Maestría en Política y Evaluación Educativa

دبي العطاء
Dubai Cares

TEACHERS, SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES: STRENGTHENING SAFE SPACES

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION

RESEARCH REPORT

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AUTHORS

Dr. Wim Savenije

MSc. Pauline Martin

MSc. Amparo Cabrera

RESEARCHERS

Wim Savenije, Ph.D. (Senior Researcher)

Pauline Martin, MSc. (Research Coordinator)

Moisés Rolando Flores Espinoza, MSc.

Luz del Carmen Galdámez, MSc.

Amparo Cabrera, MSc.

Carmen Eugenia Avelar, MSc.

José Rubén Merino, MSc.

Virginia Isabel García de Cerna, MSc.

RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Karla Sofía Molina Araniva, MSc.

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Master's Program in Educational Policy and Evaluation, Department of Educational Sciences, Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, El Salvador

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This report is the result of the research project "Teachers, Schools, and Communities: A Framework for Improving Basic Education in Gang-controlled Territories", a product of the research agreement between the Dubai Cares Foundation and the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) of El Salvador, Central America. This grant was received through the Evidence for Education in Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Envelope, in partnership with the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). The project was carried out from September 2019 to July 2022 and resulted in the crafting of the intervention framework for violence prevention in schools Context- Actions -Relationships (CAR). The research team and the UCA are deeply grateful to Dubai Cares and INEE for the opportunity to develop relevant evidence for strengthening education in contexts of insecurity. They also recognize and appreciate the invaluable contribution of the schools, teachers, families, non-governmental organizations, and Ministry of Education technical staff that participated in making this research possible.

Dubai Cares: Dubai Cares is a UAE-based global philanthropic organization that works towards providing children and youth in developing countries with access to quality education. Since its inception in 2007, the organization has successfully launched education programs reaching over 20 million beneficiaries in 60 developing countries. Dubai Cares also plays a key role in helping achieve the UN SDG4 on quality education. To learn more, please visit www.dubaicares.ae

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I. INTRODUCTION

The research project, Teachers, Schools and Communities: Strengthening Safe Spaces, addresses the social dynamics of schools and communities in local contexts of gang presence and insecurity, as a way to move from evidence to practice. When gang-related conflicts, threats of violence, extortion, and other risks prevent youth from attending school or schools from developing their curriculum, a silent emergency develops. Important life, social, and employment skills are not learned, and the essential preparation that schools provide for becoming active citizens is undermined. Because these unsafe contexts are often also characterized by poverty and social exclusion, education is thwarted as one of the few pathways to social cohesion, civic participation, and integration (Savenije & Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003). If public schools have inadequate conditions and are immersed in an unsafe environment and struggle to implement the curriculum, education reproduces poverty, exclusion, and hence, insecurity, rather than counteracting social inequalities (Novelli, 2016).

Gangs, and the violence attributed to them, affect the social fabric globally (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014) and need to be understood in a context of marginalization and social exclusion (Hagedorn, 2005). Violence and (organized) crime, including gangs, impose huge costs on local businesses, impeding economic growth and social development (World Economic Forum, 2017). However, little is understood about how gangs interact with other social institutions. The multiple marginality perspective, for instance, emphasizes the collective failure of the schools, families, and police in providing development opportunities and protection (Vigil, 2002), but it does not look into how these institutions themselves are affected by gangs and insecurity. Schools typically are expected to prevent violence and gang involvement and provide for positive social cohesion, but they cannot always deliver.

The effects of insecurity on local schools in El Salvador have 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, 2018a). This research responds to the need to understand how local social dynamics and relationships can strengthen school policies or educational interventions to prevent these situations from getting out of control and making the school an unsafe place.

Previous research[1] in El Salvador revealed some of the key social dynamics and relationships: the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and the students, the cohesion among the teachers and the principal/director, and the connection between the school and the local community. These results suggest that independent of the particular school policies or the concrete external interventions, local social processes and relationships can facilitate the achievement of a positive school environment and quality education in one school setting while hampering it in another. This research project, therefore,

[1] A pilot study of the ERCS research program was carried out in 2017.

wants to understand what is needed for school-based prevention to work and to develop a framework to help the design and implementation of prevention initiatives in contexts of insecurity and gang presence.

This study is the fourth phase of the multi-year, diversely-funded research program Education in Risk and Conflict Situations (ERCS), carried out by the Master's program in Education Policy and Evaluation (MPEE) at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in El Salvador. The ERCS program is situated in the academic field called Education in Emergencies (EiE) which addresses the challenges of delivering educational services in multiple contexts of crisis and emergency. The ERCS program seeks to understand how gang presence in the surrounding areas transforms the relationships, interactions, and functions that teachers and schools daily confront. It aims to provide input for educational policies that strengthen the daily functioning of schools in adverse situations, but also the pedagogical relationships with students, the integration of schools in the local community, and the integration of students in the education system.

The fourth phase was financed by the Evidence for Education in Emergencies research envelope (E-Cubed fund), sponsored by the Dubai Cares Foundation and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). Beyond merely seeking theoretically relevant knowledge, this study aims to structure the acquired understandings into a practice-oriented framework to guide school-based prevention initiatives in adverse contexts. This phase of research was initiated in 2020, but then was placed on standby due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so fieldwork was initiated in 2021, and the research was finalized in early 2022.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The study focuses on local social processes that facilitate success in school-based prevention, for instance, the relationships between teachers and students, cohesion among school staff and external organizations that promote prevention, and the involvement of the local community. It is not oriented at evaluating specific school policies or intervention projects, nor aims to find out which specific practices seem to work in unsafe school contexts. Rather, its objective is to comprehend *what makes* school-based prevention work, focusing on *how* local social relations and dynamics can facilitate safe school environments and support the quality of education in adverse contexts. It also seeks to develop an intervention framework for strengthening school-based prevention initiatives by incorporating these relations and dynamics in the design and implementation processes.

In other words, this study probes how the involvement of the educational community and the support of external organizations can help to prevent or overcome conflicts, threats, confrontations inside or outside the school, and the accompanying anxiety and fear. To this end, the research question is: *How can pedagogical relationships and local social dynamics in the school setting facilitate the achieving or maintaining of a positive school environment and quality education in contexts of gang presence and insecurity?*

The answer has a practical urgency for diverse kinds of school-based prevention programs and has been crafted into an intervention framework "Context–Actions–Relations" (CAR). CAR's function is to incorporate local relationships and social dynamics as integral parts of educational interventions and policies directed at helping schools in adverse contexts and subsequently improving their education quality and environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study of education in contexts with gang presence and insecurity requires a methodology that deepens understanding and generates reliable data, while at the same time guaranteeing a safe environment for informants and researchers. The multifaceted relationship between the school, the surrounding community, and the local gang makes a qualitative approach relevant. A qualitative study enables delving into topics of interest, probing into local social dynamics, and inquiring about the relations between the school and the adjacent community, but also generating propositions on why and how these dynamics appear in dissimilar contexts.

This study has adopted a multiple case study design to allow for consulting diverse actors within a single context and focus on social dynamics and relationships from different angles while generating thick descriptions of each school and its relational dynamics. Even though individual cases offer a poor basis for generalizing results, comparing multiple cases within and among varied contexts provides for the triangulation of data and probing for recurring patterns. Multiple case studies offer an integral view of each context, with rich data to help understand complex realities, while looking for theoretical understandings, i.e. analytical generalization (Yin, 2003). In this way, the study offers theoretically-informed insights for practical purposes.

Before the case studies, a document review was carried out of the principal plans, programs, and policies of diverse—governmental and non-governmental—organizations for preventing violence, gang affiliation, and insecurity in and around public schools. Then, during fieldwork, three research techniques were used. An online survey was included because of the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, eight case studies, which consisted of in-person semi-structured interviews with the school community, and a final series of three workshops were developed to discuss and analyze the information obtained. To find and have access to public schools situated in contexts of insecurity and gang presence, it was first necessary to look for gatekeepers who could identify suitable schools and establish initial trust between the informants and the research team. These gatekeepers were often teachers themselves, Ministry of Education staff, technical staff from NGOs, or sometimes members of the research team with links to schools.

For the survey, a broad sample of schools was selected. The majority of the schools had received external support from certain NGO-sponsored prevention-oriented education programs[2], while some were similar schools that without extensive external support maintained a positive school climate and quality education. Of the 61 schools that participated in the survey, 512 teachers and principals filled out the questionnaire.[3]

For the case studies, eight schools were selected from the broad survey sample. In every school, i.e. every case, the (vice)principal, teachers, parents, and local community members were interviewed. These were complemented by interviews with representatives of the NGOs, and Ministry of Education technical staff. A total of 51 semi-structured simultaneous interviews were held.

To guarantee good quality and reliable data and to protect the informants and researchers, the interviewing was done outside of the school premises. The safe, distanced spaces provided greater privacy and anonymity, with one-on-one interactions between interviewers and interviewees to develop basic trust. The interviews were held simultaneously to prevent the answers from being influenced by others or being overheard. The interviews were semi-structured with questions based on the conceptual categories generated in the earlier stages of research for identifying social relationships and dynamics, verifying answers, and allowing follow-up questions.

Afterward, three final workshops with seven of the schools were held to discuss and deepen preliminary understandings and contribute to the design of the intervention framework.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The report is structured in six sections, beginning with this introduction. The following section briefly outlines the phenomenon of street gangs in El Salvador and how it affects primary schools. Then, the situation of the Salvadoran public education system will be explored. The fourth section presents the research findings, beginning with a brief description of the most prominent government-sponsored prevention programs, then of three school-based prevention programs of non-governmental organizations. Then, this section describes everyday prevention in public schools that do not receive much

[2] The *Miles de Manos* program (Thousands of Hands), implemented by GIZ; the Escuelas Comunitarias program (Community Schools), implemented by Glasswing International; and the Education for Children and Youth Program (ECYP), implemented by USAID-FEDISAL.

[3] It is difficult to talk about statistical generalization in this survey. First of all, it is impossible to define a homogenous universe as the three interventions are very different from each other, the conditions in the schools where they were implemented vary, and also those without extensive external support are very diverse. Secondly, the very small numbers involved as for each intervention the number of schools varied from 13 to 17, for a total of 61. So, this survey, as part of a qualitative research project, essentially offers an additional viewpoint from the one that emerges from the case studies.

external help, and lastly, closes with some reflections on school-based prevention. The fifth section analyzes what happens when external organizations intervene in public schools, focusing on the dynamics of disempowerment and empowerment and emphasizing the importance of contextualization, participatory actions, and social relations. The sixth and last section introduces the 'Context–Actions–Relations' intervention framework. It first develops a concept of prevention suitable for school-based initiatives and then argues that these initiatives seek to change local social relations and dynamics the students are involved in and emphasizes the need for a localized theory of change. It concludes by presenting and explaining the foundations of the framework 'Context–Actions–Relations'.

II. GANGS AND EDUCATION IN EL SALVADOR

This section briefly outlines the gang phenomenon in El Salvador, especially the importance of the neighborhood as territory and as a place over which to maintain control. Gang members roam the streets and many do not attend school nor like to study. However, the public school, as a part of the neighborhood, is also considered part of the gang territory. Gang-related students often take the ways of the street with them to school and sometimes their behavior confronts teachers and threatens the safety of the school.

Over the past decades the street gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street gang (18th St.), have become powerful actors in disadvantaged neighborhoods. They are usually located in neighborhoods with high levels of social, economic, and political exclusion, i.e., an accumulation of a lack of employment opportunities or a stable income, poverty, overcrowding, as well as reduced access to quality education and health services, which is accompanied by social fragmentation of the neighborhoods' residents (Savenije, 2009; Savenije & Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003; Smutt & Miranda, 1998). In these places, the power of the authorities is limited (Wolf, 2017) and the schools in the already resource-stricken public education system have even fewer resources. The local gang cliques claim these spaces as their territory and protecting the neighborhood against other gangs is one of the main reasons for the use of violence by the gangs (Baires et al., 2006).

Gang presence profoundly limits the sociability of ordinary youth, because the spaces they move through and where they meet with friends are under the watchful eyes of the gangs (Savenije & Van der Borgh, 2015, p. 97). Youth living in zones controlled by a gang are forbidden to enter a zone pertaining to a rival gang, so even attending school can involve a serious security risk (INCIDE, 2016; Savenije & Van der Borgh, 2015). Access to basic education becomes restricted (FUNDAUNGO et al., 2015; Pérez Sáinz et al., 2018), especially when local gang members prohibit young people from attending school because of the place where they live (PNUD, 2013, p. 223; USAID-ECCN, 2016).

Apart from the local gang members and wannabes, the public schools in these neighborhoods also receive the sons, daughters, and other relatives of gang members. School dropout rates of gang-involved youth have been a concern for decades (Cruz et al., 2017). Research suggests that the participation of gang-related youth in formal education in El Salvador has declined in the last decades (Cruz & Portillo

Peña, 1998; Cruz et al., 2017; Santacruz Giralt & Concha Eastman, 2001; Smutt & Miranda, 1998). This quote illustrates the dynamics of drop-out and (self)exclusion of gang-related youth: "Then…, yes, I started to hang out with the gang. I didn't go any more [to school]. After I got a lot of tattoos, they did not accept me anymore" (Cruz, 1998, p. 1163).[4]

Although many of its members refuse to go to school, the gangs never abandoned the school. Therefore, it is important to make the distinction between *gang-involve*d students or active gang members; *gang-related* students, who are wannabes or students who have relatives or friends in or close to the gang; and *ordinary* students, who have nothing to do with the gangs. The disruptive behavior of the first two groups can make public schools unsafe and diminish the pedagogical authority of the teachers. Teachers often struggle to maintain discipline in the classroom (PNUD, 2013) and even develop approaches to be able to teach while protecting themselves against possible aggressions (Pérez Sáinz et al., 2018). Motivating youth to attend and be successful in school, however, is considered a critical factor in preventing gang involvement (USAID El Salvador, 2017).

III. PUBLIC EDUCATION UNDER STRESS

In general, Salvadoran families recognize a disconnection between their socioeconomic realities and what the school offers and demands, so children and youth have difficulty defining their educational interests and following through with a life plan that includes education (Díaz Alas, 2018). Household survey data reflect that enrollment is limited in basic education due to expectations that boys work and contribute income and that girls need to help out at home, while both sexes express a lack of interest in studying (Dirección General de Estadística y Censos [DIGESTYC], 2020). Public schools self-report economic factors that contribute to dropping out, such as the need to work (in 20.49% of schools) and the lack of economic resources (12.82% of schools) (MINED, 2018a).

Beyond family beliefs and economic reasons for not attending school, public schools are reporting various causes indirectly related to insecurity: change of residence (66.32% of the schools) and migration (45.31% of the schools). This excessive mobility could be related to gangs enforcing their control in the communities, as gang violence as a direct reason for abandoning school is reported by only 12.65% of the schools. In 2018, 42.93% of the schools reported the presence of gangs as an external threat to security, while 15.49% reported that gangs were an internal threat. Additionally, schools mention various risk factors affecting external and internal security, such as gang presence, theft, drugs, firearms, extortions (MINED, 2018a). The sense of insecurity is one of the most frequent drivers of demand for non-state schools (15% of the national enrollment), as parents opt for private schools that can select students and refuse enrollment to those who may exhibit troublesome behavior or may have gang connections (Martin & Aguilar, 2020). Schools themselves, nonetheless, are considered safer than the surrounding

[4] Authors' translation.

communities; in fact, local communities identify public schools as a place that prevents violence (IUDOP, 2019).

The challenges described above pressure public schools to respond to the economic and security issues in the adjacent community. However, the official discourse has often denied the existence of a gang problem, maintaining that the schools internally are safe and that insecurity is a problem in the surrounding area (Flores & Menjívar, 2014, p. 2). Mass media reporting of incidents of gang presence and gang-related violence in and around schools, nonetheless, influenced the drawing up of a national education plan and a policy addressing the needs of insecurity of the public schools in El Salvador.

In 2015, the *Plan El Salvador Educado* (Educated El Salvador Plan [PESE]), drawn up by the National Council of Education (CONED, 2016), prioritized six major challenges to quality and inclusive schools, and the general education aim of forming civil actors capable of changing their lives and society through productive and citizen capacities. The PESE affirms the role of education in reducing violence and defines the school as the principal pillar of violence prevention; however, it does so without formulating clear overall strategies or a theory of change. It proposed a diverse series of 36 strategic actions for violence prevention, especially in the classroom, by strengthening pedagogical practices to generate an attractive environment, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence. The implementation of these strategic actions is expected to result in an improved security environment in the schools and surrounding communities, as well as decreased crime and violence rates. Although the sheer number of actions reflects the fact that prevention is a core priority in the PESE, the long, rambling list reads like a brainstorming exercise with little connections among activities and a fuzzy theory of change.

In 2018, the *Política Nacional para la Convivencia Escolar y Cultura de Paz* (National Policy for a Harmonious School Environment and Peace Culture) was drawn up in another collaborative process, with the support of several international NGOs (MINED, 2018b). Its general objective is to foster an inclusive school environment with basic conditions for education quality, prevention of violence, and equitable, participatory, and harmonious relationships, to improve both the internal environment and the external security of the school. This policy offers a more complex and integral perspective on the issues of violence and gang presence that affect education.

The *Política* defines that violence produced by gangs is one of the principal problems affecting Salvadoran society for years, and consequently, the local schools. It is realistic in highlighting that the existing prevention initiatives correspond to the specific orientations of governmental institutions and national and international NGOs, without forming part of an integrated government policy to improve the school environment and reduce all forms of violence (MINED, 2018b, p. 71). The *Política* emphasizes broad participation and training of diverse professional actors, responses to environmental and social risks, and administrative, organizational, and communicational synergies as necessary for achieving the proposed actions (MINED, 2018b). However, the family and broader local community are often overlooked.

Parallel to the formulation of plans and policies addressing the security needs of the public schools, government agencies and NGOs started to implement programs for preventing violence and gang affiliation. The following section presents the principal government initiatives and three different NGO

school-based programs implemented in schools from 2013 to 2021 but also looks at ways schools themselves try to prevent insecurity that affects educational relations and to maintain a positive school climate.

IV. SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION

In light of the complex situation of violence and insecurity in El Salvador, numerous government and non-government organizations (NGOs) have developed interventions in public schools to prevent violence and gang affiliation. The range of implementers spans multiple government agencies, NGOs (local, 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.

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 security forces, especially through deterring acts of violence, delinquency, or gang membership by way of increasing police presence and involvement. This approach is often reflected in governmental prevention programs. 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. This approach is often preferred by NGOs and local institutions.

GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED PROGRAMS

The main government-related programs are designed from a public security approach, aimed at maintaining a safe environment in public schools. In general, this support is well-received by the school, teachers, and parents as police presence and involvement provide a sense of security, reinforce school rules, and support an environment of discipline. The three government-related programs reviewed are *Plan Escuela Segura* (Safe School Plan ([PES]), the Gang Resistance Education and Training program (GREAT), and the *Liga Atlética Policial* (Police Athletic League [LAP]).

The goal of the three government-sponsored programs is to modify students' individual choices concerning participating in criminal or violent acts or gangs, through deterrence or increased awareness of potential negative consequences. Hence, police officers fill the role of a 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., and teaching social skills (GREAT); or, organizing sports and dance workshops and events (LAP). Usually, officers receive specialized training to implement these different kinds of prevention initiatives with young people.

Even though the PES, LAP, and GREAT programs share the public security approach, they reflect three different perspectives on prevention. 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 LAP 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. The LAP and GREAT programs promote intensive communication with student participants and foster a positive relationship between officers and students. This is not the case in the PES where the police are the authority used to enforce control and discipline.

The content of GREAT and LAP are not exclusively preventive as sports activities and social skills training should be an integral part of any school curriculum. Unfortunately, the role of the school staff itself in prevention and maintaining a safe environment is overlooked, as well as the role of the teachers, family, and the broader education community. These programs do not consider the social dynamics of schools themselves or the surrounding community, such as student-teacher relationships or interactions between peers or with parents, nor do they recognize the importance of adolescent identity processes or of the need to belong to a peer group. Individual students, —i.e., the choices they make individually and personal awareness of the negative consequences of violence and gang membership— are the focus of these prevention programs. Schools are merely a venue for convening potentially at-risk children and youth.

PROGRAMS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

As a part of their development agenda and humanitarian mission, international development agencies and NGOs also promote prevention-oriented programs. These interventions are varied in scope, time frame, and amount of investment, as well as their underlying approach to violence prevention, although they usually have a youth development focus. Schools that participated in this study were involved in Miles de Manos (Thousands of Hands [MdM]) implemented by the German development corporation Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ); the Education for Children and Youth Program (ECYP) of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and a consortium of national partners led by the Salvadoran Foundation for Integral Education (FEDISAL); or *Escuelas Comunitarias* (Community Schools [EC]) promoted by Glasswing International.

These large-scale, highly-organized programs have many commonalities but also differ in ways that demonstrate more generalized patterns or tensions in violence and gang prevention efforts offered by the private sector. They demonstrate the diverse kinds of private actors, range of funding, and levels of coordination, among other aspects, yet all convene at the local school level. For example, MdM and ECYP are promoted by government-funded international development organizations, but while GIZ coordinates with multiple Salvadoran public institutions, USAID channels aid through national NGOs. All have processes to determine the needs to be met, but each has its unique strategy for proposing and implementing interventions in the schools. GIZ developed its MdM program by adapting interventions

from outside the region to the Central American context. In contrast, USAID works through national implementors that offer a portfolio of pre-designed interventions from which local schools choose. EC is offered by a homegrown NGO which coordinates with schools and codesigns the interventions with beneficiaries at the school level.

The diversity in design is also reflected in the different perspectives on prevention of each program. ECYP focuses on students themselves and their academic success and environment through multiple strategies (including teacher training), MdM focuses primarily on the training of parents and teachers to influence youth behavior—but, unlike the other programs, does not provide material resources—and EC aims to engage multiple community actors in schools to build broader social cohesion. The specific implementation also varies between schools within the same programs: ECYP offers the most varied supply of interventions, training, resources, materials design, etc., and the schools select the interventions of interest; EC resorts to the specific proficiencies of volunteers to form clubs, organize activities and training, but also meets the needs of local schools with resources for improving learning environments and infrastructure. Each intervention implicitly or explicitly determines who should be involved (i.e., students, teachers, family, or the broader community), their role in the problem and the solution, and the degree of attention to strengthening social relationships in the school community.

Finally, these interventions differ in their reach, coordination within the public-school system, and potential sustainability. Participation in ECYP was offered to selected schools situated in the municipalities with high rates of violence throughout El Salvador; MdM was piloted in three departments of mid-level violence levels, but also was implemented regionally in four Central American countries. Both programs have a more extensive reach and the MOE was key in identifying qualifying schools. EC coordinates directly with schools and communities, and although the model is replicated in other countries, its reach is much less extensive than other programs within El Salvador. A project's reach is also related to sustainability, which is a critical aspect and is primarily determined by how much the interventions depend on external resources and personnel. ECYP used its own technical staff to visit the schools and coordinate the implementation, while MdM instructed MOE departmental technical staff, local teachers, and parents to implement the training. The former creates a vacuum of technical staff after the life of the project, while the latter makes the intervention more susceptible to political changes within the MOE and staff assignments. The EC places technical support in schools to facilitate processes, but the main human resources are local, which installs local capacity for continuing the intervention. Both EC and ECYP provide some material resources to schools, while the implementation of MdM mostly requires personnel to facilitate and time for training.

Underlying tensions are sometimes found in who defines or prioritizes the problems facing the students and local school and how they make this assessment, but also in who defines the theory of change that explains how the intervention will work. Additionally, there is little consensus about how relationships in and with the community play out in prevention efforts, and conflicting ideas emerge 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 effectiveness is hindered by 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 how to procure sustainability.

EVERYDAY PREVENTION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Public schools that function in environments marked by insecurity and gang presence often have to confront situations of tension and conflict, with differing degrees of success. Although some schools receive support from externally-sponsored programs, others are left to their own devices, using their experiences and commitment, but have limited means to confront challenges. This section presents different ways in which schools try to prevent insecurity affecting educational relations and the school climate.

A school is considered a community, specifically a learning or educational community, that is made up of the principal, teachers, students, and their families (Asamblea Legislativa, 1996). Recent education policy documents extend the educational community to include local actors and organizations, such as churches, community associations, local businesses, and others who have an interest in the school and in educating children and youth (MINED, 2009, 2010, 2018b). However, the sense of being a collective and the active participation of members are not guaranteed. Schools deal with complex internal and external dynamics, such as the relationships with the students' families and local actors, while knowing—or suspecting—that some of them are somehow linked to insecurity.

Public schools often coexist with criminality and violence 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 often causes changes in the behavior of unruly students, as they do not want to attract the attention of the police offers or have their belongings inspected. Therefore, teachers often see police presence as beneficial and as a kind of prevention. Nonetheless, others sustain that the presence of security forces complicates the school-community relationship and is not sufficient for reducing insecurity. They consider that this depends on generating new forms of coexistence within the school and with the surrounding community because that is where the main sources of insecurity are found.

For the school, essential external relationships begin with the family. Teachers recognize them as key, even though school-family relations are occasionally tense or distant. Often families do not prioritize a relationship with the school, particularly when parents are employed or working informally and their time commitments restrict involvement in the school. Some families with gang ties maintain a distant relationship with the school in ordinary affairs but react strongly when their child or sibling complains that they are disrespected in school.

School-family dynamics were altered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of remote learning. Online and hybrid teaching and learning modalities provided a means—principally WhatsApp groups—to communicate more directly and frequently with teachers. However, in some cases,

quarantine and remote learning provoked the school–family relationship to become even more distant, even to the point that students abandoned their studies and school. In the online survey, school staff mentioned that the aspect that most impacted the students in the continuity of their studies was the lack of interest of the family (58% for female students and 54% for male students), more than the result of acquiring more responsibilities at home (33% for female students and 18% for male students).

Among other community relationships, churches take on an important role. Teachers express that those students and families associated with a church are more likely to avoid violent acts and demonstrate better student behavior. Some churches contribute to extra-curricular activities with talks to motivate students to continue learning and generate religious or social awareness in students.

Teaching methods have also evolved in the face of potential threats by gang-related students. Teachers often abandon the more punitive, coercive, or traditional authoritarian methods to enforce rules in the classroom. More positive methods, such as active listening, negotiation, creative conflict resolution, and showing respect result more effective and generate less conflict with students. Despite positive experiences with maintaining cooperative and cordial relationships with the students, teachers know this is not a guarantee for success. Nor is the change to more positive disciplinary methods necessarily a voluntary choice or part of the professional development of teachers; rather it is a manifestation of a redistribution of power that occurs within classrooms. Some students display what can be called an inverse pedagogical authority (Martin & Savenije, 2021), challenging the teacher as they are ostensibly backed by their relationship with gang members outside the school.

With few attractive educational resources available, public schools have learned that conflicts are influenced by paying attention to social relationships, both internally with and among students, and externally, primarily with families. Fostering positive, respectful relationships is the most powerful tool that teachers possess to deal with students and their relatives. The conditions and influences external to the school are strong and often outside the control of the school. Apart from their academic role, teachers sometimes take on other roles, including ones pertaining more to the realm of the family, such as advisor, parent, counselor, etc. The attention and caring of teachers have essential preventive qualities for students that are not necessarily linked to gangs but are vulnerable due to diverse situations, such as dysfunctional homes, domestic violence, economic difficulties, as well as subject to the pressure to join gangs in their communities. The development of close relationships is a way to accompany the students in the difficulties they endure and to prevent them from engaging in risky behavior. Most schools do not have psychological support services, social workers, or other qualified personnel to attend to these situations, so teachers take on additional tasks, above and beyond teaching content.

When unruly or disturbing behavior occurs, the school looks for allies in the families of the implicated students. The school will call the parents to a meeting and try to involve them in solving the problem. The school discipline handbook is commonly used as a guide in this process, as it outlines rules, procedures, and possible sanctions. The consensual nature of the handbook in the school community makes it less of a convenient rod for punishing indiscipline and more of a shield to protect staff from confrontation. However, parents that are close to the school staff and regularly attend meetings are most

likely to have children with few disciplinary problems or risk behavior. It is more difficult to establish close relationships with families involved in gangs or with high-risk behaviors, as they seem less interested in the education of their children or feel uncomfortable in the school environment. Other families have a limited capacity to influence the behavior of their children and, consequently, are restricted in helping teachers maintain order and discipline.

Families that are absent or unsupportive to the teachers facilitate or aggravate the risk of defiant or unruly behavior in their children, so teachers are left alone to manage the situations that arise. Even if school staff wish to protect and help these students, without family support the school's positive impact is reduced.

REFLECTIONS ON SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION

Schools are important venues for playing out violence and gang prevention efforts for children and youth, in that they are found in every region of the country, are a public resource, and represent an almost daily meeting place for children and youth. Yet there is a multitude of approaches, actors, and efforts oriented towards prevention. Government interventions tend to use a public security approach, relying on police officers and sometimes even military personnel. The emphasis is on controlling the behavior of individual youth, focusing on deterrence through the expression of authority or keeping them busy with positive activities and learning social skills. However, the broader social relationships that enfold children and youth are left out of the picture.

The international development agency and NGO interventions, conversely, focus more directly on youth development, especially on success in school, life skills, and future employment, by providing opportunities and fomenting abilities for making decisions for positive life pathways. These interventions, however, reflect little consensus about the importance of relationships in and with the community, are time-limited, and can only cover a small part of the Salvadoran public-school system.

In general, external prevention programs overlook or ambiguously approach the relationships among members of the educational community and the broader social network and interactions in which students are involved. However, public schools that do not participate in these large-scale interventions, often seek support from local actors and nearby resources as a natural response to their immediate needs. They have learned that paying attention to social relations, both internally and externally, and fostering positive, respectful relationships in the educational community are important tools in dealing with insecure situations. Even if the school themselves have few resources available, the online survey suggests that in the eyes of the school staff none of these programs fares better in having preventive effects in comparison with the schools' own efforts.

This raises questions about what happens when external organizations join in. But also, about what is needed for the resources—material, personnel, or didactic—they bring with them to make a difference. The next section examines the consequences for the local schools and educational

communities when a highly-resourced external organization intervenes to implement its prevention initiatives.

V. INTERVENTIONS OF EXTERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

The previous sections showed that public schools often face challenges related to students who are related to or are somehow involved in gangs. Even though teachers are not professionally prepared for these situations and educational relations become more difficult, teaching methods evolve and schools adapt to these difficult situations. Teachers and school staff even engage directly in efforts to prevent gang affiliation, mostly with individual students.

When external organizations offer their interventions to the local public schools, they become new actors in the local community, but one with many more resources at its disposal than the other actors and with more influence on different policy levels. The appearance of a new actor with resources and influence—that is, ostensibly with more power than the local actors—creates novel expectations and dynamics, with points of agreement and potential tension among the staff, parents, and students. This section first outlines some possible points of tension that this unequal relationship can create, specifically disempowerment through passivity and perceived dependence on external resources. Subsequently, it presents some ways that the empowerment of schools can contribute to more equal relationships and consensus for developing prevention interventions that can make a difference in the local school context.

DISEMPOWERING VS. EMPOWERING THE LOCAL SCHOOL

The relationship between public schools and external organizations is often based on the scarce resources the school has at its disposal to confront the challenges of education in insecure contexts. To be able to educate children and youth from disadvantaged and marginalized neighborhoods in an effective and attractive way, schools need extra resources. Infrastructure, materials, and supplies, such as classrooms and recreational spaces, teaching materials, sport and artistic equipment, etc., are often wanting. So, few means are available to prevent the occurrence of conflicts or gang affiliation among students, and teachers often contribute additional efforts, time, and even personal resources. Even though more could be done with sufficient and attractive educational resources, schools also feel the need for knowledge and training in innovative strategies for more effectively managing conflict situations and gang presence.

External organizations generally offer resources that the schools need, but at the same time, they do not have the presence, permanency, and enduring responsibilities these other more organic actors have. For public schools, extra educational materials, updated pedagogical support, and even novel possibilities for recreational activities are more than welcome and they are grateful for any collaboration received. The resulting relationship, however, can become unbalanced, leaving the school staff and the local educational community disempowered, that is, in a position of dependency—reliant on the external

organization for resources—and passivity—by accepting aid without participating meaningfully in the decision-making process on its use. However, successful efforts to prevent insecurity and student gang involvement require the contrary: a proactive attitude by the staff and educational community and a disposition for innovation—e.g., organizing interesting activities and creating new kinds of relationships with at-risk students.

Extra educational resources may be important, but social relations are central. A school-based prevention program that offers an abundance of resources and activities will not likely be successful without establishing appropriate relationships with local stakeholders; while, conversely, an intervention with few resources can be successful when it achieves adequate relations. Strong relationships can be built by empowering the local school and community and countering passivity or dependency on external resources.

Empowering the local school means seeking the input of local ideas and promoting participatory efforts to co-formulate responses to the question of how to educate effectively and prevent insecurity and gang membership. It also means sharing the responsibility of decision-making and implementation and actively taking into account local knowledge and experiences. Empowerment in school-based prevention efforts aims to avoid externally-planned activities that do not deliver the promised results by connecting to local knowledge, experiences, and school-related actors, and by incorporating the relationships among stakeholders and local social dynamics as integral parts of prevention programs in public schools.

EMPOWERMENT: CONTEXTUALIZATION, PARTICIPATIVE ACTIONS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

This study 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, school staff can be empowered to take on the co-responsibility for the decision-making and the implementation process. 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 building social relations, i.e., investing in close relationships with local stakeholders to show commitment and a positive attitude. Each one of these will be described as follows.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Schools are an important source of knowledge about students, their families, and the surrounding community. 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, and the potential participants can become indifferent and uninterested in what is offered.

To avoid this, intimate knowledge is needed of the nature of the local social and historical aspects of violence, the community's reality, its organizations and their leaders, the families' socioeconomic situation, the interests of young people, as well as the existing opportunities, recreational activities, and other assets. The recognition of the community's needs in the design and implementation of an external intervention program is fundamental. School-based initiatives that have already proven to be successful in preventing insecurity and violence locally could form part of an externally-sponsored program, rather than starting from scratch. Years of accumulated experience and lessons learned are of much value to prevention-oriented interventions.

PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS

When external organizations approach the schools offering to implement a prevention-oriented intervention, they aim for changing certain dynamics in the school and its community, for which they need the commitment and participation of members. To be effective, this involvement means taking on responsibilities and putting into practice their experience, knowledge, strategies, or abilities. Even more important, sustainability is achieved by engaging local actors and obtaining commitment and ownership. This can give continuity to the prevention efforts and extend a safe school climate beyond the presence of external actors or interventions.

Nonetheless, teachers normally dedicate their time in school trying to comply with their assigned tasks and responsibilities and little time, if any, is left for other kinds of activities. Parents are also limited in their time as they may work long hours away from home to support their family, often for little income. The invitation to participate in prevention projects is often positively received by the educational community but entails extra effort and dedication with limited time available. During an intervention, teachers can feel overburdened with multiple extra activities and functions, while parents may simply have less opportunity to participate. But this does not mean that teachers, parents, or other local actors do not need to be involved: it is vital! Design and implementation need to provide times and spaces for participation.

SOCIAL RELATIONS

A positive attitude on behalf of the persons who design, organize and facilitate external programs and a mutually encouraging relationship with the school staff and student's parents are essential factors that influence the efficacy of prevention-oriented interventions. "The power of violence prevention is relationships" (Aspholm, 2020, p. 195). 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 and showing commitment to the proposed activities or program. One fundamental aspect of developing respectful relationships is taking seriously the experiences and ideas of the local actors to enrich the proposed initiative. Therefore, the facilitators and technical staff of external organizations must intentionally dedicate time and energy to learning the viewpoints, experiences, and needs of the local educational community.

Demonstrating commitment implies that the external facilitators fulfill the promises made, especially programming timetables, technical assistance, and material or economic contributions. Schools rapidly detect when organizational aspects are not met and interpret this as the lack of will or ability to keep agreed-upon dates, plans, or objectives, and as a lack of interest in the proposed activities. Respectful treatment also means approaching the school with sufficient organizational capacity to fulfill the promises and planned activities.

Sometimes, external programs expect the school staff and parents to take on responsibility for the implementation and the roles of executing and sustaining the activities without considering their daily responsibilities. These kinds of projects risk failing in their objectives due to the resulting disorganization and lack of authentic interest by the facilitators for the local dynamics and implementation. Participating in an unsuccessful project generates even more discouragement and skepticism in the educational community, takes away the credibility of offers of help from external organizations, and consequently, spawns little interest in participating in new projects.

The importance of establishing positive relations between these external actors and programs and the local school and community is clear, but at the same time, establishing them can be fraught with difficulties. However, the quantity and quality of these relationships are fundamental for the success of the interventions and the sustainability of the results. The following section presents the foundations for an intervention framework to help with the design and implementation of school-based prevention programs. It identifies the different relationships they require and proposes a way to construct them, and emphasizes the importance of contextualization and the participation of local actors.

VI. TOWARDS THE 'CONTEXT–ACTIONS–RELATIONS' FRAMEWORK

The strengthening of positive social relations is central to the success of all school-based prevention initiatives. This research program has developed an intervention framework to incorporate local and external relationships and social dynamics as integral and fundamental elements of these violence and gang prevention programs. The intervention framework 'Context–Actions–Relations' aims to be a guide that orients the design and the implementation of school-based initiatives or programs to prevent unsafe situations, particularly—but not only—in the cases of threats of violence and students with ties to gangs.

This section first discusses the question of what prevention means in the context of public schools and introduces the concept of *social prevention* as distinct from *crime prevention*. Afterward, it argues that school-based prevention means changing the local social relations and dynamics that involve youth who may perceive violent behavior or gang membership as normal or attractive. Therefore, it is necessary to elaborate a basic *theory of change* to help to visualize which relations and dynamics are susceptible to changes and how. The last section discusses the objectives, the basic elements, and the organization of the 'Context–Actions–Relations' framework (CAR).

THE CONCEPT OF PREVENTION FOR SCHOOL-BASED INITIATIVES

In the context of public schools, what does prevention mean? Prevention generally was considered as averting crime to protect public security. This narrow interpretation of prevention focusing on lawbreaking behavior reinforces the idea that prevention is mainly the responsibility of the police (Crawford, 1998, p. 10). Hence, from a public-security perspective, the simple presence of the police can be considered prevention. Successive Salvadoran governments seem to conceive prevention this way, as the enduring character of the Safe School Plan indicates. A police official of the PNC expresses it this way: "We go to the neighborhoods; we do police presence. We stop in different places in the neighborhood and so we are doing prevention" (Savenije, 2010, p. 171).

What needs to be prevented, however, in public schools is not so much criminal offenses—theft, assault, violent incidents, extortion, etc.—as behaviors that generate fear in relationships but do not necessarily break the law. If school-based prevention wants to go further than the narrow notion of averting students' criminal behavior, social prevention (i.e., focused on the relationships and processes that incite individuals or groups to commit a crime or to generate fear) becomes a clear alternative. In schools, social prevention focuses on interfering in the social causes of disruptive or threatening conduct by changing the relations and dynamics in which young people are involved. The objective is to reinforce those relations and dynamics that promote social cohesion and diminish the risk of fear, delinquency, and violence, and—at the same time—to foster protective relationships and dynamics for schools, families, and communities (Savenije & Beltrán, 2012).

Social prevention is not only directed at averting students from showing disruptive, delinquent, or violent behavior but is also directed at saving them from becoming victims. Youth who get close to a gang, for instance, have an increased probability of using violence—for instance, against their peers—and at the same time, an increased risk of becoming a victim in a violent episode (McCord et al., 2001; Savenije, 2009; Short, 1997). Averting both can be part of school-based prevention efforts (Crawford, 1998, p. 15).

Looking at prevention from the perspective of the community highlights the fact that violence and crime are rarely the only problems in a neighborhood, but they are compounded by accumulated social and economic disadvantages (Crawford, 1998). When these problems are present in the community, it is also likely that the school is affected. The measures to prevent or reduce unsafe situations in the school should also consider the problems of the local community. For this reason, it is not very realistic for schools to do prevention by themselves; they need the help of the nearby community and other institutions. This is not to say that school-based prevention should so solve all the community's problems, but it is well within their reach to focus on the social and community-related aspects of the problematic behavior of students.

Active participation of students in prevention-related activities fosters positive youth leadership and develops their social competencies. In school, it stimulates positive social relationships among students and with their teachers. The involvement of the neighboring community also strengthens the relations between the schools, the families, and the other neighbors.

SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION MEANS CHANGING LOCAL RELATIONS AND DYNAMICS

School-based social prevention seeks to change the social relations and dynamics students are involved in, especially those which consider violent or threatening behavior and gang membership as normal or attractive alternatives. How can these relations and dynamics be changed? How can we explain the expected results of the intervention? These are questions that every prevention initiative or program needs to answer. General answers applicable to all situations, neighborhoods, or schools, and also theoretically grounded and failproof in their implementation are, however, difficult to come by. "[T]he causes of crime are neither settled nor uncontentious, but rather the subject of debate, competing theories and explanations, as well as conflicting evidence" (Crawford, 1998, p. 7). Envisaging how given interventions will lead to particular preventive outcomes is an integral part of doing prevention.

Developing a full-fledged theory to describe and ground the changes sought is neither necessary nor advisable, as it may complicate or even ruin the intervention (Stufflebeam, 2001, p. 39). The solution is to engage in the local situation, analyze the specific characteristics of the school and its surrounding community, and discover experiences and lessons of what has already proven to be successful in preventing insecurity and violence in this specific context. Implementing initiatives that have been verified as effective in other contexts, also called "scaling up", without looking into the local historical and social dynamics and relations often does not work.

> *To be certain, we need fewer narrow, deductive, one-size fits all violence prevention efforts that impose rigid, predetermined models on situations in which their assumptions may have no bearing. What we need are analyses and interventions developed inductively by the realities and conditions on the ground. (Aspholm, 2020, p. 196)*

Developing a localized theory of change is essential to elucidate what changes are sought in this specific context and how these are expected to come about. It requires anticipating and formulating steps and processes that bring about changes in the social relations and dynamics that provoke insecurity in schools. The theory of change—sometimes also called program theory—is an assumption on which the intervention or program is based and which identifies the problem, the short-term objectives, and the expected impact on the medium-term, as well as the mechanism of change (Rogers, 2007, p. 64). By doing so, it facilitates achieving the objectives of the intervention. In the case of school-based prevention, the theory of change describes, for instance, the way to prevent students from threatening with violence or suffering it (short-term objective) and to create a safe school atmosphere (medium-term objective). In other words, it explains how an intervention and its activities will transform the present situation of the target group (e.g. the risk of using or suffering violence) into a new one (e.g. reduced risk of violence). These ideas can be later used to evaluate or reflect on the effects of the school-based initiative or program, formulate the lessons learned and improve its design or implementation (Rogers, 2007, p. 65).

An example of a theory of change is an initiative that starts from the assumption that some students, often with low academic achievement, resort to (the threat of) violence because it is how they can stand out and get noticed. So, activities where students can stand out by acquiring positive social skills and competencies and also develop a sense of belonging (Butts & Gouvis Roman, 2010, p. 186), can be expected to diminish the occurrence of violence and progressively make the school safer. Starting from this assumption, a prevention program that designs and implements activities expects that the participating students will find their recognition and merit in other kinds of behaviors instead of violent conduct. The assumption and the mechanisms identified, although not aiming to have validity beyond the local context, give meaning to the intervention because they explain the change; that is, they explain which mechanisms of the intervention reduce the risk of violence (Rogers, 2007, p. 64).

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK "CONTEXT–ACTIONS–RELATIONS"

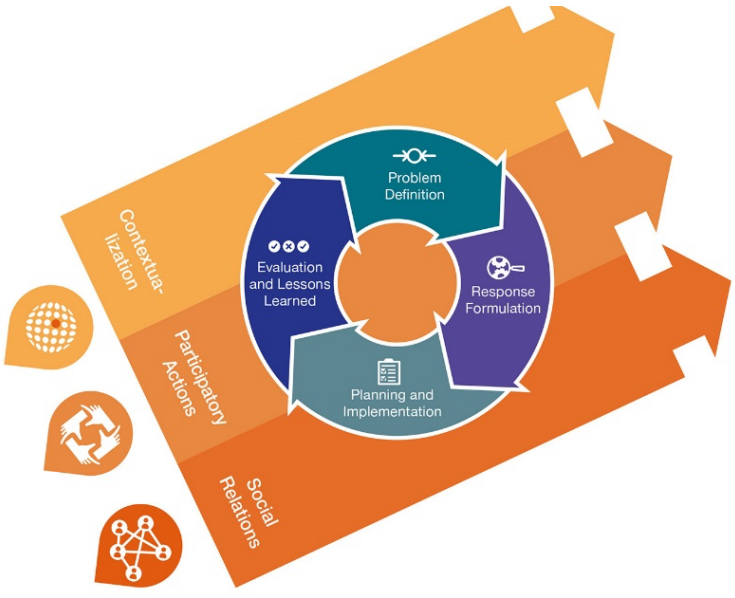
An intervention framework describes and guides the process of translating research into practice, indicating a series of broad steps that should be followed in the process (Nilsen, 2015). The intervention framework CAR specifically translates the results of the ERCS research program into a series of general guidelines and practical objectives. Its main objective is the empowerment of the local school and educational community for the social prevention of insecurity. In practice, empowerment means the *contextualization* of the intervention, *participatory actions* with local actors, and building s*ocial relations*. CAR guides the school staff, the educational community, and involved external organizations in the collaborative design and implementation of school-based initiatives to prevent unsafe situations,

especially –but not exclusively– threats of violence and students getting involved in gangs. In this way, CAR aims to strengthen the local school as a safe space.

CAR is not a collection of pre-elaborated recipes and one-size-fits-all solutions. On the contrary, the framework seeks to guide the design and implementation of different kinds of prevention initiatives, without determining which one is the best or the most adequate. This judgment depends on the situation of every school, the surrounding context, the participants, the feasibility of activities, the types of resources available, etc.

CAR builds upon the idea that interventions can be organized in four general phases that correspond to the project cycle: problem definition, formulation of the response, implementation, and evaluation of the lessons learned. Every intervention starts with the definition of a problem and a theory of change that helps to formulate a possible response or solution. Implementing a prevention initiative or program involves an interwoven set of persons, resources, time, and processes interacting within a complex environment. An important moment is the reflection, evaluation, and formulation of the lessons learned. This is not only to identify if and how the activities have been implemented as planned and have the desired effects but also to reconsider the original problem definition and see if the problem has changed. The goal of these reflections is to adjust and improve the intervention and its implementation based on the experiences obtained. The CAR framework is a tool for putting all these aspects in order.

In short, every school-based prevention initiative should place the empowerment of the school and educational community as the central objective. The intervention framework is a guide to the process of incorporating the relations between local stakeholders and the local social dynamics as integral parts of these prevention programs. Contextualization, participative actions, and building social relations are principal requirements for school-based prevention to be successful and sustainable.



Intervention Framework "Context-Actions-Relations"

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