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Practices that promote comprehensive school safety

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Abstract

Educational institutions must be safe and secure spaces for students, teachers and non-teaching staff. It is necessary to manage the safety and security properly in order to prevent accidents and incidents, creating an environment in which physical, emotional and social well-being is promoted. The aim of this study is to identify and analyse actions that promote comprehensive school safety in educational institutions of Catalonia (Spain). From a qualitative perspective, we carried out a multiple case study, with a sample of 9 educational institutions. The outcomes show that educational institutions develop various activities in order to promote school safety, but many of them are performed only because they are required by regulations, without any sensitivity and real commitment to their need or importance. For an adequate management of comprehensive school safety, it is necessary to mainstream safety management processes in all areas of school management, involving all stakeholders of the educational community.

Keywords: Comprehensive school safety, prevention, school management, school safety.

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1. Introduction

Safety, security, and prevention in educational institutions are themes that have always been of interest and concern for the educational community. Educational institutions must be safe and secure spaces for students, teachers and non-teaching staff in order to create optimal spaces for learning and working. The progressive improvement of school safety necessarily requires the development of a set of actions related to physical safety, social safety, and emotional safety (Devine & Cohen, 2007). The ultimate aim is to ensure that students learn in a quality learning environment in which accidents and incidents are prevented, and positive attitudes and perceptions toward safety are developed.

Several authors (Boychuk, 2014; Duke, 2002; Hundeloh, & Hess, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Syrjalainen, Jukarainen, Varri & Kaupinmaki, 2015) defend the need to address school safety from a comprehensive, holistic, global and integrated approach, considering that school safety cannot focus only on the promotion of health, physical security or risk prevention, but rather we need to move towards the creation and maintenance of the safety of the whole educational institution.

The concept of comprehensive school safety emerges in this context, trying to address the multiple issues that must be considered to ensure the welfare of students, teachers, non-teaching staff, and any other member of the educational community (Author, 2014). Furthermore, in the process of creating and maintaining safe schools, it does not make sense to adopt narrow approaches, especially if we consider that the different dimensions of school organizations are interrelated and influence each other (Gairin, 2004).

For the European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health [ENETOSH] (2014), there are two different perspectives concerning the whole-school safety approach. Firstly, the whole-school approach is a management approach which encompasses the whole educational establishment and, secondly, the whole-school approach stands for a paradigm shift: it is no longer just about education promoting safety and health, but rather safety and health as a means of promoting quality in education.

Other authors and bodies opt for a two-dimensional distinction. Sprague & Walker (2005) distinguish between two dimensions of school safety that every educational institution should consider: one involves the overall safety of the school building and grounds, and the other involves the social environment of the school.

Along the same premises, Xaba (2014) defends that securing the school environment and creating safe conditions involves the maintenance of the school facilities and ensuring that all areas of the school are constantly observed and monitored regardless of whether or not they are occupied. UN/ISDR, UNICEF, & CECC (2008) argue that two factors must converge to provide safety to the educational community; they are linked to structural factors (education 'hardware'), including the building where the school functions, its furniture and equipment and the quality and regularity of maintenance, and non-structural factors (education 'software'), which comprise all the aspects that concern the approach that the education institution has and applies to the world, to human beings, to the teaching-learning process, to relations between community and school and to itself.

In the same direction, the EDURISC research group, from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, distinguishes between the static risk dimension (hazards related to natural agents, chemical contaminants, physical contaminants, and biological contaminants) and dynamic risk dimension (risks related to the processes of interaction between people, including the traffic of people and vehicles, the development of teaching activities, the physical risks to the student body and teaching staff, and social and leisure activities), supporting an interdependent relationship between them (Díaz-Vicario & Gairin, 2014).

Therefore, we define school safety as the safety related to the school context that involves looking at physical, emotional and social dimensions of individual and collective safety, pursuing the achievement of safety for all members of the educational community, especially the students as the

most vulnerable group. For that reason, we use the concept of comprehensive school safety, understanding that the achievement of safety should be integrated into each and every daily activity that the educational institution develops, as part of its culture (Author, 2015).

In the Spanish context, in recent years, efforts have focused on compliance with the Prevention of Risk at Work Act, in addition to other matters related to health and healthy lifestyles. The safety issues have been developing, focusing efforts on specific parcels of school safety, without taking an overall approach, as outlined by international organizations and scholars. This is because the comprehensive school safety perspective is already partially assumed, and it is true that educational institutions develop several actions that ensure school safety. This study aims to identify and analyze specific measures adopted and actions performed by administrators, teachers, non-teaching staff, students and other members of the educational community to promote comprehensive school safety in educational institutions of Catalonia (Spain), in order to emphasize the actions that they are developing.

2. Methods

From an eminently qualitative perspective, we carried out a multiple case study, with a sample of 9 educational institutions (3 primary schools, 3 secondary schools, and 3 vocational training institutions), of public and private ownership. The selection process of the sample was intentional for the purpose of selecting relevant cases.

In each institution, we collected data using three different instruments: semi-structured interviews, focus group and documentary analysis (see Table 1). The semi-structured interviews - with school principals, occupational risk coordinators, teachers and non-teaching staff, and also some parents - were used to inquire into the organizational and management practices that education institutions implement. The focus group was used only when it was possible to gather some parents at the same time, for the purpose of knowing their opinions and impressions about the safety of the educational institution. The documentary analysis was applied to analyze institutional school documents with a double intention: a) complete and contrast the information obtained with other techniques, and b) identify norms and actions related to school safety. The study involved 10 school principals, 6 occupational risk coordinators, 24 teachers and non-teaching staff, and 21 parents, but we did not have access to all key informants in all educational institutions.

Table 1. Sample

		Primary schools (n = 3) <i>2 public</i> <i>1 private</i>	Secondary schools (n = 3) <i>2 public</i> <i>1 private</i>	Vocational training schools (n = 3) <i>2 public</i> <i>1 private</i>
Semi-structured interviews	School principal	4	3	3
	Occupational risk coordinator	3	1	2
	Teachers and non-teaching staff	6	13	5
	Parents	2	4	-
Focus group	Parents	-	8	7
Documentary analysis		19	27	12

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles & Huberman (1994). The procedure consisted of three flows of activity; data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying

conclusions. We developed various coding cycles; during the first cycle, we used a list of predetermined codes taken from the literature review (deductive codification) and, during the second cycle, we completed and redefined the list with new codes (inductive codification). MAXQDA 11 was the software used to work on the breakdown, coding and regrouping units of meaning. We developed a cross-case analysis (Yin, 2009), because this enabled us to compare the commonalities and differences in the norms, activities, and processes of the different educational institutions (case studies) (Khan, & VanWynsberghe, 2008).

3. Findings

In this section, we present the main results of the study related to the measures adopted and actions performed by the educational community in order to promote comprehensive school safety. We distinguish between measures and actions related to physical safety and those related to emotional and social well-being, in order to facilitate their presentation, but we should not forget that school safety is a cross-disciplinary subject.

“Safety is all. All is linked. The school has life, and we must take care of all aspects of the school life.” (IES_03_PRIV-PROF_05, 105:105)

3.1. Practices that promote physical safety

There is a range of specific practices that educational institutions develop in order to maintain good levels of physical safety, in the opinion of educational community members. According to the areas of management of educational institutions, these actions are related to management of material resources, organization and management of time and spaces, management of human resources, and permanent surveillance (see Table 2).

Table 2. Practices that promote physical safety in educational institutions

Areas of school management	Specific practices that promote physical safety
Management of material resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building and installation maintenance. ▪ Communication of damages or malfunction for their repair in a short period of time. ▪ Space order and cleaning. ▪ Installation and maintenance of fire safety measures. ▪ Removal of dangerous elements and installation of protective measures. ▪ Safekeeping and custody of documentation, for example student records. ▪ Organization of the school schedule to prevent the confluence of people at the same time and in the same space, especially during the times of arriving and leaving, and in the playground, the school canteen, and the corridors.
Organization and management of time and spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organization of the furniture and the school material in order to protect staff and students against bumps and falling objects. ▪ Organization of school access path, especially in primary schools, due to the age of the students. ▪ Organization of the movements of people inside the school building.
Human resources management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having enough staff to fulfill all the institutional tasks and look after the students, reorganizing the staff in case of absence of an employee due to sickness.
Permanent surveillance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure vigilance and school access control to prevent students

from leaving the building during school hours without permission and to prevent access by persons not related to school tasks.

- Installation of protective measures against burglary, vandalism and other violent acts (fences, alarms, video surveillance, and so on).
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The actions related to management of material resources are the practices that the informants of all the cases and different profiles identify as the most important actions to guarantee physical safety, indicating that detection and courses of action are the most important principle to guide the management of physical safety in educational institutions.

“When we see a dangerous thing, we always go and try to fix it. When we detect anything, we act.”
(SS_03_PRIV-PROF_06, 21:21)

All actions undertaken to guarantee physical safety are supervised by school principals and/or risk prevention coordinators and non-teaching staff. Some institutions have a maintenance coordinator responsible for a variety of tasks related to maintaining and improving institutional facilities and equipment. Also, educational institutions contract maintenance companies to ensure the correct functioning of the installations (electrical installations, boilers, elevators, and so on), but in the case of public primary schools and some public secondary and vocational training institutions, these contracts have been established by the Department of Education or the city council, because they are the owners of the buildings. Beyond the practices pointed out in Table 2, risk prevention coordinators are in charge of risk management prevention, developing different tasks that promote physical safety:

- Identify factors that might damage students and staff.
- Develop the emergency plan of the educational institution.
- Inform the members of the educational community about the risks and the preventive and proactive measures to be taken.
- Promote preventive strategies according to the safety and security needs of the educational institution.
- Periodically review the signaling and all aspects related to the emergency plan to ensure their functionality (annual drills).

These tasks, already mentioned by the informants and written in the institutional documents (organizational and operational rules and emergency plan), are specified in educational law and it is compulsory that all educational institutions ensure correct compliance with them. In public schools, the educational law establishes that one teacher must be appointed as a risk prevention coordinator, while in private schools they can contract an external organization responsible for risk prevention.

Furthermore, documentary analysis reveals that promotion of the proper use of facilities, resources and materials is a responsibility of the entire educational community. The organizational and operational rules include regulations related to the maintenance and proper use of facilities, which in some cases are completed by the rules of use and behavior related to certain areas of the educational institution (workroom, laboratory, gymnasium, playground, school canteen, and so on). The aim of these rules is to create “a working environment that will guarantee the normal development of academic activities” (SS_02_PUB-OD_12). Rules are related to facilities, resources and materials, space order and cleaning, avoiding accidents and incidents in the playground, school canteens and corridors, and they also contain norms that regulate the school access path.

“The institute is a public school funded by public resources; therefore, conservation, maintenance and improvement of facilities are the responsibility of the entire educational community: teachers, students, non-teaching staff, families, and public government [...]

2. Teachers, non-teaching staff, and families have an obligation to educate the students to keep resources and materials in good condition [...]

4. Any member of the school community that observes any damage on the facilities must inform secretariat.

5. It is forbidden to interfere with inscriptions, walls, doors or furniture, under penalty of disciplinary measures typified for these facts [...]

7. In the case of negligence in cleaning, teachers may determine that students, individually or in groups, leave the space or spaces in good condition." (*SS_01_PUB-NOFC_01, 153-162*)

3.2. Practices that promote emotional and social well-being

Unlike physical safety, informants of the educational communities interviewed have more difficulties identifying actions that promote emotional and social well-being, probably because these are subjective aspects. All in all, informants of the cases pointed out different actions that they think promote a positive school climate in their institutions, linked to different areas of educational institution management: human resources management, relationship management, and school/classroom climate:

- Encourage positive relationships among teachers and non-teaching staff. For school principals, it is important to create a pleasant working environment in which the staff feels comfortable. Also, school principals and teachers believe that holding social activities (lunches, dinners, outings, etc.) helps to establish positive relationships.

- Encourage positive relationships between teachers and students.

- Encourage positive relationships among students. The teaching staff says that it works hard on the issues related to daily coexistence at two levels: developing tutoring programs with a student group, and promoting initiatives to link students of different course levels (for example, holding cultural events or retreats). According to informants, these activities promote the cohesion of the student group because they get to know each other, since ignorance of the other breeds mistrust and conflicts. These actions are not as relevant in vocational training schools.

"My six-year-old daughter is learning to read sponsored by a twelve-year-old girl. This activity enables them to get to know each other and when you know someone it is more difficult to have relationship and coexistence problems." (*PS_02_PUB-FAM_04, 45:45*)

- Encourage the involvement and participation of families in school life, something that is more important for school principals, teachers and families of primary schools. Teachers and principals also believe that it is important to address the needs of families as quickly as possible.

For some informants, beyond the programs, activities and specific actions that can be implemented, creating a positive climate "is a matter of common sense and empathy" (*SS_02_PUB-PROF_11, 87:87*) and "before any aggression" it is necessary to act "correcting and preventing" (*PS_01_PUB-PROF_15, 48:48*).

Conflict resolution between students is another issue identified in primary and secondary school cases. For teachers, mediation in student conflicts is a common task, especially for tutoring teachers. Related to this issue, primary schools implement emotional education programs and secondary schools implement mediation programs that promote positive relationships among all educational community members.

In view of all the above, socio-emotional safety is a central issue in all cases in order to ensure the normal operation of the educational institution and to ensure a proper learning environment. The basic planning documents of educational institutions (School-based Education Project and Annual Plan) include objectives and principles related to these aspects.

“Regarding coexistence and conflict resolution we believe that, although it is not a widespread problem in our school, it is true that this sometimes interferes both with the classroom environment and with the minds of the students and their attitude towards learning. It is necessary to create a calm and relaxed atmosphere to learn collaboratively.” (Extract from “Project Management” PS_02_PUB-OD_15, 31:31)

In line with the above, coexistence is linked to the establishment of preventive measures (education in values, setting standards for the regulation of coexistence in the institution, promoting dialogue and participation of all members, teacher on duty, and so on) and disciplinary measures (sanctions depending on the seriousness of the offence).

The application of the basic rules of coexistence, included in the organization and operational rules is also considered a key element to ensure social and emotional safety. All the documents analyzed from the different cases include rules governing coexistence and a list of protection measures against harassment and bullying, and also include references to specific plans and/or programs: Tutoring programs, Mediation programs, Plan for conflict resolution, and so on. Through their establishment, institutions try to promote positive relations between and inside the different groups of the educational community, avoiding conflicts and creating a friendly climate.

4. Discussion

The educational institutions develop various activities in order to ensure and promote comprehensive school safety, linked directly to physical, emotional and social dimensions of safety. Our results agree with those reported by authors such as Gavidia (2001), Longás (2012), and St Leger, Young & Perry (2010):

- The physical dimension of safety. Attention to the physical aspects of the school building: physical structures, infrastructure, furniture, surrounding environment, among other more specific aspects. The actions and activities are related to the management of material resources, the organization of human resources, the organization of time and space, and permanent monitoring and control.
- The socio-emotional dimension of safety: Attention to the social and emotional well-being of the educational community: ensure that the teaching-learning process takes place in a positive climate that promotes cooperation, communication, and prevents bullying, harassment and violence through actions that promote non-violent coexistence. The actions and activities are linked to the development of relations and participation, the application of rules of coexistence, conflict resolution and education in values.

Furthermore, school principals, teachers, non-teaching staff, and families describe practices related to the functions and tasks assumed by the risk prevention coordinator, linking school safety to risk prevention management. These tasks are clearly identified by the informants because they are clearly defined in the school policies; they are tasks that educational institutions have taken on gradually as their own compliance (Author, 2010).

Despite the number of actions identified, many of them are performed unconsciously, without seeing the prevention and promotion of educational safety component, or because they are required by regulations, without any sensitivity and a real commitment to their need and importance. We agree with Castro & Sans (2014) that nowadays promotion of school safety is mostly for legal reasons. The law is necessary, but we need another mechanism in order to ensure comprehensive school safety, because rules and regulations have no significance if the educational community assumes its responsibility for safety (Syrjalainen et al., 2015).

The entire educational community is involved in promoting comprehensive school safety, although school principals play a central role in its promotion, because they are the person in charge (Author, 2012) and they are responsible for the implementation of risk prevention arrangements (Petal, 2008).

4.1. Conclusions

Achieving safe environments for students, teachers, and non-teaching staff requires paying attention not only to the physical conditions of the building and the facilities or fulfilling the obligations regarding risk prevention, as indicated in the school laws, but also adequately addressing emotional and social safety, both from an individual and a collective viewpoint.

4.2. Recommendations

The practices described in this article are just a small sample of the many actions that the educational community conducts every day to promote and maintain comprehensive school safety. Although the level of safety at educational institutions of Catalonia (Spain) is adequate, we must continue to support it: stakeholders and the educational community must make a commitment to promote comprehensive school safety, paying attention to physical, emotional and social aspects.

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