



# Teachers, Schools and Communities: Strengthening Safe Spaces

*Towards a Framework for Improving Basic Education  
in Territories with Gang Presence*

## Executive Summary

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### 1. Introduction

The effects of insecurity on local schools in El Salvador has only been acknowledged relatively recently (PNUD, 2013; Savenije & Van der Borgh, 2015; USAID-ECCN, 2016). The Ministry of Education (MOE) identifies the following risk factors that affect schools: gangs, theft, drugs, carrying of firearms or knives, extortion, sexual exploitation, violations, human trafficking, threats against students, alcoholism and bullying. It also explicitly mentions teachers being threatened or extorted (MINED, 2018).

In light of the complex situation of insecurity in El Salvador, numerous government and non-government organizations (NGO) have developed interventions in public schools with the objective of preventing violence and gang affiliation. The range of implementers span multiple government agencies, NGOs (national and international), as well as smaller (in both scope and budget) local

institutions, such as churches, community associations, private sector actors, municipal offices and neighborhood councils. This study delves into the lessons learned from these diverse experiences in preventing risk situations from getting out of control and contributing to making the school an insecure place. More specifically, it aims to *understand how local social relations and dynamics can facilitate positive school environments and education in contexts of insecurity and gang presence, and to develop an intervention framework for strengthening prevention initiatives through incorporating these relations and dynamics in the design and implementation processes.*

Each organization's priorities, interests, needs assessment, and experiences translate into a variety of approaches and intervention designs. However, amid such a diverse offering, two main approaches to preventing insecurity in schools can be identified: public security and youth development. The former is characterized by giving a prominent role

to the police, especially through deterring acts of violence, delinquency, or gang membership by way of increasing police presence and involvement, without an active role for the school itself. The latter approach, youth development, relies on the participation of school staff and focuses on strengthening learning processes, life skills development and the well-being of students, carried out in complementary curricular content and activities.

In regards to this distinction, the study probes into the experiences with three general government-sponsored programs: the Secure Schools Plan (Plan Escuela Segura [PES]), the Gang Resistance Education and Training program (GREAT), and the Police Athletic League (PAL). Also, it examined the experiences of schools that participated in three programs of non-governmental organizations: Miles de Manos (MdM / Thousands of Hands), the Education for Children and Youth Program (ECYP) and Escuelas Comunitarias (EC/Community Schools).

This study was financed by the Evidence for Education in Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Envelope, (INEE/Dubai Cares Foundation) and structured the acquired understanding into a practice-oriented intervention framework to guide school-based prevention initiatives in adverse contexts. Fieldwork was initiated in 2021 and the research finalized in early 2022.

## 2. Approach



The methodological approach aims to generate an understanding of local experiences with school-based prevention programs, not to produce statistical generalizations or evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. A multiple case study design was chosen because it allows for focusing on social dynamics and relationships from different angles in specific school contexts, and also allows for making analytical generalizations (Yin, 2003).

Due the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the fieldwork initiated with a school-centered, on-line survey. 512 teachers and principals from 61 schools participated. Later on, when restrictions eased, eight schools participated in the case studies, where semi-structured simultaneous interviews were held with staff and members of the educational communities (principal, teaching staff, parents and external actors). Afterwards, three workshops were held to discuss and deepen emerging understandings and to contribute to the design of the intervention framework.

## 3. Results



The results are presented distinguishing between the public security approach usually government-related, and the youth development approach generally preferred by the non-governmental organizations.

### The Public Security Approach: Government-Related Programs

The three government-sponsored programs mentioned above use a public security approach to school-based prevention, in that police officers are the protagonists and the goal is to modify the students' individual choices about participating in criminal or violent acts or gangs, through deterrence or increased awareness of potential negative consequences.

Hence, police officers fill the role of security agent, disciplinary authority, and even teacher or trainer as they undertake specific tasks: patrols and on-site presence and inspections (PES); sharing dissuading information about crime, gangs, drugs etc., teaching social skills (GREAT); and organizing sports and dance workshops and events (PAL). Usually, officers receive specialized training to implement different kinds of prevention initiatives with young people. However, these programs do

not consider the social dynamics of school itself, or of the surrounding community, nor recognize the importance of adolescent identity processes or of the need to belong to a peer group. Schools are merely a venue for convening potentially at-risk children and youth.

Even so, these programs represent three different perspectives. The PES conceptualizes prevention as deterrence through police patrols in the school's surroundings and maintaining a presence at its entrance when students enter or leave the school premises. The PAL sees prevention as keeping young people occupied through sports and artistic activities and highlights the importance of team values and skills. GREAT approaches prevention by raising awareness about crime, drugs and gangs and by teaching social skills as protection against gang propositions and peer pressure. Contrary to the PES, the LAP and GREAT programs promote intensive communication with the beneficiaries and foster a positive relationship between officers and students. Though these activities are highly valued by students and school staff, the content is not exclusively preventive; sports activities and social skills training should be an integral part of any school curriculum. However, the role of the school staff itself in prevention and maintaining a secure environment are overlooked, as well as the role of the family and the broader community.

### **The Youth Development Approach: Programs of Non-Governmental Organizations**

International development agencies and NGOs also promote prevention-oriented programs in Salvadoran public schools, as a part of their bilateral development agenda and humanitarian mission. These projects propose responses to insecurity and violence in or around schools that are integral to the developmental processes of students taking into account, for example, relationships with prosocial peers, family dynamics and

socio-economic characteristics of the community, as well as the quality of education, pedagogical practices, and positive school environments. The youth development-oriented programs are not uniform, due to diverse ways of understanding violence, prevention, and student development, but generally programs promote socio-emotional skill development that fosters good decision-making and the rejection of gangs and delinquency.

This diversity is reflected in the specific programs mentioned above. ECYP focuses on students themselves and their academic success, and on the school environment through diverse strategies; MdM focuses primarily on the training of parents and teachers to change youth behavior, but without intervening directly with children and youth nor providing material resources; and, EC engages multiple community actors involved in schools to build broader social cohesion. The concrete enactment also varies within the programs; ECYP offers the most varied supply of trainings and resources and the schools select what is needed. EC resort to the particular proficiencies of volunteers to form clubs, organize activities and trainings, but also supplies specific necessities of the local school improving environments and infrastructure. Each intervention implicitly or explicitly determines who should be involved in preventing youth violence and gang affiliation (i.e., students, teachers, family, or the broader community), their role in the problem and the solution, and the degree of importance of strengthening social relationships in the school community.

Schools convey a general sense of appreciation for any help received, both technical and material, as they often feel abandoned by the MOE. However, the level of commitment, appropriation, implementation, and sustainability differs greatly within and across types of interventions. Underlying tensions are sometimes found in who defines or prioritizes the problems facing the students and local school, who defines the solution, as well as who defines

the logic of change that argues that the solution will work. Additionally, tensions are found in the lack of consensus about how relationships in and with the community play out in the prevention efforts, and in conflicting ideas about the need to focus on individual decisions and behavior, or instead on intervening in the local dynamics and relationships. This diversity is not necessarily a problem, rather the lack of clarity within each approach and the ambiguity of the underlying theory of change. Other points that need consideration are the schools' ability to take advantage of new tools, the possibilities of installing new ways of doing things within existing structures and procuring sustainability.

## 4. Analysis and Conclusions



Public schools in settings with gang presence often coexist with criminality and insecurity in the surrounding community, as teachers identify the existence of, among others, theft, assault, extortion, drug trade, threats, and even murder. Some schools count on frequent appearances of the police who aim to control situations of insecurity in and around the school premises. The very presence of the police causes changes in the behavior of unruly students, as students related to or involved in gangs do not want to attract the attention of the police officers or have their belongings inspected. Therefore, some teachers see police presence as beneficial and as a form of prevention. Nonetheless, others sustain that the presence of security forces is not sufficient for reducing insecurity, since that depends on generating new forms of social coexistence within the school and with the surrounding community, because that is where some sources of insecurity reside.

Public schools struggle with the expectations of social relevance in the sense that the Ministry of Education, the society at large, and local commu-

nities believe that the school should be a space that discourages students from entering gangs or participating in violent or risky activities. However, limited resources and opportunities make the role of the school in prevention difficult. The overwhelming challenge for teachers is to manage and continue to educate in the midst of complex external and internal social dynamics related to insecurity.

Public schools often express a need for more support to do their job of educating under these difficult circumstances. When the programs of international development agencies and NGOs arrive at local schools through the coordination of national NGOs or local agency offices, the local school and its educational community establish a unique kind of relationship with these external organizations. They offer resources that go beyond what the school, local community and also the MOE can contribute, but at the same time they do not have the presence, permanency and enduring responsibilities these other more organic actors have.

The importance of establishing positive relations between these external actors and programs and local school and community is clear, but at the same time, establishing them is fraught with difficulties. The quantity and quality of these relationships, however, are fundamental for the success of the interventions and sustainability of the results.

### Disempowering vs. Empowering the Local School

In the context of prevention interventions in schools, how the different parts treat each other in building social relations can result in conflict and tensions. The concrete grounds of these frictions can be varied, but often school staff can resent that local knowledge and experiences are not appreciated nor are they valued as competent professionals. If the design and the specific content of

the intervention or activities in the school do not take into account the local staff and educational community, it can have a disempowering effect and generate a feeling of being disrespected. To avoid this, external programs need to incorporate the relationships among local stakeholders and the local social dynamics as integral parts of the school-based violence and gangs prevention programs in public schools.

## 5. Recommendations: Contextualization, Participatory Actions and Social Relations



This project identified three ways in which the everyday efforts and experiences of the schools can be endorsed and recognized as relevant and, at the same time, the school can be empowered to take on the co-responsibility for the decision-making and the implementation process in violence prevention initiatives. The first is through contextualization, i.e., inquiring and taking into account the local context; the second is through participatory actions, i.e., involving local stakeholders, school staff and the educational community in the design and implementation process; and the third is through investing in social relations, i.e., building close relationships with the local stakeholders showing commitment and a positive attitude.

### Contextualization

Schools are an important source of knowledge about students, their families and the surrounding community. Findings show that school staff, in general, emphasize that a prevention-oriented program must respond to the specific characteristics and needs of the local school and its surrounding community if it wants to be effective. If not, the proposed interventions can appear to be disconnected from the local situation, inviable or even irrelevant for the school and community, re-

sulting in indifference and lack of interest in the potential participants.

### Participatory Actions

When external organizations approach the schools offering to implement a prevention-oriented intervention, their aims are often to foster change and growth in the school and community, for which they need commitment and participation from members of the educational community. This involvement means community members take on new responsibilities and put their experience, knowledge, strategies, or newly-learned abilities into practice. The engagement of local actors is the only means for achieving sustainability of the prevention efforts and extending a secure school climate beyond the presence of external actors or interventions. Although the invitation to participate in prevention projects is often positively received by the educational community, it also entails extra effort and dedication with their limited available time.

### Social Relations

School-based social prevention means changing local relations and dynamics youth are involved in that make violent or threatening behavior and gang membership seen as normal or attractive. Only a positive attitude on behalf of the persons that design, organize and facilitate external programs and a mutually encouraging relationship with the school staff and students' parents, can create positive and attractive educational alternatives. Strong social relations are essential factors that influence the efficacy of prevention-oriented interventions, and achieving them takes time and dedication.

As basic as it may seem, respectful treatment of teachers, parents, and students is essential, but not always observed; this is seen through maintaining frequent and transparent communication

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and showing commitment with the proposed activities or program. One fundamental aspect of developing respectful relationships is taking the experiences and ideas of the local actors seriously and valuing them as important alternatives to enrich the proposed initiatives. Therefore, the facilitators and technical staff of external organizations must intentionally dedicate time and energy to learn the viewpoints, experiences and needs of the local educational community. Respectful treatment also means approaching the school with sufficient organization to fulfill the promises and planned activities.

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