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Analysis of Physical and Psychological Safety Strategies in Schools and their Impact on the Protection and Safety of Students

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Abstract

Safety in schools is a key factor for a successful educational process, and includes both physical and psychological dimensions of student protection. Physical security includes measures related to the control of access to the facility, monitoring of the school premises, security protocols and clearly defined procedures for responding to crisis situations (eg evacuation, handling in the event of a threat, violence or accident). These measures have a preventive function because they reduce the possibility of incidents, but at the same time they are an operational mechanism that enables a quick and coordinated reaction of employees. However, physical protection in itself is not enough if a culture of safety is not built and if students do not feel belonging, supported and trusted in the school environment. The aim of this paper was to analyze physical security strategies in schools and their impact on the protection of students, as well as psychological strategies that contribute to the prevention of emotional risks and the reduction of violence. The methodology used included an analysis of relevant literature and the application of authoritative school climate theory, which emphasizes the importance of a combination of clear rules, consistent discipline, and supportive relationships between teachers and students. Special emphasis is placed on the psychological aspects of safety, such as developing social-emotional competencies, strengthening communication, resolving conflicts in a non-violent way and creating a stim-



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ulating atmosphere in which students feel seen and respected. The results show that schools with strong physical safety strategies reduce violence and risky behaviors, while psychological strategies, such as healthier interpersonal relationships and emotional safety, have a significant impact on academic achievement and a reduction in mental health problems. The conclusion suggests that the most effective is an integrated approach that connects organizational and technical measures with pedagogical-psychological interventions. In practice, this means that security protocols and infrastructural solutions should be supplemented with systematic violence prevention programs, peer mediation, team work of professional services, as well as continuous education of teachers to recognize early signs of risky behavior and provide support to students. Also, the involvement of parents and the local community in security initiatives further strengthens the school's resistance to various forms of threats. A comprehensive model that simultaneously builds a safe infrastructure and a positive school climate contributes to a safer, healthier and more stimulating school environment, and thus to better education of students.

Keywords

Student safety, physical protection, psychological safety, school, school climate.

1. Introduction

Safety in schools today represents one of the most important issues of modern education systems, since it directly affects not only the physical protection of students, but also the quality of their overall development and educational achievements. In the context of increasingly frequent discussions about violence, crisis situations and mental health of young people, school safety goes beyond the traditional understanding of protection from physical threats and grows into a complex, multidimensional construct. Modern education systems face the challenge of simultaneously ensuring the infrastructural security of facilities and developing a supportive psychological environment that fosters a sense of belonging and trust. It is this dual nature of security – physical and psychological – that requires an integrated approach that goes beyond partial and fragmented solutions. In the literature, it is increasingly emphasized that school safety cannot be reduced solely to the absence of violence or crime, because such a reductionist understanding ignores the emotional and social dimensions of school life. Traditional strategies, focused on access control, supervision and disciplinary procedures, although they have a preventive function, cannot by themselves ensure long-term stability and a sense of security among students. At the same time, neglecting the physical aspects of protection can lead to serious risks in situations of natural disasters, traffic

incidents or intentional acts of violence. Therefore, there is a need for a theoretical and empirical review of the existing models of safety in schools. The fact that there is no unique and universally accepted definition of school safety in the professional literature makes it difficult to compare research results and create coherent policies. Starting from the aforementioned theoretical and empirical findings, the goal of this paper is to analyze physical and psychological safety strategies in schools, as well as to consider their mutual relationship and impact on the protection of students. The paper tries to examine to what extent individual strategies contribute to the reduction of violence and risky behaviors, but also to point out the need to integrate them into a single, coherent model. Special emphasis was placed on considering the limitations of existing measures and the need for empirically based approaches in the creation of educational policies.

2. Conceptual definition and multidimensional structure of school safety

Different definitions of the concept of school safety, which appear in the professional literature, seriously complicate the comparison of scientific results and the establishment of a unique approach to the management of safety in the educational environment. Although everyone admits that safety in schools is a key social issue today, there is no common understanding of what the term exactly means, so this lack of consensus creates obstacles not only in the theoretical understanding of the term, but also in the practical solution of safety problems during the educational process (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Early definitions of school safety mainly concentrated on reducing crime and physical violence within the school environment. The biggest challenge in defining lies precisely in the fact that personal beliefs are often mixed with the results of empirical research, which is why it is extremely difficult to separate empty rhetoric from real, evidence-supported facts in discussions about school safety (Lewno-Dumdie et al., 2020). The school environment today requires security that is not limited to physical protection, but also includes organizational mechanisms, social relationships, and the emotional and psychological stability of students and teachers. It is precisely this multidimensionality that makes the notion of safety in schools extremely complex and comprehensive. Unlike earlier approaches that focused exclusively on the prevention of violence and crime, modern definitions introduce a wider range of elements that affect the overall sense of security. Therefore, today's understanding of school safety differs in that it actively includes psychological, social and emotional factors, thus creating a holistic framework for creating a supportive environment (Cvetković, Nikolić & Lukić, 2024;

Metić, 2025b). School climate is understood as a broad and multi-layered construct that includes numerous interconnected elements, among which safety occupies a key, unavoidable place. Although there is still no universally accepted definition for either school climate or school safety, most authors agree that the two concepts are deeply intertwined (Metić, 2025a). Three key elements stand out in most definitions of school safety, although there is still no universally accepted definition or full consensus on its basic components. Special emphasis is placed on the perception of the actors themselves within the school - primarily students and teachers - which includes their subjective views on the actual level of security in that environment. This category also includes feelings of fear of possible victimization or, conversely, the experience of personal safety while at school. In the broadest sense, perception includes overall attitudes about how physically and emotionally safe the school is for all its members (Anderson, 2022; Baumsteiger et al., 2022). Another key element relates precisely to the physical and social environment of the school, which must be free from any form of violence, criminal acts, intimidation, threats or permanent fear. In the definitions from this category, emphasis is placed on creating an atmosphere in which students, teachers and other actors feel protected and motivated to learn.

Thus, safety is not only reduced to the absence of danger, but also to the active creation of conditions that support emotional health and the successful execution of the educational mission (Tadić, 2022). Effective, consistent, and fairly applied disciplinary procedures and practices constitute the third key element in definitions of school safety. They enable the rules to be respected equally by all participants, thus building trust and stability within the school system. It is the presence of such structures that prevents chaos, reduces the unpredictability of behavior and contributes to the overall feeling of protection, which is why modern approaches emphasize that without systematically implemented and impartial discipline, security remains incomplete and vulnerable (Klevan, 2021). In research (Bauerline, 2022) on school safety, two overlapping, yet mutually distinguishable dimensions are clearly outlined - one related to physical protection, and the other to a psychological sense of safety. Those two planes constantly intersect in practice, but their separation allows for a more precise understanding of the problem and better targeting of interventions.

3. Protection in schools through the physical and psychological dimensions of safety

3.1. Ensuring physical safety in the school environment: risk prevention and protection from danger

Protection from external dangers such as natural disasters or traffic risks in the immediate vicinity of the school is as important as preventing internal threats, among which the inappropriate behavior of students, crime and various forms of violence stand out. At the very core of physical safety lies the creation of such a school space where all risks of physical injury, damage or violence are minimized. This means that students, teachers, other staff and all visitors are simultaneously protected through carefully designed conditions and structures that guarantee their well-being. Physical safety, therefore, does not mean only the absence of immediate danger, but the active formation of a safe environment that enables the unhindered presence and work of all actors in the school (Mubita, 2021). Distinguishing disasters from related terms such as hazards, crises and risks is a fundamental need behind any attempt to formulate a concise and clear definition. Precisely because of this need for a precise separation, the theoretical determination of the content and scope of disasters remains one of the most persistent and topical research questions in this field. Without such a clear demarcation, it is impossible to establish a common language, compare cases or develop effective prevention and response strategies. Therefore, the authors constantly return to this problem, trying to single out disasters through precise definitions as a special phenomenon that is significantly different from other threatening situations (Cvetković, 2015).

In the distant past, people interpreted natural disasters as the work of “higher forces”, because they represented inexplicable and destructive forces that go beyond human power. Such an understanding arose from the fact that disasters always meant the most severe possible consequences for people’s lives, nature, property, the economy and the entire society. They were not just single incidents, but often a series of connected events with a long-term and deep negative impact (Metić, 2024). The classification of natural disasters is done primarily according to the place and sphere of their occurrence, thus distinguishing between geophysical, meteorological, hydrological, biological and those of extraterrestrial origin. All natural disasters are characterized as harmful events that threaten people’s lives, destroy their material goods and cause serious damage to the environment. Therefore, their origin and action are analyzed through the prism of the specific natural spheres in which they take place, which enables a better understanding of the mechanisms and possibilities of prevention (Cvetković, 2020). The activ-

ities, distribution, possession or consumption of illegal substances, as well as the possession or use of weapons in the school environment are among the most serious internal security risks. In addition, student disciplinary infractions that result in injury or create a threat to others often present a direct threat within the community. Violent and non-violent crimes, including murders and suicides, represent the most serious forms of endangerment stemming from school behavior itself. All these risks have a common origin in the intentional acts or negligence of members of the school community, which makes them particularly dangerous because they come from within and directly threaten the safety of individuals (Fredrick et al., 2021). School physical security measures against internal risks usually rely on a combination of technological solutions, strictly defined procedures and the presence of specialized personnel. Restricted access to certain rooms, along with clearly established protocols for dealing with crisis situations, form the backbone of the security procedures that the school puts in place. The presence of security personnel, from school resource officers, through private security, to stationed police officers, is a key human factor in minimizing threats and protecting all persons within the school (Lazarus & Sulkowski, 2024). Providing emergency resources as well as first aid equipment is a necessary part of schools' responsibility in dealing with disasters. In addition, clearly defined evacuation routes and regularly rehearsed emergency procedures enable quick and organized evacuation of the facility in moments of crisis. Schools are required to design and regularly maintain buildings so that they are resistant to various types of natural and other disasters. It all stems from a deep ethical and operational obligation to create an environment that actively protects the life and safety of students, teachers and everyone present (Khan et al., 2020).

In developed countries, especially in urban areas, measures to improve traffic safety around schools sometimes cause unexpected negative effects despite good intentions. Conversely, in many developing countries, school-related traffic incidents remain among the most common causes of serious injury and death among school-age children. Inadequately organized school transport, lack of basic safety standards and weak regulation of traffic near schools significantly increase the risk of accidents. Therefore, in those societies, the traffic safety of students on the way to school and back is highlighted as a priority problem that requires urgent systemic changes (Zacharia & Yablon, 2021). Well-intentioned road safety initiatives often end up keeping students off the road without providing real protection while walking, cycling or traveling as a passenger. Such an approach limits their mobility without effectively addressing the key risks they are exposed to as pedestrians, cyclists or passengers.

3.2. Ensuring psychological safety in the school environment: prevention of emotional risks and protection from psychological threats

School must be a place where students' social and emotional needs are met without any threat or insecurity - this is one of the basic expectations that define psychological safety in a broader sense. At the same time, the quality of interpersonal relationships among all participants - from students to teachers to parents - directly affects the degree of satisfaction with those interactions and the sense of belonging. Psychological safety, therefore, consists of two closely related aspects: the nature of social contacts that take place at school and the belief that the environment will remain safe for emotional and social fulfillment. Due to its two-layered nature, it cannot be reduced to individual incidents, but represents a continuous state of support and trust that enables the free development of personality within the school environment (Edwards, 2021). Trust, respect and emotional support are common pillars on which a positive school climate and psychological safety are built, because they are deeply rooted in the same theoretical framework. In order to turn this construct into something practically useful in everyday school life, it needs to be broken down into clearly defined, observable and measurable components. Those parts then become a concrete framework that enables the creation of an atmosphere in which both students and teachers feel emotionally protected and accepted. At its very core, psychological safety is focused on the quality of interpersonal relationships, where the school functions as a space with constantly available caring and supportive adults - primarily teachers who actively contribute to the sense of safety of all participants (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Closeness, affection, friendship and the constant availability of caring, supportive adults (most often teachers) are the main characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships that are built through continuous and meaningful interaction. Those relationships form the first key element of psychological safety that can be clearly operationalized in the everyday school environment. Therefore, overlapping factors such as trust, emotional support and mutual respect emphasize that psychological safety must be built as an integral, inseparable component of the overall school atmosphere (Daily et al., 2020; Longobardi et al., 2021). Social acceptance among peers, perceived popularity and general preference within the group are among the most significant indicators of social positioning that are closely related to the quality of relationships among peers. Positive relationships among children of the same age also strongly correlate with the depth of friendship and the quality of emotional attachment to peers, which contributes to their psychosocial development. Unlike the teacher-student relationship, these peer relationships are characterized by voluntariness and fundamental equality, without any hierarchical dimen-

sion. Another key element of psychological safety rests precisely on those egalitarian, freely chosen relationships among peers, because they directly affect the sense of belonging, emotional support and safety within the school social environment (Portt et al., 2020). Finally, that construct includes three main levels: rational judgments about real risks, emotional waves like fear or anxiety, and deep-rooted value attitudes that determine how significant a threat really is to someone. Because of this complexity, feelings of safety are a dynamic, internal process that shapes how students and teachers perceive and experience their own protection within the school environment.

4. Physical and psychological safety strategies in schools and their impact on protecting students and reducing violence

4.1. Physical security strategies in schools and their impact on student protection

Deliberately strengthening a school building and other facilities to make them more resistant to potential attacks is at the heart of a concept known as “target hardening”. Collectively, all these measures, procedures and the engagement of specialized personnel make up the physical security strategies that the school is actively implementing. The goal of these strategies is to simultaneously protect students and staff from any threats and significantly reduce the occurrence of crime and inappropriate behavior within the school space (Kim et al., 2021).

The personal importance that an individual attaches to various security threats, fear as a dominant affective reaction, and cognitive assessments of the seriousness or frequency of crime - all these layers together build a multidimensional construct known as feelings of security. The subjective feeling of safety at school does not arise in isolation, but as an emotional response to a wide range of contextual factors surrounding the individual. Finally, that construct includes three main levels: rational judgments about real risks, emotional waves like fear or anxiety, and deep-rooted value attitudes that determine how significant a threat is to someone (Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2021). The media and the academic community often harshly criticize policy makers for proposing measures that seem attractive to the public, but do not have a solid scientific basis or proven effectiveness. Another function of physical security strategies is highly symbolic – it serves to send a strong message to the public that the school is still a safe place for students. When a serious incident of violence occurs, the school must quickly demonstrate

its power and authority, reassuring parents and the wider community that the situation is still under control. (Mann & Brock, 2020). Widespread school safety practices often enjoy great popularity and acceptance despite lacking serious empirical support and being based on limited or poor quality research. Leading experts in this field point out that the total quantity and quality of scientific works on school safety is extremely uneven, with large differences between individual topics.

Therefore, it is concluded that most current approaches suffer from a lack of rigorous, analytically deep and methodologically impeccably performed studies, which limits the possibility of making reliable, evidence-based decisions in this area (Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020). Most of the problems related to school violence, crime and victimization remain intact even when multiple security measures are implemented in schools at the same time, and the only noticeable effect appeared in the reduction of exposure to property crime, but only in secondary schools. In primary schools, as in most cases in secondary schools, such combinations of measures have proven to be completely ineffective in solving most security challenges. Despite these limitations and the lack of evidence, it can be clearly concluded that the mentioned strategies do not bring the expected results in preventing or suppressing safety problems in schools (Sorensen et al., 2023). In secondary schools in Serbia, as in numerous other studies, the increased presence of school resource officers did not show any impact on the prevention of peer bullying or on the reduction of incidents related to weapons. On the other hand, studies indicate that their presence contributes to greater detection and arrest of drug-related offenses, which is one of the positive effects. Increased visibility of SROs has also been associated with decreases in some forms of non-gun violence, such as physical assaults, as well as fewer incidents of gun ownership among students. Nevertheless, when all the results are considered, the effectiveness of SRO engagement remains limited and selective, it acts on certain types of offenses, while on others, especially the most serious and widespread ones, it leaves no measurable trace (Grmuša, 2024). Students often perceive increased physical security measures not as protection, but as an additional instrument by which school personnel reinforce their control, assert authority, or even abuse power over them.

Such a perception leads to a serious negative outcome: strategies that should ensure safety lose credibility and cease to be seen as relevant for personal protection. In addition, an overemphasis on rules, procedures and their strict enforcement can shift the focus from teaching and learning to the routine enforcement of discipline and supervision. Therefore, the implementation of these strategies carries the risk of turning the school environment into a place where safety is measured by the amount of restrictions and not by the quality of support for student growth and development (Curran et al., 2022).

Many schools that adopt a “zero-tolerance” policy toward any inappropriate student behavior use SROs as the primary mechanism for enforcing discipline, even for minor infractions. This results in school resource officers becoming regular participants in day-to-day policing, rather than being engaged only for serious crimes or violence. This practice becomes particularly problematic as SROs become involved in standard disciplinary procedures for minor incidents, which changes their role from security guards to routine enforcers of school rules. Because of this, SRO engagement is highlighted as a critical point, as overuse for minor offenses can erode student confidence and turn the school into a place of heightened surveillance instead of support and development (Fisher et al., 2020).

The vast financial resources invested in physical security strategies require policymakers to insist on conducting rigorous, methodologically sound studies that would ultimately provide justification for such expenditures. Schools today find themselves in a difficult dilemma: how to maintain a high level of physical protection of the environment without turning it into a closed fortress full of surveillance and restrictions. Quantitative data clearly show that the presence of school resource officers (SROs) leads to a sharp increase in standard disciplinary sanctions against students, often for minor infractions. Therefore, it is necessary for policy makers to insist on rigorous studies in order to justify huge financial investments in the implementation of physical security strategies (Lazarus & Sulkowski, 2024). Lack of in-depth knowledge of disaster preparedness procedures among teachers is one of the biggest problems, despite their extremely positive attitudes during training. Training is mostly reduced to post-event reactions rather than proactive preparation, while evacuation exercises and simulations are often conducted as a mere formality without a serious approach and the necessary visual aids. Even in developed countries that have been repeatedly hit by devastating earthquakes, the preparedness of school facilities still remains inadequate, although in some US states it has reached a medium to high level. In developing countries, the situation is even worse, which shows that the problem of inadequate preparedness for disasters extends globally and requires a fundamental change in the approach to training, materials and the severity of exercises (Sonmez & Gokmenoglu, 2023; Khan et al., 2020).

The only study conducted in Serbia on the safety of schools from natural disasters revealed a worrying fact where more than half of the students do not feel safe inside school buildings when they think about the possible consequences of an earthquake or other disasters. Those findings are based solely on the perceptions of the students themselves, because objective data on the condition of school facilities in the context of natural disasters in Serbia is almost non-existent. This clearly shows that realistic insights into the degree of preparedness of Serbian schools for natural disasters are extremely

limited and come down to the subjective feeling of students. Therefore, it remains completely unclear whether school buildings really provide adequate protection or whether the feeling of insecurity among students is completely justified by the actual situation (Cvetković, Janković and Milojević, 2016). Therefore, preparedness does not automatically extend to other types of crises; people and institutions most often remain vulnerable to disasters that differ from the one they recently experienced, so such a selective effect emphasizes the need for systematic, comprehensive planning, because past experience alone cannot be relied upon as a universal protection mechanism.

4.2. Improving interpersonal relationships and reducing violence through psychological safety strategies in schools

A large number of studies have confirmed that the feeling of security and the quality of interpersonal relationships significantly influence academic results and psychosocial outcomes in education, as well as the reduction and prevention of problematic student behavior. This means that a stronger sense of security at school leads to more positive academic achievements and a better psychosocial state of students. Exposure to violence and victimization, regardless of whether it is personally experienced, observed or committed violence, predicts a significantly weaker sense of safety in the school environment (Adzkiya et al., 2023). In schools where peer bullying is widespread, students most often feel insecure, which was also found in schools in Serbia. The quality of relationships at school, both between teachers and students, and among students, is crucial for the emergence of various unacceptable behaviors, such as social maladjustment, criminal activities, violence and aggression, which manifest both within the educational institution and in the wider social context (Tadić and Kordić, 2024). When relationships between teachers and students are of high quality and supportive, students less often exhibit risky and problematic behaviors, while their exposure to violence and the risk of becoming victims of peer bullying is significantly reduced, which is true both in schools in Serbia and in the international context. Students who fail to build good social relationships with their peers belong to a group with an increased risk for behavior problems, emotional difficulties and academic difficulties in future years (Milićević et al., 2022). A recent large-scale meta-analysis found a clear link between better teacher-student relationship quality and less occurrence of peer bullying, regardless of whether the student is in the role of perpetrator or victim.

Interpersonal relationships at school proved to be a particularly important factor when it comes to peer bullying, both among those who perpetrate it and among those who suffer from it. Therefore, encouraging healthy and

reducing bad teacher-student relationships can be an effective way to reduce the problem of bullying among children in school. Such an approach not only helps to resolve specific incidents, but also builds a long-term atmosphere of trust and respect in the entire school community (Bokkel et al., 2022). One of the strongest protective factors against victimization by peer bullying, according to another meta-analysis, is warm, caring, and supportive peer relationships in the classroom. Empirically validated strategies that both increase feelings of safety and improve the quality of interpersonal relationships are limited to those that shape an authoritative school climate. Authoritative school climate theory - a conceptual framework for understanding the connection between school climate and school safety, is derived from the literature on authoritative parenting in developmental psychology. The essence of that theory lies in the combination of high expectations and emotional support towards children (Kloo et al., 2023). In schools that foster an authoritative approach, there is a balance between high standards and continuous support, which has a positive impact on students.

Such environments ensure better engagement, greater academic success, but also reduce the occurrence of mental health problems, reduce absenteeism and reduce peer violence. An authoritative school atmosphere is associated with higher levels of academic success, including better achievement, higher educational goals, and greater motivation to progress. In addition, research shows that students in such schools feel a higher level of security. Also, in schools that provide clear discipline and fair measures, there is less chance of later behavior problems, while schools with an authoritative approach tend to have lower levels of violence and bullying among students (Kloo et al., 2023). Schools that implement authoritative approaches have a lower incidence of risky activities, such as drug use, suicidal thoughts, association with criminal groups and carrying weapons. In such institutions, students are less exposed to behaviors that threaten their safety and well-being. In contrast, the results of multilevel analyzes show that in educational institutions with a less authoritative approach, there is a higher frequency of violent behavior and more frequent victims of these same negative phenomena.

5. Conclusion

Safety in schools is a complex and multidimensional construct that cannot be reduced to the mere application of technical protection measures or formal safety protocols. Its essence is reflected in the simultaneous provision of physical protection and the construction of a psychologically stable and supportive environment. Any unilateral approach, whether based solely on control and surveillance or solely on declarative support, remains insufficient to

achieve lasting and sustainable security. Safety implies the existence of clear, consistently applied rules, but also an atmosphere of trust in which students do not feel the fear of humiliation, stigmatization or unfair treatment. If the school is organized predominantly through the logic of repression and sanctions, an environment of formal order can be created, but without a true sense of security among the students. On the other hand, the absence of clear norms and structure can produce unpredictability and destabilize the school environment. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a balance between organizational strength and emotional support, so that safety becomes part of everyday school practice, and not just a normative requirement. The subjective experience of safety occupies a central place in shaping the school experience, because it affects the motivation, engagement and readiness of students to actively participate in the teaching process. When students perceive the school as a place of fairness, consistency and respect, their trust in the institution grows and their sense of belonging to the community strengthens. In such an environment, discipline does not function as a mechanism of coercion, but as a framework that enables stability and predictability of relations. The quality of interpersonal relationships is of particular importance, since it is through daily interactions that students shape their sense of personal and social security. Relationships based on respect, support and open communication contribute to the creation of an atmosphere in which conflicts are resolved constructively and differences are accepted without violence. Security, therefore, is not built exclusively through infrastructure and formal procedures, but through a culture of shared responsibility and mutual understanding. An integrated approach, which connects the physical and psychological dimensions of safety, allows overcoming partial solutions and creates a foundation for the long-term stability of the school system. Such a model implies that protection is seen not only as a response to a threat, but as a continuous process of building trust and institutional consistency. Finally, a school that manages to harmonize the organizational structure with emotional support becomes a space where safety is not only the absence of danger, but the foundation for the complete development of students and the realization of the educational mission.

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