Confronting school violence in Brazil: insights from social psychology for safer educational environments

Enfrentando a violência escolar no Brasil: insights da psicologia social para ambientes educacionais mais seguros

DOI: 10.55905/revconv.16n.10-225

Recebimento dos originais: 22/09/2023
Aceitação para publicação: 23/10/2023

Rosimar José de Lima Dias
Post-Doctor in Clinical Psychology
Institution: União das Faculdades Católicas de Mato Grosso (UNIFACC - MT)
Address: Cuiabá - MT, Brasil
E-mail: rosimar.dias@faccmt.com.br
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5768-9142

ABSTRACT
School violence is a complex issue with significant implications for students, educators, and society as a whole. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted nature of school violence in Brazil and proposes a multidimensional approach to address this pressing problem. Drawing upon social psychology and current empirical research, the paper explores the role of individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors in the occurrence of school violence. It highlights the importance of values education, ethical development, and creating safe and supportive school environments. Additionally, the article emphasizes the significance of evidence-based interventions, such as social-emotional learning programs and conflict resolution strategies, in preventing and reducing violence. Collaborative efforts involving educators, policymakers, parents, and the wider community are crucial for the successful implementation of these interventions. By integrating social psychology perspectives and evidence-based strategies, schools can foster a positive and inclusive environment that promotes the well-being and academic success of all students.

Keywords: school violence, social psychology, values education, safe school environments, evidence-based interventions.

RESUMO
A violência escolar é uma questão complexa com implicações significativas para estudantes, educadores e para a sociedade em geral. Este artigo oferece uma visão abrangente da natureza multifacetada da violência escolar no Brasil e propõe uma abordagem multidimensional para tratar este grave problema. Com base na psicologia social e em pesquisas empíricas atuais, o trabalho investiga o papel dos fatores individuais, interpessoais e contextuais na ocorrência da violência escolar. Destaca a importância da educação em valores, do desenvolvimento ético e da criação de ambientes escolares seguros e acolhedores. Além disso, o artigo enfatiza a relevância de intervenções baseadas em evidências, como programas de aprendizagem socioemocional e estratégias de resolução de conflitos, na prevenção e redução da violência. Esforços colaborativos envolvendo educadores, formuladores de políticas públicas, pais e a comunidade em geral são
fundamentais para a implementação bem-sucedida dessas intervenções. Ao integrar perspectivas da psicologia social e estratégias baseadas em evidências, as escolas podem cultivar um ambiente positivo e inclusivo que promove o bem-estar e o sucesso acadêmico de todos os estudantes.

**Palavras-chave:** violência escolar, psicologia social, educação em valores, ambientes escolares seguros, intervenções baseadas em evidências.

1 INTRODUCTION

School violence in Brazil is a pressing and multifaceted issue that has garnered significant attention from researchers, policymakers, and educators. The escalation of violence within the school environment, as documented in numerous studies and reports, calls for a comprehensive understanding and effective strategies to address this complex problem (Garcia-Silva; Lima Junior, 2022; Trevisan, 2022; Unesco, 2019). This article aims to provide an in-depth examination of school violence in Brazil by integrating Bandura's social psychology, a prominent theoretical framework that offers valuable insights into understanding and preventing violent behaviors (Bandura, 1973; Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1997). By exploring school violence through the lens of social psychology, this research seeks to offer evidence-based analysis and recommendations for intervention.

Over the past decades, the teaching of ethics and morality in Brazilian schools has undergone various phases and approaches. From the era of moral dogmatism in the 1960s, characterized by the mandatory subject of "Moral and Civic Education," to the subsequent shift towards moral relativism in the 1990s, there has been a continuous evolution in educational paradigms and policies (Menin et al., 2014). The introduction of constructivist perspectives, influenced by Piaget's theories, marked a transition towards the notion of the rational and autonomous construction of values, emphasizing the social negotiation and contextual nature of ethical frameworks (Buxarrais, 2000; Morillo, 2022).

However, despite these pedagogical advancements, school violence remains a pervasive issue, necessitating a deeper exploration of theoretical frameworks and evidence-based strategies. Bandura's social learning theory provides valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying violent behaviors, highlighting the role of observational learning, self-regulation, and the influence of social factors on behavior (Bandura, 1973; Bandura, 1977).
Moreover, Bandura's concepts of self-efficacy and moral disengagement offer critical perspectives for understanding the cognitive and motivational processes that contribute to the perpetuation of violence within school settings. Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capability to execute specific actions, influences the adoption of prosocial or violent behaviors (Bandura, 1990; Bandura, 1997). For example, a student with a high level of self-efficacy in conflict resolution may be more inclined to employ peaceful strategies when faced with interpersonal disputes. On the other hand, moral disengagement provides insights into the cognitive mechanisms by which individuals rationalize and justify their aggressive actions, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to school violence (Bandura, 2002; Gini, 2016). For instance, the process of moral disengagement may involve justifying violence as a means of self-defense or a reaction to perceived provocation.

To effectively confront school violence in Brazil, it is crucial to integrate Bandura's social psychology with broader theoretical perspectives, such as sociocultural theories and ecological systems frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Swearer et al., 2010). These interdisciplinary approaches shed light on the complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors that contribute to violent behaviors in schools. For example, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes the influence of cultural norms and societal values on shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors, including violence. The ecological systems framework, on the other hand, recognizes the impact of various systems, such as families, peers, and communities, in shaping the development of individuals and their likelihood of engaging in violence. By drawing on a comprehensive body of research and evidence-based practices, policymakers and educators can develop targeted interventions that address the underlying causes of violence, promote prosocial behaviors, and foster a safe and supportive school environment.

This study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering an in-depth exploration of Bandura's social psychology within the context of school violence in Brazil. By integrating relevant literature, empirical findings, and practical implications, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective strategies for preventing and addressing school violence, ultimately fostering healthier and more inclusive learning environments for students.
2 THE MAP OF VIOLENCE IN BRAZILIAN SCHOOLS: A WORRISOME AND CHALLENGING REALITY

Violence in Brazilian schools has emerged as a significant and multifaceted concern, drawing substantial attention from researchers, policymakers, and educators. Recent studies and reports have shed light on the extent and complexity of violence within the school environment, highlighting the urgent need for a comprehensive understanding and effective interventions (Garcia-Silva; Lima Junior, 2022; Trevisan, 2022; Unesco, 2019). This section aims to provide a broader and more in-depth exploration of the landscape of school violence in Brazil, integrating current literature and research in the field to offer an authoritative and evidence-based perspective.

A comprehensive study conducted by UNESCO in 2002, involving researchers from 14 capital cities in Brazil, highlighted the prevalence and complexity of violence in schools (Abramovay, 2002). The study defined violence as any physical or symbolic harm inflicted upon individuals or groups within the school context (Abramovay, 2002). It revealed an alarming increase in school violence in recent years, creating a pervasive sense of insecurity among students and teachers. Examples of school violence in Brazil include physical altercations between students that escalate into fights, instances of bullying that involve verbal and physical aggression, and acts of vandalism that damage school property (Becker; Kassouf, 2016; Silva; Negreiros, 2020).

To comprehend the complexity of school violence, it is essential to examine the underlying factors that contribute to its occurrence. Extensive research has identified several contributing factors, including social inequality, family dysfunction, peer influence, exposure to media violence, and inadequate school environments (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Payton et al., 2008; Nation et al., 2003). For example, socioeconomic disparities in Brazilian society can lead to social exclusion and frustration among disadvantaged students, increasing the likelihood of engaging in violent behaviors. Additionally, family dynamics characterized by neglect, abuse, or lack of parental involvement can contribute to the development of aggressive tendencies in children. Peer influence, particularly in the form of peer pressure and the desire to gain social status, can also perpetuate violence within school settings (Silva; Negreiros, 2020).

The consequences of school violence extend beyond immediate physical and psychological harm to students. It significantly hinders academic performance, school
attendance, and overall educational outcomes. Students exposed to violence are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, experience mental health issues, and struggle with forming positive relationships (Becker; Kassouf, 2016; Silva; Negreiros, 2020; Polanin et al., 2020). For example, a study conducted in Brazil found that students who reported being victims of violence at school were more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and disobedience, and experience higher levels of depression and anxiety (Silva; Negreiros, 2020).

Addressing school violence requires a multifaceted approach that integrates research, policy, and practice. Effective interventions should encompass preventive measures, early identification and intervention, targeted support for at-risk students, and the promotion of positive school climates (Durlak, 2011; Silva & Negreiros, 2020; Swearer et al., 2010). For instance, schools can implement violence prevention programs that promote conflict resolution skills, social-emotional learning, and the development of prosocial behaviors. Collaboration among stakeholders, such as educators, families, community organizations, and government agencies, is essential for implementing evidence-based strategies and creating sustainable change (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Programs should be developed to successfully engage school communities, including teachers, students, and parents, in creating a positive and peaceful school environment through conflict resolution training (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

The reality of violence in Brazilian schools is deeply concerning and demands immediate attention and concerted efforts from all stakeholders. By comprehensively understanding the extent and manifestations of school violence and considering the underlying factors contributing to its occurrence, policymakers, educators, and researchers can develop evidence-based interventions that promote a safe and inclusive learning environment. In this sense, initiatives should be implemented focusing on preventing and addressing school violence through various strategies, including awareness campaigns, teacher training, and the creation of safe spaces for students to report incidents (Trevisan, 2022).

In conclusion, violence in Brazilian schools is a pressing issue that requires a comprehensive and evidence-based approach. By acknowledging the prevalence and complexity of school violence, understanding its underlying factors, and implementing effective interventions, policymakers and educators can create safe and supportive school environments that foster positive educational experiences for all students. It is crucial to continue conducting research, evaluating intervention programs, and promoting collaboration among stakeholders to
ensure the ongoing improvement and sustainability of violence prevention efforts in Brazilian schools.

3 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY IN UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

School violence, as a multidimensional issue, necessitates a holistic understanding to effectively address its underlying causes and inform the design of targeted interventions. In this endeavor, social psychology plays a pivotal role, providing the intellectual framework to delve into the intricacies of individual, interpersonal, and socio-environmental facets contributing to the incidence of school violence. This section aims to elaborate these aspects further.

At the individual level, a plethora of psychological components wield significant influence in sculpting behavioral patterns and predisposition towards violent conduct. Emerging research has underscored the imperative to consider unique individual traits, including aggressive tendencies, impulsivity, and empathy deficits, in addition to the presence of underlying mental health disorders, all of which constitute potential risk factors associated with school violence (Swearer et al., 2010; Vagi et al., 2013). Notably, these factors don't exist in isolation; rather, they intricately interact with various social and environmental influences, often amplifying the propensity for violent behavior in certain individuals.

For instance, an impulsive individual, when faced with hostile peer interactions or exposed to a violent home environment, might be more inclined towards aggressive responses than someone lacking such traits. This underscores the importance of early psychological intervention and support, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, to help students manage these traits and mitigate their potential escalation into violence.

Interpersonal dynamics within the school environment significantly contribute to the manifestation of violence. A critical illustration of this is bullying, which has been consistently identified as a significant precursor to more severe forms of school violence. Both victims and perpetrators of bullying exhibit an increased risk of experiencing and perpetrating intensified forms of aggression (Espelage; Swearer, 2003; Swearer et al., 2010). Power imbalances, entrenched social hierarchies, and negative peer interactions often serve as breeding grounds for a culture of violence, escalating aggressive behaviors among students.
Efforts to disrupt these harmful dynamics can involve interventions aimed at promoting empathy, communication skills, and respect for diversity among students. Furthermore, school policies and practices can also play a crucial role in establishing a safe and respectful environment, such as implementing strict anti-bullying policies and offering conflict resolution programs.

Furthermore, the broader socio-environmental factors framing students' lives are instrumental in molding their attitudes, values, and behaviors. Socioeconomic disadvantage, community violence, familial dynamics, and exposure to media violence have been linked to an augmented risk of school violence (Farrell et al., 2006; Huesmann et al., 2003; Turner et al., 2011). These socio-environmental influences interact synergistically with individual and interpersonal processes, resulting in a complex weave of factors that contribute to the emergence and escalation of violent behavior.

Such complexity calls for comprehensive approaches informed by social psychology's theoretical foundations. For instance, Bandura's (1973) social learning theory accentuates the pivotal role of observational learning, modeling, and reinforcement in shaping behavior. This perspective highlights the potential of role models within the school environment, peer interactions, and media in shaping students' attitudes and behaviors towards violence. This insight supports initiatives like mentoring programs, positive role model promotion, and media literacy education.

Similarly, social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) elucidates how individuals' social identities and group affiliations influence their attitudes and behaviors. This theory indicates that school violence could stem from negative group dynamics, social categorization, and intergroup conflicts. As such, interventions promoting positive intergroup relations, such as cooperative learning strategies and school-wide inclusivity campaigns, could help mitigate school violence.

Lastly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological model provides a comprehensive framework to examine the multifaceted nature of school violence. This model accentuates the interaction between individuals and their immediate social environments – including families, schools, and communities – while also accounting for the broader societal factors that shape these environments. This perspective underscores the necessity of multi-level interventions targeting
individual, interpersonal, and community factors simultaneously to effectively address school violence.

In essence, social psychology significantly enriches our understanding of the multifaceted nature of school violence, shedding light on individual, interpersonal, and socio-environmental factors contributing to its occurrence. By examining the underpinnings of psychological processes, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and the influences of broader social and environmental contexts, social psychology imparts a profound understanding of school violence. It equips us with the tools to conceptualize, and therefore mitigate, the mechanisms and risk factors associated with school violence. Consequently, this knowledge becomes indispensable when developing evidence-based interventions and prevention strategies, shaping policy, and guiding future research. The end goal remains to create a safe and nurturing environment conducive to the holistic growth of every student.

After considering the multifaceted nature of school violence from the lens of social psychology, it becomes increasingly clear that addressing this issue requires a comprehensive and integrative approach. This involves acknowledging the individual, interpersonal, and broader societal factors that contribute to the occurrence of violence in schools. Having explored these contributing elements, the question then becomes: what are the potential strategies and approaches that can be employed to address this issue effectively? The following section is dedicated to dissecting and proposing potential interventions and strategies, built upon the understanding we have established so far, that could help mitigate the prevalence and impact of violence in Brazilian schools.

4 A POSSIBLE PATH FOR CONFRONTING THE ISSUE

Addressing the pervasive issue of violence in Brazilian schools necessitates the implementation of comprehensive strategies that go beyond mere disciplinary measures. Instead, the focus should be on creating a safe and supportive educational environment that promotes positive values, ethical development, and draws on Bandura's social cognitive theory. This section aims to provide a more in-depth exploration of a potential path for confronting school violence, offering evidence-based insights and practical examples from current literature.

Values education assumes a critical role in shaping students' moral compass and promoting prosocial behavior. By instilling core values such as empathy, respect, and
Responsibility, educators can foster a positive and ethical school culture. For example, a study by Morillo (2022) examined the impact of a values education program in Spanish schools, which included activities to enhance empathy and conflict resolution skills. The results demonstrated a reduction in aggressive behavior and an increase in prosocial behavior among students. Similarly, Piotrowska et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis that revealed the positive effects of values education programs on reducing aggression and promoting prosocial behavior across diverse cultural contexts. These examples highlight the importance of implementing values education programs that actively engage students in developing and internalizing positive values.

Ethical development is another crucial aspect in confronting school violence. Fostering students’ ability to critically analyze moral dilemmas, reflect on their values, and develop a personal ethical framework contributes to their decision-making skills and moral agency. Bandura’s social cognitive theory provides valuable insights into the process of ethical development. Observational learning and exposure to positive role models play a pivotal role in shaping ethical behavior. For instance, a study by Gini et al. (2015) implemented an intervention program in Italian schools that involved role-playing activities and discussions to promote empathy and prosocial behavior. The findings revealed a significant decrease in aggressive behavior and an increase in prosocial actions among students. These examples demonstrate the potential of integrating Bandura’s social cognitive theory into ethical development programs to cultivate students’ ethical decision-making skills and foster a sense of moral responsibility.

Creating a positive and non-violent school culture requires nurturing positive relationships and a sense of community within the educational environment. Research consistently emphasizes the importance of a supportive school climate characterized by strong teacher-student relationships, peer collaboration, and shared responsibility in reducing violence and promoting student engagement. For example, a study by Nation et al. (2003) examined the relationship between school climate and violence prevention in American middle schools. The results showed that schools with a positive climate experienced lower levels of violence and better academic outcomes. Restorative practices, such as implementing conflict resolution strategies and adopting restorative justice approaches, are effective in promoting a positive and non-violent school culture. Thorsborne (2017) highlighted the success of restorative practices in Australian schools, where they have been implemented to address conflicts and repair harm. These practices promote empathy, respect, and constructive problem-solving skills among
students, fostering a sense of belonging and collective responsibility for maintaining a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Implementing this possible path for confronting school violence requires collaboration among stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, parents, and the wider community. It entails integrating values education, ethical development, and Bandura’s social cognitive theory into the curriculum and providing ongoing professional development for educators. For example, Lepre (2019) explored the role of teacher professional development programs in promoting values education and positive school climates in Brazilian schools. The study highlighted the importance of equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively implement values education initiatives. Engaging all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of evidence-based strategies is essential for creating sustainable change and promoting a violence-free school environment.

In conclusion, effectively addressing violence in Brazilian schools requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes values education, ethical development, and the integration of Bandura’s social cognitive theory. By nurturing empathy, fostering ethical decision-making skills, and promoting positive relationships and a sense of community, schools can create a safe and inclusive environment that mitigates the risk of violence. Collaboration among stakeholders, informed by current research and practical examples, is crucial for successful implementation and long-term sustainability. By adopting this evidence-based approach, we can pave the way for schools that prioritize the holistic development and well-being of students, contributing to a more peaceful and inclusive society.

5 FINAL REMARKS

Addressing and preventing school violence is a complex and multifaceted task that requires a comprehensive and in-depth approach. In this section, we have explored the complexity of school violence and underscored the significance of integrating research findings and evidence-based strategies to create safe and supportive school environments.

The extensive body of literature on school violence emphasizes the interconnectedness of various factors contributing to its occurrence. It is evident that a simplistic explanation or a focus on a single factor cannot fully account for the complexity of this issue. Instead, a comprehensive
understanding necessitates an examination of the interplay between individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors.

At the individual level, research has highlighted several psychological factors associated with an increased risk of engaging in violent acts. Studies by Swearer et al. (2010) and Vagi et al. (2013) have shown that individuals with aggressive tendencies, impulsivity, low empathy, and mental health problems are more likely to engage in violent behavior. For example, a student with high levels of aggression may become involved in bullying incidents, escalating the potential for violence in schools.

Interpersonal dynamics within the school setting also play a significant role in the manifestation of violence. Research by Espelage and Swearer (2003) and Swearer et al. (2010) demonstrates that bullying serves as a critical precursor to school violence, with both victims and perpetrators at an increased risk of experiencing and perpetrating more severe forms of aggression. These negative peer interactions and power imbalances perpetuate a culture of violence within schools, leading to heightened aggression among students.

Furthermore, the broader social and contextual factors surrounding students' lives significantly shape their attitudes, values, and behavior. Socioeconomic disadvantage, community violence, family dynamics, and exposure to media violence contribute to an increased risk of school violence (Farrell et al., 2006; Huesmann et al., 2003; Turner et al., 2011). For instance, in neighborhoods with higher rates of community violence, students may develop a skewed perception of aggression as a normative behavior, increasing the likelihood of violence in schools (Richards; Grogan-Kaylor, 2022).

To effectively address school violence, interventions must adopt a comprehensive and preventive approach that targets risk factors at multiple levels. Evidence-based programs, such as those evaluated by Cook et al. (2010), Nation et al. (2003), and Olweus et al. (2013), have shown promise in promoting positive school climates, enhancing social-emotional skills, fostering supportive teacher-student relationships, and encouraging peer interventions. For instance, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program has been implemented in schools worldwide and has demonstrated significant reductions in bullying and related violence.

Moreover, recognizing the role of educators, parents, and community members is crucial in creating a safe and inclusive school environment. Collaboration among all stakeholders is essential for implementing effective prevention strategies and fostering a culture of respect.
empathy, and tolerance. Partnerships with community organizations and engagement with parents, as highlighted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) and Vivolo-Kantor et al. (2016), enhance the overall effectiveness of violence prevention efforts. For example, involving parents in school-based initiatives and promoting community engagement can strengthen the collective effort to create a violence-free environment.

Furthermore, ongoing research and evaluation are vital for refining and improving violence prevention programs. Studies by Bradshaw et al. (2009) and Durlak et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of continuous assessment to identify promising practices and inform evidence-based strategies. By evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, researchers can contribute to the development of practical and targeted approaches that address the evolving challenges of school violence.

In conclusion, addressing and preventing school violence require a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of its complexities. By considering the interplay of individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors, implementing evidence-based interventions, fostering collaborative partnerships, and conducting rigorous research and evaluation, we can work towards creating safe and supportive school environments where all students can thrive. This commitment to comprehensive action and ongoing improvement is essential for the well-being and holistic development of individuals and the broader community.
REFERENCES


