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Violence in Schools in Africa:

Prevalence, Impacts, and Potential Solutions

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Violence in Schools in Africa:
Prevalence, Impacts, and Potential Solutions

Ada Nayihouba and Quentin Wodon[1]

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<u>Abstract</u>

Preventing violence in and around school is a moral imperative. It is also essential to reap the benefits from education and ensure children's well-being. Unfortunately, violence in schools remains widespread in Africa, as is the case in the rest of the world, contributing to learning poverty and leading some children to drop out of school. The objective of this paper is threefold. First, basic insights on the prevalence of violence in schools are provided. Second, some of the potential impacts of violence in schools are estimated. Third, a case is made to the effect that interventions to end violence in schools tend to have high benefit to cost ratios and are also affordable. In a nutshell, ending violence is not only the right thing to do, but also a smart investment to invest in children's human capital.

Keywords: Violence against children, Violence in school, sub-Saharan Africa, PASEC, Good School Toolkit.

## 1.	Introduction

Preventing violence in and around school (VIAS) is a moral imperative. It is also essential to reap the benefits from education and ensure children's well-being. Receiving an education of good quality is the right of every child, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Education plays a unique role in promoting respect for human rights and contributing to safe and inclusive societies that do not condone the use of violence, but rather provide children with the skills they will need as adults to find peaceful solutions to conflicts. Education also plays a fundamental role in countries' ability to achieve the targets set forth under the Sustainable Development Goals (Wodon et al., 2018). But in addition, in today's fast changing world, education is the foundation of countries' future economic development. It drives human capital wealth (the value of the future earnings of the labor force), which itself accounts for two thirds of the changing wealth of nations (Lange et al., 2018; World Bank, 2021).

Unfortunately, VIAS remains widespread in developing and developed countries alike, contributing to learning poverty and leading them to drop out of school (UNICEF, 2018)[2]. Failing to prevent VIAS will affect not only children today, but also the members of their future families, their communities, and societies as a whole. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed for substantial periods of time in many countries, including in Africa, but several of the factors that may lead to higher violence against children overall and violence on schools in particular have been exacerbated. The need to end violence in and around school is even more pressing today.

VIAS is a threat to both schooling and learning, as well as to children's well-being, health, and future earnings as adults. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined violence as *"the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a person or group that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation"* (Krug et al., 2002, based on WHO Global Consultation on Violence and Health, 1996). Violence is the result of an abusive use of force. The harm can be actual or threatened. It can lead to injury or death, but also to trauma or other mental health symptoms. Violence is often multidimensional, as individuals are often subjected to multiple forms of violence and in multiple locations. VIAS includes but is not limited to child victimization, physical and psychological exploitation, cyber victimization, bullying[3], fights, and sexual violence. It also includes violence by teachers such as corporal punishment, with potential negative impacts (Naz et al., 2011). Overall, VIAS has major effects on children's well-being and health, and through reduced attainment and achievement, it reduces earnings and productivity in adulthood.

In this context, the objective of this paper is threefold. The objective of this paper is threefold. First, basic insights on the prevalence of violence in school are provided. Second, some of the potential impacts of violence in schools are estimated. Third, a case is made to the effect that interventions to end violence in schools tend to have high benefit to cost ratios and are also affordable. In a nutshell, ending violence is not only the right thing to do, but also a smart investment to invest in children's human capital. The analysis relies in large part on a recent study at the World Bank (Wodon et al., 2021). Note that the focus in the paper is on violence in schools as measured by school-based surveys, and not on how the climate of insecurity that affects many of the countries in the region is forcing some schools to close[4].

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[2] On the prevalence of violence against children, see Hillis et al. (2016). See also Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children (2016), UNICEF (2017, 2019), and Know Violence in Childhood (2017).

[3] Bullying is defined as repeated aggression (physical, verbal or psychological) over a prolonged period of time among peers who have an imbalance of power.

[4] As of early 2021, close to 5,000 schools had to be closed in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, as well as part of Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2021).

2.   Prevalence of Violence in Schools

Violence remains ubiquitous in schools globally. Some of the most commonly used surveys to analyze patterns of violence, especially in the case of gender-based violence, are Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys (MICS). For example, DHS surveys focus on intimate partner violence, with questions on physical, emotional, and sexual violence in the women's questionnaire for all women aged 15-49. This means that when considering violence against children, analysis can be conducted only for adolescent girls (only a few DHS surveys collect data on men). For each type of violence, women may respond on whether they have been affected in four different ways: never, often, sometimes, or yes but not in the last 12 months (in some countries, the modalities for the responses are slightly different). Data collected in MICS surveys tend to be even more useful to analyze violence against children because questions on violence are available for younger age groups and for boys as well as girls[5].

Unfortunately, the questions in DHS and MICS surveys do not cover VIAS. For VIAS, analysis therefore relies instead on multi-country school health surveys which tend to focus on physical violence and bullying, but do not provide data on sexual violence and most forms of emotional violence (although bullying could be considered as a form of emotional violence). The two main school-based surveys are the Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) which has been implemented mostly in developing countries, including in Africa, and the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey, which covers mostly European countries, countries in North Africa, and some other countries such as Canada. The main advantage of the GSHS is that it covers a large number (95) of countries, including in sub-Saharan Africa. While the GSHS does not measure all forms of violence, it provides globally comparable data on physical violence (being attacked or being involved in a fight), bullying, and the risk of injury, although in that case not specifically from violence in school. A key disadvantage is that the data are relatively old, as the survey has not been implemented in recent years.

Given the focus of this paper on sub-Saharan Africa, measures of the prevalence of violence in schools are based on GSHS data. In addition, the analysis is complemented with data from the *Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs de la CONFEMEN* (PASEC), an international student assessment used by Francophone African countries. In 2014, 10 countries participated (Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Senegal and Togo). The assessment was implemented in grades 2 and 6 to measure grade-appropriate student competencies in reading/language (in French) and mathematics in a comparable way across countries. A total of about 40,000 students participated in the assessment. Data are available on proxies for violence experienced by teachers, as well as whether teachers have been harassed physically, emotionally, or sexually, and how they perceive the school climate, including in terms of security at the schools. The data can thus be used to assess the potential impact of proxies for violence on student performance, and it can be used to measure the prevalence of corporal punishment in schools[6].

Estimates of the prevalence of violence in schools using GSHS data are visualized in Figure 1. Across the countries for which GSHS surveys are available, over the last year, more than a third of students were attacked in school at least once (37.8 percent) or got into fights at least once (27.6 percent). In addition, just under a third were bullied at least once over the last 30 days (29.5 percent). Many students have also been injured over the last year (31.3 percent), but this is not necessarily from VIAS since it may also include injuries from other activities such as sports or work.

Injuries are defined as incidents leading students to miss at least one full day of usual activities or requiring treatment by a doctor or nurse. Students are also asked about the type of the most serious injury

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[5] For example, relevant questions are asked for infants in recent MICS surveys thanks to a module on early childhood development.

[6] Apart from results from large surveys or student assessments, interesting insights can also be gained from small surveys implemented in a handful of schools. For an illustration, see Nneka Opara and Wodon (2022).

they had and the cause of this injury. For injured students the causes listed are: (i) I was in a motor vehicle accident or hit by a motor vehicle; (ii) I fell; (iii) Something fell on me or hit me; (iv) I was attacked or abused or was fighting with someone; (v) I was in a fire or too near a flame or something hot; (vi) I inhaled or swallowed something bad for me; (vii) Something else caused my injury. When students state that they were attacked or abused, or were fighting with someone, this is taken as a proxy for VIAS, even though some of those incidents may take place elsewhere, albeit possibly still with other students. The share of students who are injured through fights is fairly low, at 1.5 percent overall (the estimates are higher at 2.3 percent for boys that for girls at 0.6 percent).

Overall, as shown in Figure 1, boys are more likely to be involved in incidents of violence than girls, especially for physical violence (being attacked or fighting). They are also more likely to be injured, but for bullying differences are small. While this is not measured in this particular survey, girls however tend to be more affected by sexual violence and harassment.

Figure 1: Share of Students Affected by Type of Violence by **gender**, GSHS
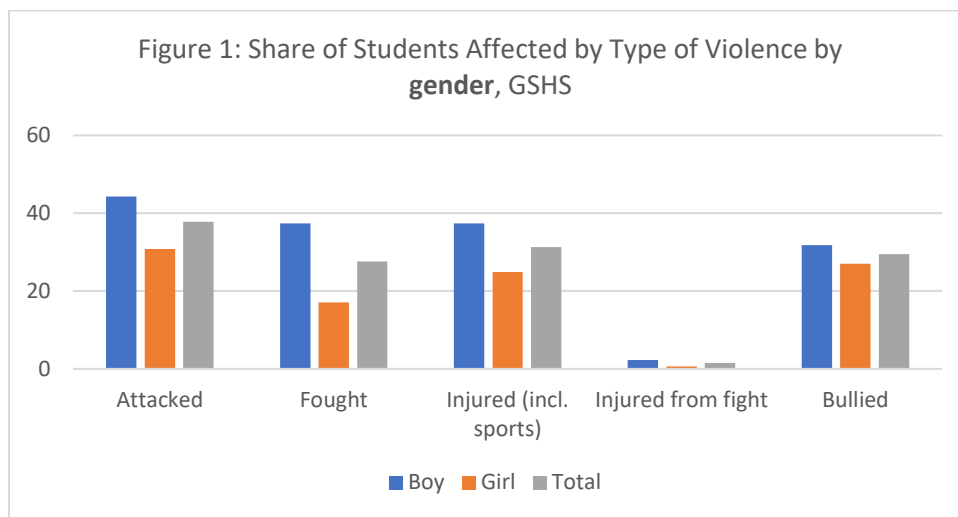
Source: Authors' estimations using GSHS data.

There are substantial differences between countries and regions in the prevalence of violence. As shown in Figure 2, across regions, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence for several types of violence measured by the GSHS survey (estimates are provided for the region as a whole – typically coverage of the population through the surveys is higher in East and Southern Africa than in West and Central Africa). South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa also tend to have high prevalence rates. By contrast, Europe and Central Asia has the lowest prevalence. Countries that have been or are still affected by conflict and fragility often have a higher prevalence of violence in and around schools.

Figure 2: Share of Students Affected by type of Violence (%), Comparisons by **region**, GSHS
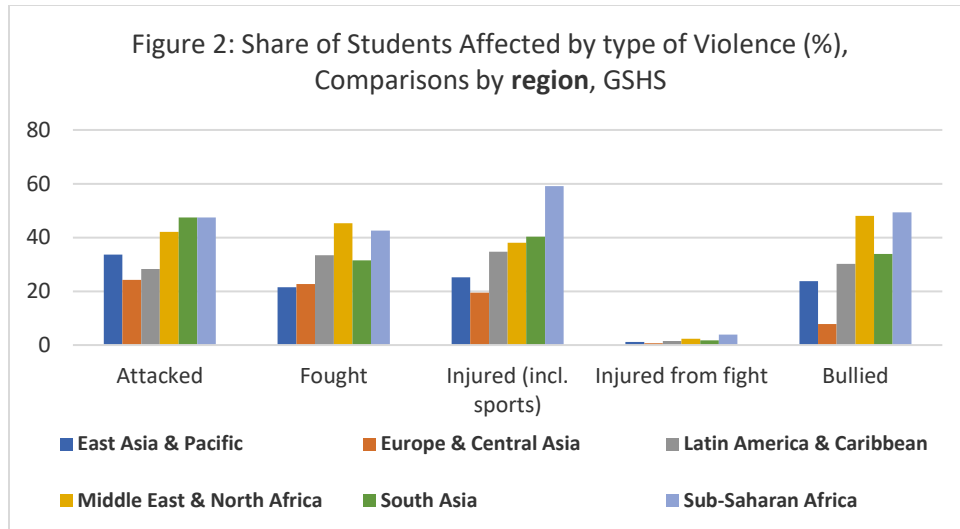
Source: Authors' estimations using GSHS data.

There are also differences in the prevalence of violence in school according to their level of development of countries. As shown in Figure 3, while most countries regardless of economic development have unacceptably high prevalence rates, low income and lower-middle income countries tend to have higher prevalence rates than upper-middle and high income countries in the GSHS data (noting that very few high income countries are included in those datasets – but data on high income countries are available from the HBSC surveys as discussed below). The ability of countries to provide comprehensive services to prevent violence and respond to incidents of violence is also unfortunately affected by the countries' level of economic development. But even low-income countries can make great progress towards ending VIAS, as examples of promising interventions presented later demonstrate.

Figure 3: Share of Students Affected bt Type of Violence (%), Comparisons by **income group**, GSHS
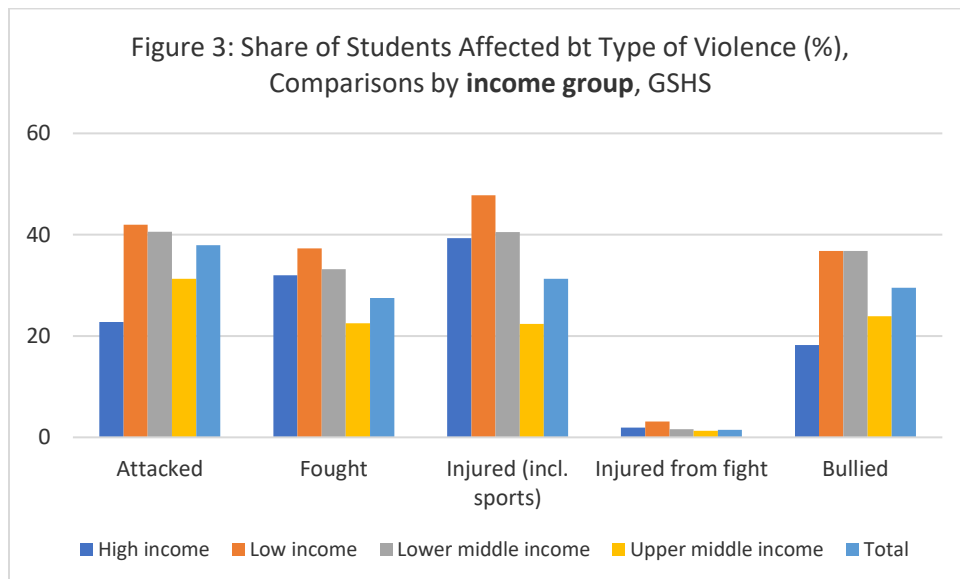
Source: Authors' estimations using GSHS data.

Corporal punishment by and corruption among teachers and school officials (which may involve threats of violence against students or sexual abuse) also remain widespread. At the time of writing, 67 countries still did not have legislation banning corporal punishment in schools[7]. In Francophone Africa, data on corporal punishment from PASEC suggest that more than a third of teachers in sixth grade of primary school use corporal punishment, leading to up to two-thirds of students being beaten by teachers.

The various forms of violence often do not occur in isolation. Instead, they tend to reinforce each other. Children are often victims of violence in separate locales, at school but also at home and in the community. This feeds into a self-reproducing cycle (Wilkins et al., 2019). or poly-victimization, which has negative multiplier effects on children's wellbeing and capacity to learn, leading to higher risk of lasting physical, mental and emotional harm. Policymakers and stakeholders working in schools must take poly-victimization into account to respond to multiple layers of risks for children and target the most vulnerable children (Finkelhor et al., 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have exacerbated some of the factors that lead to violence against children, including violence in schools.

3.   Potential Impacts of Violence in Schools

VIAS can have a wide range of negative impacts. This paper provides evidence of potential impacts related to education (schooling and learning) as well as health outcomes (including mental health). Note that the analysis is based on regressions that suggest clear correlations, but not necessarily causality.

Students' Experience in School

Violence in school affect the relationships between students, and between students and their teachers. It can also affect the community, or vice-versa, and reinforce exclusion. This in turn can affect how students view their own education, and how they perceive not only their schools, but their teachers as well as whether they even want to go to school. Simply said, violence in school affects student's socio-emotional well-being as well as their socio-emotional skills, which in turn are critical for the student's growth, resilience, and openness/tolerance vis à vis others' cultures and beliefs. In contexts marked by violence, both in school and elsewhere, experiences in schools may contribute to distrust.

In this section, the aim is to suggest estimates of the potential negative impact of violence in school on student's experience in school. The data from the GSHS are less detailed than those from other school health surveys, but three perceptions of students related to their experience in school are available: (1) whether the students have close friends in school; (2) whether they missed school days; and (3) whether they can benefit from help from other students or not. To assess the direct potential impacts of VIAS on those perceptions controlling for the factors that may affect them, a range of controls are included in the regression analysis[8].

Table 1 provides the results for the potential impacts of the variables of interest (VIAS). The interpretation of the coefficients is in terms of percentage points at the margin. For example, controlling for other factors, being the victim of a physical attack is associated at the margin with an increase in the probability of missing school of 3.4 percentage points in the GSHS data. For being involved in a fight in those data, having an injury, and being bullied, the negative effects at the margin are larger at respectively 8.9, 7.8, and 5.8 percentage points. Note that for injuries, we consider all types of injuries, whether likely

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[7] See https://endcorporalpunishment.org/schools/.
[8] Controls include gender, age, grade, the student's height, whether s/he goes hungry, whether s/he is underweight or overweight, whether s/he is active, whether s/he benefits from physical education at school, the time spent sitting without activity, whether parents check his/her homework, understand his/her trouble, know what s/he does in his/her free time, and go through the child's things. Other factors could affect the outcomes of interest, but these are the variables available in the dataset that seem to be the most important potential factors affecting outcomes.

to have taken place in schools due to physical violence or not, but only a minority of injuries are due to violence even if all injuries may affect the outcomes of interest. Most coefficients in Table 2 are statistically significant, suggesting systematic negative potential impacts of VIAS with only two exception: physical fights are associated with a slightly lower likelihood of having no friends (perhaps because some fights were to support friends), and the association between injuries and perceptions that other students do not accept the student as they are is not statistically significant, suggesting no direct impact in that case (indicated by NS in the Table). Still, by and large, the effects are systematic.

Table 1: Marginal Potential Impacts of VIAS on Students' Experience in School, GSHS

	Physical Attack	Physical Fight	Injured	Bullied
No close friends in school	0.008	-0.004	NS	0.011
Missed school	0.034	0.089	0.078	0.058
Not Helped by other students	0.023	0.015	0.010	0.051

Source: Authors' estimations using GSHS data.
Note: Estimates are for all countries in the sample, not only those from sub-Saharan Africa. NS means statistically not significant at 0.1 level.

What might be the aggregate potential impact on these outcomes if VIAS were eliminated? The potential benefits from ending VIAS depend on both the sign and magnitude of the marginal impacts estimated through the regression analysis, and the share of students experiencing each form of VIAS. When conducting simulations of the potential impacts of violence based on the regression results, only injuries likely to be directly related to physical violence in school are accounted for. The analysis is done with the whole sample of countries for robustness, not only countries from sub-Saharan Africa.

In Table 2, the first two columns provide the baseline predicted values of the various outcomes, considering first a simple average across countries without country population weights, and next an average accounting for the difference between countries in the size of their student body. Considering missing days of schooling as an example, the share of the students missing school is 28.4 percent without country weights and 20.0 with country weights. If all forms of VIAS were eliminated, that share would drop by 5.6 percentage points without country weights and 4.0 points with country weights. In other words, the simulations suggest that one in six instances of missing school may be due to VIAS. For other outcomes, the proportions are lower, but still substantial. This is the case with the other surveys as well.

Table 2: Simulations of Potential Impacts of Ending VIAS on Students' Experience, GSHS

	Predicted Share Under Baseline Conditions		Potential Impact of VIAS		Share associated with VIAS	
	Simple Average	Weighted Average	Simple Average	Weighted Average	Simple Average	Weighted Average
No close friends in school	6.1	6.6	0.5	0.4	7.2	5.2
Missed school days	28.4	20.0	5.6	4.0	16.7	14.9
Not Helped by other students	25.0	22.6	2.6	2.0	10.3	8.3

Source: Authors' estimations using GSHS data.
Note: Estimates are for all countries in the sample, not only those from sub-Saharan Africa. The simple average is an average values across all countries without considering differences in student population between countries. The weighted average factors in the countries' student population.

Students' Perceptions of their Health and Risky Behaviors

Regarding students' health, data are available in the GSHS on perceived health (difficulty to sleep), risky behaviors (ever smoked, ever used alcohol, ever used drug, ever has sex), and psychological well-being (ever considered suicide, ever planned to commit suicide, ever attempted to commit suicide). Table 3 provides the key results from the regression analysis on the potential impacts of VIAS. Virtually all the potential impacts are again statistically significant, which suggests systematic negative potential impacts. As before, the interpretation of the coefficients is in percentage points. For example, for the likelihood of having difficulties to sleep in the GHSH data, the coefficient 0.058 for physical fights suggests that controlling for other factors that may affect this perception, being involved in a physical fight is associated with an increase in the likelihood of having difficulties to sleep of 5.8 percentage point.

Table 3: Marginal Potential Impacts of VIAS on Various Health Outcomes, GSHS

	Physical Attack	Physical Fight	Injured	Bullied
Perceived health				
Difficulty to sleep	0.058	0.037	0.109	0.125
Risky behaviors				
Ever smoked	0.051	0.118	0.055	0.065
Ever used alcohol	0.049	0.139	0.069	0.078
Ever used drug	0.021	0.042	0.031	0.018
Ever has sex	0.031	0.097	0.038	0.027
Psychological well-being				
Ever considered suicide	0.044	0.036	0.049	0.072
Ever planned to suicide	0.039	0.035	0.041	0.060
Ever attempted to suicide	0.068	0.038	0.061	0.069

Source: Authors' estimations using GSHS data.
Note: Estimates are for all countries in the sample, not only those from sub-Saharan Africa. NS means statistically not significant at 0.1 level.

What might be the aggregate potential impact on these various outcomes if VIAS were completely eliminated (for injuries, as before, only those related to fights are included in the simulations since not all injuries are related to VIAS)? Table 4 provides the results. The first two columns provide again the baseline predicted values of the various indicators, considering first a simple average across countries without country population weights, and next an average accounting for the difference between countries in the size of their student body. Consider as one example the likelihood of having difficulties sleeping in the GSHS data. With student population weights by country, just over a third of students (37.1 percent) declare having difficulties to sleep. This could potentially be reduced by 6.9 percentage points by eliminating VIAS according to the regressions, or 16.4 percent from the base, which is large. Other results in the Table can be interpreted in a similar way, suggesting potentially large impacts of VIAS.

Table 4: Simulations of Potential Impacts of Ending VIAS on Various Health Outcomes, GSHS

	Predicted Share Under Baseline Conditions		Potential Impact of VIAS		Share associated with VIAS	
	Simple Average	Weighted Average	Simple Average	Weighted Average	Simple Average	Weighted Average
Perceived health						
Difficulty to sleep	37.1	31.0	6.9	5.2	16.4	13.7
Risky behaviors						
Ever smoked	16.6	19.0	5.8	5.2	28.5	21.8
Ever used Alcohol	31.4	24.1	6.5	5.0	21.4	18.2
Ever used drug	8.9	10.6	3.7	3.4	31.9	24.5
Ever has sex	10.8	9.7	3.6	3.0	28.2	22.5
Psychological well-being						
Ever considered suicide	13.7	13.0	4.7	3.5	27.3	21.8
Ever planned to suicide	11.1	9.2	3.8	2.8	27.1	21.8
Ever attempted to suicide	9.3	8.6	4.2	3.2	32.9	26.3

Source: Authors' estimations using GSHS data.
Note: Estimates are for all countries in the sample, not only those from sub-Saharan Africa. The simple average is an average values across all countries without considering differences in student population between countries. The weighted average factors in the countries' student population.

Student Learning

As mentioned earlier, proxies for VIAS are also available in the PASEC data for primary schools in ten Francophone African countries. The latest available data are for 2014 (only parts of the data for the 2019 assessment are currently available). The PASEC dataset also includes information on corporal punishment by teachers –whether teachers report using it, and whether children state that they are beaten by teachers when they are punished or are perceived by teachers as not performing well. Students are asked whether other children play with them (a negative response may be a good predictor of bullying, at least for some students) and whether they feel scared in the classroom/school, which could be a reflection of violence including corporal punishment by teachers. Almost two-thirds of students reported being beaten by teachers and one-third reported that other children don't play with them, or that they are scared in school. Finally, teachers are asked whether they experienced physical, emotional, or sexual harassment, and how they perceive the school climate and security in the schools.

Key results are provided in Table 5. Scores are scaled so that the average for the ten countries is 500 points. The analysis is for students in grade 6. When a student reports not playing with others, this is associated with a reduction in score of up to 17.3 points depending on the student's gender and the type of test. Students who report feeling scared also score lower may suffer from a loss of up to 23.0 points at the margin[9]. How do these effects compare with the potential impact of other variables? The negative effects of the proxies for VIAS are typically larger than the potential impact of variables on the socio-economic background of the student, the effect of either a hearing or visual disability, and many other factors affecting learning such as teacher absenteeism, the level of education of teachers, or some of the characteristics of the schools. This suggests that VIAS may have large negative effects on learning.

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[9] Students who declare being victims of corporal punishment do actually slightly better, but effects are smaller (the largest effect is at 7.2 points). This positive effect is no reason to endorse corporal punishment given the possibility of other negative effects and the fact that the practice may contribute to perpetuating a culture of violence in schools and more generally in communities.

Table 5: Potential Impact of VIAS on Student Learning, 10 countries in Francophone Africa, PASEC

	Mathematics			Reading		
	All	**Boys**	**Girls**	**All**	**Boys**	**Girls**
Not playing with others - Totally agree	-16.5	-17.3	-15.5	-12.1	-12.1	-12.1
Not playing with others - Agree	-10.3	-9.9	-9.3	-9.1	-8.7	-9.3
Feeling scared - Totally agree	-21.6	-23.0	-19.2	-20.4	-21.8	-18.7
Feeling scared - Agree	-17.0	-16.6	-16.6	-18.5	-19.3	-17.7
Corporal punishment by teachers	5.7	7.2	4.2	5.0	7.0	3.4

Source: Authors' estimations using PASEC data.

Would ending VIAS make a large difference in PASEC scores at the national level? Table 6 provides the results of simulations in which violence and corporal punishment by teachers have been eliminated. Average reading scores for all student in the 10 countries would increase by 5.7 points (5.2 points for boys and 6.4 for girls), which represents an increase in performance of 1.2 percent from the base (1.1 percent for boys and 1.3 percent for girls). Estimates for mathematics are of a similar order of magnitude, with gains of 6.4 points overall (5.1 points for boys and 7.5 for girls), which represents an increase in performance of 1.24 percent from the base (1.1 percent for boys and 1.6 percent for girls). The order of magnitude of these potential impacts in PASEC are slightly smaller than estimates for middle- and high-income countries based on data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) obtained by Wodon et al. (2021). These effects may seem small, but they are of a similar order of magnitude to the effects observed for other variables that are known to affect student learning.

Table 6: Simulations of Potential Impacts of Ending VIAS on Learning Performance, PASEC

	Gain (absolute value)			Gain (proportion from base, %)		
	Boys	**Girls**	**All**	**Boys**	**Girls**	**All**
Reading (10 countries)	5.2	6.4	5.7	1.1	1.3	1.2
Mathematics (10 countries)	5.1	7.5	6.4	1.1	1.6	1.4

Source: Authors' estimations using PASEC data.

Another interesting feature of PASEC is that teachers are asked whether they have experienced harassment, which is a form of violence, and their perceptions of the school climate in general, and specifically in terms of security at schools. Some teachers state that they have been harassed emotionally, but the prevalence of physical and especially sexual harassment is lower. A small share of teachers also mentions a lack of security at school and a negative school climate. Harassment of teachers in particular affects teacher satisfaction with their working conditions, which in turn may affect the school climate and how well children learn in school as measured by student assessments.

One of the strategies for ending VIAS consists in providing appropriate pre-service and in-service training to teachers on how to ensure that schools remain safe. Another result from the PASEC analysis worth mentioning is the fact that unfortunately, such training is rarely provided in Francophone Africa, and probably in low and lower-middle income countries more generally. The data suggest that training on child-friendly and inclusive schools, the topics most closely related to preventing violence in school, are the two categories of in-service training provided the least to teachers.

4.   Violence Prevention Programs

The investment case study to end violence in Schools (Wodon et al., 2021) suggests that ending VIAS requires multifaceted interventions, but promising interventions tend to have high benefits to costs ratios. Risk factors for violence include factors at the levels of the individual, the household, the community, and society[10]. The accumulation of risk factors often explains why an individual behaves more violently or is more prone to be victimized than others. Instead of looking for a single best intervention that would be most effective in preventing violence, it often makes sense to combine interventions that can both mitigate the most salient risk factors and enhance relevant protective factors in a given context and for a specific group. In what follows, some lessons learned from the literature are shared.

Benefits and Characteristics from Successful Programs

There is no unique way to categorize programs to prevent VIAS, but a lifecycle approach is useful because risk factors leading to VIAS evolve over time in a child's life. In particular:
- Cost-benefit analyses suggest that promising interventions have high benefits to costs ratios. While these ratios are sensitive to assumptions used in the analyses, results suggest that reducing violence in and around schools is a smart economic investment. While most of the available analyses are from developed countries, programs should generate high benefits in developing countries as well if one presumes that results of a similar magnitude could apply.
- Early childhood interventions are essential to prevent VIAS and often have high returns. Cost-benefit analyses have been` implemented mostly for center-based interventions (typically preschools, although many programs also include home visiting, parenting advice, health and nutrition services, and referrals for social services)[11]. Such programs tend to have high returns on investment, with benefit to cost ratios ranging from 2.04 to 16.14. Some of the more recent programs do not have as high benefits to cost ratios, but this may be due in part to the fact that some of the benefits from these programs in adulthood could not yet be measured.
- In primary schools, programs helping children improve their social and emotional skills also have high returns. A recent synthesis of cost-benefit analyses for these types of programs suggest benefit to cost ratios ranging from 3.46 to 13.91 across interventions in baseline scenarios[12].
- In secondary schools, a key area of focus should be to reduce bullying. Reviews suggest that intensive and long-lasting programs are needed to change behaviors, with parental sessions contributing to success[13]. Cost-benefit analyses have been conducted especially for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and the KiVa anti-bullying program. For the Olweus program, a benefit-cost ratio of 6.94 is suggested when start-up costs are not included[14]. For KiVa, analyses suggest benefit-cost ratios well above one, with differences depending on countries[15].

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[10] School safety issues at the school level can compound each other. For example, poor infrastructure and lack of basic services at schools is associated with increases in violence. Community factors, such as conflict/fragility can also influence school level relationships and contribute to exclusion and negative behaviors such as bullying/violence.

[11] Dalziel et al. (2015).

[12] Belfield et al. (2015).

[13] Farrington and Ttofi (2009).

[14] Highmark Foundation (2018).

[15] See Huitsing et al. (2019) and McDaid (2017).

Five additional points are worth emphasizing. First, so-called whole school approaches can help reduce VIAS at a limited cost. Engaging with the entire school community is beneficial. A whole school approach uses multiple strategies to develop a common vision and shared values and rules for the school, and works through the curriculum, teacher training, parental engagement, and student learning towards a safe and inclusive school climate and respectful school values. One example is the Good School Toolkit (GST) in Uganda. Evaluations suggest that after 18 months of implementation, the program reduced the risk of physical violence by teachers and school staff against students by 42 percent; halved the number of teachers who reported using physical violence against students; and improved students' connectedness and sense of safety and belonging with their school. The program also increased teachers' satisfaction in their role at school and increasing students' wellbeing and sense of safety at school (Devries et al., 2015).

Second, supporting teachers to enhance their skills in positive discipline and classroom management is also effective. Providing teachers with skills to improve their relationship with students and manage behaviors lessens disruptive and aggressive behaviors in the classroom and enhance prosocial behaviors later in life. By contrast, punitive interactions tend to feed a vicious circle of violence, delinquency, and further exclusion. The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children and the WHO (2019) handbook on school violence prevention provide useful resources on positive discipline for teachers and schools. When teachers and the entire school community understand that respect and trust are key pillars for child's healthy development and that corporal punishment is not only counterproductive but negatively impacts a child's learning, the school climate can be transformed.

Third, families should be part of school programs. Engaging with parents of adolescents that display behavioral problems can yield significant results even in a relatively short period of time. But parenting programs should follow evidence-based practices, including focusing on positive discipline, positive communication, and increased bonding among family members. As with teachers, providing alternative tools and skills to caregivers in dealing with their children can help break the intergenerational cycle of violence. Effectively engaging with parents requires choosing wisely among alternative programs, as well as recruiting parents and keeping them engaged. The challenging part is to keep parents engaged long enough to produce sustained behavioral change, but techniques have been developed to do so.

Fourth, engaging with communities to shift norms also matters. The SASA! program is a good example of how norms can be challenged. SASA! means "Now!" in Kiswahili. The program employs multiple strategies to build a critical mass of engaged community members, leaders, and institutions, including local activism, media and advocacy, communication materials, and training. In comparison to control communities, SASA! communities reported a reduction in levels of violence against women of 52 percent; an increase in the share of women and men who believe it is acceptable for women to refuse sex of 28 percent; and an increase of 50 percent in the share of men and women who believe that physical violence against a partner is unacceptable (Abramsky et al., 2014). Essentially, SASA! works with key stakeholders at the community level to deconstruct power in intimate partnerships. Another interesting program is the Bell Bajao! campaign in India. Engaging with community is also important to ensure safe passage to schools by identifying hot spots where children may feel vulnerable and placing adult monitors on those spots.

Fifth, these various interventions and approaches have proven benefits, but they are not exhaustive in terms of the types of programs and policies that may help prevent violence in school or cope with its effects. Guidance on how to prevent violence in school is available from the WHO (2019) Handbook on school-based violence prevention and for violence against children more broadly from the INSPIRE framework (WHO, 2018). Also relevant is the new strategy adopted by the Safe to Learn initiative to which a wide range of organizations are contributing. The organizations that are member of the Safe to Learn initiative have made the prevention of violence in schools a priority in their own strategies. For example, at the World Bank, the Safe and Inclusive Schools Initiative is one of five pillars of the Bank's approach to realize the future of learning (World Bank, 2020).

Affordability of Violence Prevention Programs

One last question to be considered in this paper is whether prevention programs are affordable. To consider that question, illustrative analysis for the Good School Toolkit (GST) is provided, suggesting that if the GST program were implemented at scale, unit costs for implementation would be low. When the program was implemented at a pilot level, results from a cost-effectiveness assessment suggested a cost of implementation of US$279,000 or US$7,500 in the pilot, which translates into a cost of US$15 per student per year and a cost of US$245 per episode of violence averted (Greco et al., 2018).

However, if the program were to be scaled up nationally, the cost per student could be much lower. Colin Pescina et al. (2021) conduct detailed simulations of the potential cost of a national scale-up over five years. The analysis considers the cost of printing and distributing the GST materials together with supplementary materials, the cost of capacity building events and trainings, the cost of redesigning the toolkit in order to be able to scale-up, and the cost of monitoring and evaluation. On training, the approach is to first conduct training of trainers workshops as well as training for local and regional government officials before training schools personnel (both headmasters and teachers). The cost of providing training at the central level (Ministry of Education and Sports) is also factored in. These costs are all "financial" costs for which an additional budget is required. In addition, the authors also consider the opportunity cost for teachers, headmasters, and other staff locally and centrally to participate inn trainings and implement the program. These costs are based on the time needed for training and program implementation, and the wage bill for the various categories of workers. These opportunity costs do not require an additional budget allocation, but they are important to factor in because teachers, headmasters and other staff could use their time for other purposes.

The cost projections are based on a five-year scaling up and one additional year which represents steady-state assumptions, with 20 per cent of schools added each year. As the program is scaled up, the cost per student decreases from US$8.20 per student in the first year to 3.98 in the sixth year. In that year, the cost of materials decreases drastically because schools already have the necessary materials (and an assumption is made that for students, necessary materials can be integrated in existing textbooks). The cost of capacity building also decreases. As a result, under the assumptions of the model, the financial cost of the program decreases from US$2.33 per student in the first year to $0.19 in the sixth year. The program has been "mainstreamed" and the main costs are opportunity costs.

The authors also compute average costs per student in net present value for the six years as a whole. The average total cost per student is estimated at US$4.90 per student, of which US$2.02 is a financial cost that requires an additional budget allocation. But again, in future years, the financial costs that would have to be budgeted would be much smaller. Finally, the authors conduct a simple sensitivity analysis suggesting that with more efficiencies and a 10 percent decline in opportunity costs, the total cost of the program in net present value could be reduced by a further $0.40 over the period of six years. While some of the assumptions used could be adjusted, the analysis suggests that programs such as GST are affordable even in a low-income country such as Uganda (or many other countries in Africa)[16].

5.   Conclusion

VIAS is widespread, including in Africa, and has large negative impacts on students' experience in schools, student learning, and a wide range of health outcomes as well as risky behaviors. Ending VIAS requires multifaceted interventions, but promising interventions tend to have high benefits to costs ratios.

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[16] Although the programs are fairly different, Colin Pescina et al. (2001) compare this cost to the cost of SASA! in Uganda (US$ US$485 per episode of violence averted) and Sisters for Life in South Africa (US$891 per year free of violence). On SASA!, see Michaels-Igbokwe et al. (2016). On Sisters for Life, see Jan et al. (2011).

While these ratios are sensitive to assumptions used in the analyses, results suggest that reducing violence in and around schools is a smart economic investment apart from being the right thing to do. Most of the available cost-benefit analyses are from developed countries, but there is an emerging body of evidence on interventions in low-income countries, and it seems that programs should generate high benefits in developing countries. In particular, so-called whole school approaches could help reduce VIAS at relatively low cost. Whole school approaches use strategies to develop a common vision and shared values and rules for schools. They work through the curriculum, teacher training, parental engagement, and student learning towards a safe and inclusive school climate and respectful school values. One example is GST in Uganda. Evaluations suggest that after 18 months of implementation, the program reduced the risk of physical violence by teachers and school staff against students by 42 percent; halved the number of teachers who reported using physical violence against students; and improved students' connectedness and sense of safety and belonging with their school. The program also increased teachers' satisfaction in their role at school and increasing students' wellbeing and sense of safety at school. Importantly, if the GST program were implemented at scale, unit costs for implementation would be fairly low. The cost estimates for scaling up the GST program were estimated for Uganda, but they should provide insights for other African countries as well.

Beyond efforts in individual schools, strategies to end VIAS should be led by Ministries of Education with other Ministries or agencies. To sustainably shift norms, parent associations and teacher unions, as well as religious groups and political parties, need to participate and be heard. Several guides exist in that respect, including on engaging religious leaders to end VIAS. Codes of conducts and zero tolerance policies towards violence by teachers need to be adopted. More generally, four steps in the strategic process can be suggested: (1) Setting clear standards for all including through codes of conduct and appropriate laws including on corporal punishment; (2) Establishing a solid diagnostic of VIAS; (3) Developing a common vision and action plan with accountability mechanisms; and (4) Promoting a whole school approach to enhance students' connectedness with schools and ensure a positive learning environment. Finally, better data are needed both to update existing school health surveys in many African countries and to ensure that broader information is collected, especially on sexual violence.

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