniority and age, older students may be more involved in bullying their younger peers. According to the accounts of Terefe and Mengistu (1997), school authorities view this form of bullying as normative and accept this kind of behavior. However, readers are cautioned not to make national or cultural interpretations without a convergence of data that is representative, qualitative, and otherwise empirically sound. Hypotheses about different national norms in non-European and Anglo/English-speaking cultures should be tested in future international research.

International studies may also shed new light on the relationships between gender and school violence. Currently, there is broad consensus that males are both perpetrators and victims of physical violence in school to a greater degree than females. Findings from several European countries regarding gender differences related to relational and indirect violence seem to be less consistent (see recent reviews and studies by Currie et al., 2004; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004; Tapper & Boulton, 2004). For instance, Craig and Harel (2004) noted that whereas males tend to bully others more than females in most countries surveyed in the Health Behaviors in School-aged Children study (HBSC; Currie et al., 2004), patterns of gender differences in bully victimization are far less consistent. The picture is even more complicated with regard to the interaction

between age and gender. Benbenishty and Astor (2005) reported that the gap between victimization rates of males and females *grows* with age. In contrast, Craig and Harel (2004) concluded that in most of the 24 countries surveyed in the HBSC study, the trend was in the opposite direction and gender gaps were smaller among older students.

### ***The Relative Influences of Multiple Contexts on School Violence***

The questions as to similarities of effects across countries and cultures are not limited to student personal characteristics. In recent years, there have been calls urging scholars to move from a focus on individual characteristics of victims and bullies, such as age and gender, to an understanding of how contexts, both within and outside of school impact school violence (Akiba et al., 2002; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Chen & Astor, 2009a,b; Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). These approaches help examine how external contexts in which a school is embedded interact with internal school and student characteristics to influence levels of victimization in schools. These layered and nested contexts include the *school* (e.g., structural characteristics, social climate and policies against violence), the *neighborhood* (e.g., poverty, social organization, crime), students' *families* (e.g., education, family structure), *cultural* aspects of student and teacher population (e.g., religion, ethnic affiliation), and the *economic*, social, and political makeup of the country as a whole. An international system of research will help clarify both theoretically and practically the role of these nested contexts.

As an example, Akiba and colleagues (2002) utilized international survey data (TIMSS) on student victimization in 37 countries to test theoretical assumptions about the nature of school violence in different countries. They tested two sets of national-level variables: (a) known predictors of crime (both general and juvenile) and (b) factors related to the educational system itself. Their investigation demonstrated that factors inherent in the educational system (e.g., academic achievement, school climate, teacher-child relationships) are more strongly correlated with school violence than general crime, basic national economic conditions, and demographic characteristics. Additionally, secondary analyses by Akiba (2008) revealed that the same variables (witnessing a friend victimized and being the victim of theft) predict fear of being victimized in eighth graders in all participating countries. The author notes that whereas individual predictors of student fear (e.g., gender) were relatively consistent, school predictors varied more across the countries studied. Somewhat in contrast, recent research (Due et al., 2009; Elgar, Craig, Boyce, Morgan, & Vella-Zarb, 2009) suggests that between-countries differences in prevalence rates of school violence may be connected to levels of income inequality in the country.

Such conflicting international findings may help refine a theory on the "spill over" of political and community violence into schools (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). For instance, Akiba and associates (2002) noted variable levels of association of different types of school victimization (e.g., sexual assaults) to community crime. This pattern was also found in a study in Israel (Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2004) in which more severe types of school victimization were related to poor neighborhoods, compared with mild/moderate types of victimization.

### **A Proposal for a World Wide Study of School Violence**

Based on a review of reports on school violence from across the world and the above analysis, Benbenishty and Astor (2008) recommended a proactive research agenda for an international perspective on school violence and suggested a worldwide study to monitor school violence. Such a study would follow examples of international studies on academic achievements (e.g., TIMSS) and health behaviors (HBSC) and would utilize standardized measures and methods to serve as a platform for global learning and monitoring of school violence over time.

The proposed study would address the multiple perspectives of students, teachers, principals, and whenever possible, parents. Each of these constituents should be asked questions about aspects of school victimization and climate that are relevant to their specific roles and manifestations of problems in the school community in addition to a set of questions that will be identical for all participating schools. This ecologically sensitive approach could help illuminate multiple perspectives, as well as facilitate analyses addressing nested systems.

The suggested international study would provide a detailed picture for each participating country. Due to the use of standardized and highly congruent instruments across participating countries, meaningful comparisons would be facilitated. These comparisons could include prevalence rates for a wide array of school violence behaviors and school climate measures, as well as comparisons across sub-groups of students, staff, and parents. Furthermore, the interrelationships between the different perspectives of the various members of the school community would be compared across countries, to identify settings in which significant congruence or discord is more pronounced.

Such an international collaboration would provide an excellent opportunity to address theoretical questions presented in earlier sections, such as the role of multiple contexts in determining school violence. In order to be able to test these hypotheses, sampling and analysis could be conducted from both student- and school-level perspectives. This design would enable the measurement of school and neighborhood level variables, facilitating tests of hypotheses on the role of contexts in explaining levels of school violence. Further, this approach could also create a foundation for examining how different countries vary in homogeneity of levels of violence in their schools. Thus, among other advantages, such a design would allow examination of what is similar and different in schools high or low on school violence across the world (Astor, Benbenishty, & Estrada, 2009).

### ***Conceptual Considerations and Challenges in an International Study on School Violence Definitions, Connotations, Interpretations, and Meanings***

When cross-cultural comparisons are made, very often, different forms of violence are inappropriately compared. The two most used terms in the English literature are “bullying” and “school violence.” In many publications, they are often used interchangeably, even though they are not conceptually or theoretically the same. There is a pressing need to either distinguish between what is school violence and bullying, or better explain the relationship between the two terms. As Devine and Lawson (2003) noted, bullying is more often used in European countries whereas school violence is a term used more often in the United States. School violence is a general term that may include many different aspects of victimization. It is practically impossible to compare reports that use “school violence” as a generic term without providing the kinds of specific behaviors that are included under this term. Bullying, on the other hand, has had a quite precise theoretical definition (e.g., Olweus, 1991), to the point that it could allow direct international comparisons. Hence, the World Health Organization conducted a cross-national study of Health Behaviors in School-Aged Children (HBSC) that uses and defines the term “bully” (e.g., Currie et al., 2004). Nevertheless, most current, large-scale international research does not strictly use commonly agreed upon definitions of bullying (e.g., that the bully have asymmetrical power over the victim, that the bullying event be part of a large repeating pattern of events, etc.). Yet, inferences are made about bullying. Benbenishty and Astor (2005) argued that bullying is a specific subset of school violence that could overlap with a wide array of school violence behaviors (e.g., sexual harassment, weapon use, school fights). However, those behaviors may not be considered bullying if they do not conform to the formal definition of bullying. Furlong and colleagues also make this similar and important point (Furlong, Morrison, & Greif, 2003; Greif, Furlong, & Morrison, 2003).

Review of the literature suggests that most international studies employ diverse meanings, measures, and understanding of which behaviors should be included in the term bully (Benbenishty & Astor, 2003). This could have a dramatic impact on the interpretation of cross-national comparisons. For example, Harel, Kenny, and Rahav (1997) asked Israeli students whether they were “bullied.” The questions (in Hebrew) stated that they were being asked about *hatrada* (harassment), *hatzaka* (teasing), and *biryonoot* (mainly physical bullying). Each of these words in Hebrew has quite a specific meaning. The direct word for bullying in Hebrew strongly implies physical force exerted by a strong, well-built student (an antisocial “thug”). The overall term “bullying” in Japan has a strong connotation of social isolation, impurity, and shame. To a large extent, the set of behaviors, connotations and cultural interpretations the Japanese associate with “ijime” seem distant from the Israeli term “biryonoot” for bully. How might data on students in different cultures with different connotations for the word bullying be synthesized and integrated in order to respond to questions about bullying?

Indeed, Smith Cowie, Olafsson, and Liefvooghe (2002) studied school children (ages 8–14) from 14 countries and found significant differences in the ways the term “bullying” was understood in the different countries. Similarly, a study among parents of school-aged children in five countries (Italy, Spain, Portugal, England, and Japan) found clear differences in the ways the term was understood by parents. Cultures also varied on the extent to which the term “bullying” used in everyday language resembled the scientific definition of the term (Smorti, Menesini, & Smith, 2003; Smith & Monks, 2008). In a recent review, Swearer Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) analyzed how such differences in definitions and conceptualizations negatively affect efforts to learn from research on how to implement bullying interventions in schools.

One potential solution is to use the same scientific definition, and agreed upon instruments, across many countries. The World Health Organization uses the Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) instruments that provide the definition of bullying to the respondents. This effort could be coupled with smaller qualitative studies that aim towards understanding the social and cultural meanings of the term bullying in each of the participating countries. It should be noted, however, that policy makers and the public in different countries are likely to have diverse understandings and interpretations of the same concept, regardless of formal scientific definitions. Hence, Israeli policy makers presented with findings on high levels of bullying would probably have a different image of the problem compared with South African, Brazilian, Canadian, or Japanese policy makers considering similar findings.

### ***An Operational Solution: Using Self-Reports of a Wide Range of Specific and Concrete School Violence Behaviors***

Based on the above analysis, the authors propose using self reports as the primary source of information on victimization, perpetration, and school climate (see a discussion of the merits of self-report on school victimization in the report from the Surgeon General, Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Further, in order to reduce variability in cultural definitions and interpretations, these self reports should focus on specific behaviors and refrain as much as possible from using loosely defined abstract labels (such as bully) that may have different meanings and connotations in different countries. Hence, asking students whether larger or stronger students pushed them is probably understood more similarly across cultures than the question of whether or not they were bullied.

The work by Furlong and associates (e.g., Furlong, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1995; Furlong, Greif, Bates, Whipple, Jimenez, & Morrison, 2005) provides a good example of the suggested approach. The California School Climate & Safety Survey contains questions about victimization linked to an extensive list of concrete and specific victimization types. The merits of this approach were clear when the instrument was utilized in the first National Study of



School Violence in Israel. Translation of the specific and concrete behaviors in the instrument and the comparisons with available U.S. data were relatively straightforward, especially when compared to parallel attempts to translate terms such as “bully” (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005).

Further, the analyses of the findings showed the advantages of using this wide range of victimization types. The detail-rich instrument yielded a complex and nuanced picture and highlighted the multifaceted nature of school victimization. It enabled analysis and description of which forms of victimization are more frequent in Israeli schools and which behaviors are relatively rare. The findings in Israel were comparable with data in Furlong and colleagues’ studies in Southern California (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005) that examined differences in prevalence rates and structure of victimization.

Furthermore, the findings that included a wide range of behaviors showed that various aspects of victimization have different patterns of association with student characteristics, such as gender and age, and with school context variables, such as poverty in the school neighborhood. Without the large number of behaviors examined, it would not have been possible to ascertain how forms of school violence were related to each other and to other social phenomena in the Israeli context. These patterns may or may not be similar across cultures. Thus, school violence studies should examine the prevalence of a wide range of victimization types.

### ***Psychometric Challenges in Comparing across Contexts***

Using the same instrument across different contexts is not without challenges. In order to interpret differences across contexts in a valid manner, it is important to examine scale comparability across contexts. It is common to examine several aspects of such comparability: (a) to what extent the *structure* of the instrument is similar (e.g., to what extent the same items create similar factors across the different settings); (b) to what extent each of the individual items in the scale have the same relationship to the full scale score, across settings (scalar equivalence, van de Vijver and Poortinga, 2005; Waller, Compas, Hollon, & Beckjord, 2005); and (c) to what extent the scores generated by a measure have similar precursors, consequents, and correlates across the various settings (functional equivalence, Knight, Little, Losoya, & Mulvey, 2004).

Establishing scale comparability is a complex process and a discussion of the psychometric issues is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, the authors caution against over-reliance on methodological considerations, at the expense of understanding the real complexities involved in comparing across nations and cultures. To illustrate, factor analyses of self reports of victimization in schools in two countries may reveal two different structures—in one country items are grouped into two factors pertaining to severe and moderate victimization, and in the other country they align with two other factors—direct vs. indirect types of victimization. From a strictly methodological point of view, these findings may be interpreted as reflecting low structural equivalence that reduces the value of the comparison. From a more conceptual and theoretical point of view, these findings may tell an important story on two cultures that have different ways of experiencing and interpreting interpersonal behaviors in school.

### ***Including a Focus on Staff-Initiated Victimization***

Studies of school violence across the world differ in whether they include staff victimization of students. Studies on prevalence of school violence in the U.S. rarely address victimization by staff. Although there have been state and federal mandates to survey school staff, few if any have asked about staff maltreatment of students. The extensive work by Hyman and associates (e.g., Hyman, 1990; Hyman & Perone, 1998) on the role of staff in inducing trauma among students is the exception rather than the norm. Similarly, a review of reports from 24 European countries

Table 2.1 Summary of Implications for Practice and Policy

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- Cross country comparisons are important because they could provide:
    - Context and perspective to understand local data on school violence
    - A rich source of insights about policies and interventions proven effective
  - Evidence-based programs and interventions do not always translate across country contexts, and transferability should be examined carefully
  - Global perspective could contribute to theory and help identify the role of individual characteristics and school contexts which influence school violence
  - A world wide study of school violence should be designed. This collaborative study should:
    - Address the multiple perspectives of students, teachers, principals, and whenever possible, parents
    - Design sampling and analysis from both student- and school-level perspectives
    - Use self-report of a wide range of specific and concrete violent behaviors and perceptions of school climate and policies
    - Include a focus on staff-initiated victimization
- 

reveals minimal reference to staff victimizing students (Smith, 2003). In contrast, reports from other parts of the world address the role of staff vis-à-vis school violence. Staff may play direct and indirect roles in victimizing students. The international literature reveals how teachers' behaviors may actually promote bullying of certain students by their peers (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). Other studies, mainly from developing countries, present teachers as one of the main sources of victimization of students. Hence, in places like Malaysia, Ethiopia, Brazil, and other countries in Latin America, teachers may use physically and verbally aversive discipline measures (e.g., Salas, 1997).

The potential contribution of including staff-initiated violence in studies of school violence has been clearly demonstrated in Israel. As described in Chapter 16 of this volume and in a series of papers (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2002; Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002; Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2008), representative findings on staff violence contribute to better theoretical understanding of the phenomenon and to efforts to address this problem that affect so many students, especially students in more vulnerable groups in society. In conclusion, given that staff may play such an important role in victimizing, as well as protecting students, reference to staff-initiated violence and more protective behaviors of staff should be included in international comparisons of school violence.

### Concluding Comments

School violence is a global phenomenon. A review of the literature from across the world shows both the similarities across diverse cultures and many different patterns that reflect the unique characteristics of cultural and national contexts. This richness provides unique opportunities for comparisons and mutual learning that can facilitate examination and development of theories of school violence, and can help expand the repertoire of effective interventions. In the present chapter the authors propose a collaborative study that will bring together researchers and policy makers from across the world and employ methods and instruments that will help further theory and global efforts to reduce school violence. The authors' call for an international study of school violence was accepted by the International Observatory of School Violence in its annual meeting in Lisbon (2008). Since then, however, the first steps toward realizing this mission revealed major practical obstacles. Language barriers in combination with major discrepancies between

developing and developed countries in access to resources are formidable challenges. There is a clear need to form a global collaboration, perhaps through the United Nations or World Bank, in order to address this significant global social problem of school violence.

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