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# School Violence and Theoretically Atypical Schools: The Principal's Centrality in Orchestrating Safe Schools

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*Theories often assume that schools in communities with high violence also have high rates of school violence, yet there are schools with very low violence in high violence communities. Organizational variables within these schools may buffer community influences. Nine "atypical" schools are selected from a national database in Israel. Three years of intense qualitative and quantitative methods are employed at these schools. The most important variable found is the leadership of the principal. These schools emphasize a school reform approach rather than packaged school violence evidence-based programs. The schools demonstrate "outward" oriented ideologies, a schoolwide awareness of violence, consistent procedures, integrated use of cultural and religious symbols, visual manifestations of student care, and the beautification of school grounds.*

**KEYWORDS:** school violence, mixed-method design, culture, case study, school reform

Existing theories and research suggest that students' victimization rates in schools tend to reflect crime rates and demographics of their surrounding communities (Astor & Benbenishty, 2007; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2005; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2004; Laub & Lauritsen, 1998; Lord & Mahoney, 2007; Lorion, 1998). Hence, schools embedded in communities with high crime and low socioeconomic status are often expected by many scholars and the general public to have higher rates of school violence when compared with schools in lower crime and higher socioeconomic status communities.

Yet some research and practice literatures document considerable variations in victimization rates among school sites within demographically similar communities (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 1999; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Garbarino, 1995; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1997; Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992; Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). For example, Olweus (1993) describes victimization rates between schools in comparable regions of Norway and Sweden that have five times more bullying events than other schools with similar demographics. Furthermore, Benbenishty and Astor (2005) recently reported that in Israel there was great variation between schools on specific forms of violence, even between schools with similar sociodemographic characteristics. To date, there is little research from any country that examines the prevalence of schools that deviate from local community violence rates and norms. It is not known, for instance, how many peaceful schools can be considered extremely different from what is common in their more violent community contexts. How many schools on a national level depart greatly from violence rates that are normative in their community?

Descriptions about the characteristics and practices of schools reporting atypical victimization rates when contrasted with surrounding community demographics are mostly anecdotal accounts. There are very few empirical studies on atypical schools. This is unfortunate, because studies of these schools may contribute to our knowledge by unearthing important factors that could be emulated. The overarching hypothesis of this inquiry is that there are social and organizational variables within atypical schools that either buffer students from the influences in their communities or exacerbate student victimization rates. This inquiry is designed to address the gap in the theoretical, empirical, and policy literatures.

The term *theoretically atypical schools* refers to schools where the violence victimization rates are in the extreme opposite direction to what we could have predicted based on the community crime and poverty rates. The word *theoretical* stems from the fact that theories of communities and schools often predict a strong relationship between community and school violence (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). In this study, we focus on schools that do not fit the pattern of violence in the surrounding community. There are two types of theoretically atypical schools explored in this study: schools that

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have much lower levels of violence than one would predict on the basis of the school's community characteristics (atypically low), and those with higher than expected levels of school violence (atypically high). Examinations of these atypical schools may highlight the social and organizational factors that distinguish exceptionally peaceful schools.

## Understanding Multiple Aspects of School Violence

### School Factors Mediating and Buffering Outside Influences

Knowing which components of the school environment buffer or exacerbate victimization could have many theoretical and practical implications regarding the structure and organization of schools. In the present study we wanted to explore several broad areas of school life that could explain how certain schools were able to create an unexpectedly nonviolent environment. Within atypical schools, it is plausible that the social supports (peer and staff), school climate, procedures, and school policies mediate the effects of external spillover variables on victimization.

### School Type and Cultural Affiliation in Context

Theories and research strongly suggest that school violence should be studied in context—both the context of a specific school and the context of the socioecological environment in which the school is embedded. In the design of the present study we paid attention to two specific aspects of context, school type (i.e., primary, middle, and high schools) and cultural/ethnic affiliation.

*School type as context.* Primary, middle, and high schools are contextually different from each other in many respects including their philosophies, procedures, teacher-child relations, and beliefs about appropriate and expected behaviors. The school violence literature demonstrates that school types have a major impact on school violence (Astor, Benbenishty, Vinokur, & Zeira, 2006; Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; Behre, Astor, & Meyer, 2001; Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007a, 2007b; Marachi, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2007a, 2007b; Pepler, Smith, & Rigby, 2004; Scheithauer, Hayer, Peterman, & Jugert, 2006). Hence, in this study we explore whether similar themes are expressed differently in the range of school types.

*Culture as context.* Research suggests that with some types of school violence (e.g., staff violence, peer sexual harassment, verbal violence, and social exclusion), culture plays a significant role (Nesdale & Naito, 2005; Ohsako, 1997; Smith et al., 1999; Zeira, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2002). However, with many other forms of school violence (e.g., physical acts), diverse cultures appear to have similar patterns (Astor & Benbenishty, 2007; Meyer, Astor, & Behre, 2004). How culture is expressed in schools around the ways schools address violence has not yet been explored much in qualitative

or quantitative studies of school safety. Expressions of the culture in which the school is embedded, such as religion, ideology, holidays, pop culture, cultural heroes, and symbols, may be used in efforts to create safe schools. These culturally based efforts may be qualitatively different than current psychologically and sociologically based school safety interventions used in schools.

In this study we explored the role that cultural practices have on school safety approaches. From a research design and theory perspective, Israel's organization of public schools creates a natural opportunity to examine how schools deal with school violence in three different and distinct cultures. Publicly funded schools in Israel are organized by cultural and religious affiliation of the student's family. Because language, religion, and culture are perceived as central to the preservation and perpetuation of each subculture, these distinct cultural features are key elements in the publicly funded Israeli educational system. In Israel, Jewish families can choose from an array of publicly sponsored schools based on their cultural and religious orientations (e.g., Secular, Orthodox, and Ultra-Orthodox schools). Arab families also have several different types of cultural public schools they can choose to attend (e.g., Muslim or Christian schools, or an Arab mixed-religion school). In each public school, the curriculum, language of instruction, teacher education, and overall mission are built around an ethnic affiliation and/or religious ideology matched quite closely to the families of children who attend that particular school.

These separate educational systems provide rare opportunities to highlight patterns of similarities and differences in how each culture deals with school violence. In this study we try to identify how culture and ethnic identity influenced the ways atypical schools defined and addressed school violence.

### **Violence in Schools and the School Organization**

Benbenishty and Astor (2005) strongly encourage researchers to gather data on a wide range of violent acts (e.g., sexual harassment, use of weapons, school fights, verbal harassment, threats of violence, gang activity, and bullying). The prevalence and severity of the multiple manifestations of school violence may have important implications for the ways schools respond to violent events. The present study explored many different aspects of violent acts in schools.

Furthermore, Benbenishty and Astor (2005) draw attention to the complex relationships between multiple perceptions and reactions related to school violence. In a series of six studies they show that prevalence of violent acts in school, awareness of school violence (i.e., how severe is the violence problem in school), and feelings of personal safety are all related to different school social and organizational factors. For example, students across different cultures judge their school as having a violence problem primarily based on the amount of risky peer group acting out behaviors they observe on school grounds rather than on their own personal experiences

of victimization. In contrast, students who miss school due to fear focus primarily on personal experiences of severe victimization at school when assessing their school's violence problem (Astor, Benbenishty, Vinokur, et al., 2006; Astor, Benbenishty, Zeira, & Vinokur, 2002; Benbenishty, Astor, Zeira, & Vinokur, 2002). Finally, student assessments of school safety tend to reflect issues related to school climate, relationships with teachers, and the way the school responds to violent events (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005).

As a result, this study explores whether schools that had atypically low levels of violence differed from atypically high violence schools not only in the prevalence of violence but perhaps also in different types and patterns of violence. Furthermore, this research explores whether perceptions of and reactions to school violence differ. For instance, do students and staff members in "atypically high" schools feel that they have a greater school violence problem than in "atypically low" schools? We examine how atypically low and high violence schools differ in the ways they address issues of school violence.

## **Methods**

### **Use of a Two-Phase Mixed-Method Approach**

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase employed quantitative methods to identify and describe the national pool of schools that are theoretically atypical. In this phase we analyzed data from a large and comprehensive national study of school violence in Israel. Based on this analysis we identified two sets of schools—theoretically atypically low and high violence schools. The selection of the schools using this method added policy and theoretical value to the study since these sites would be representative of atypical schools across the country.

The second phase of this study is an in-depth qualitative study of a subset of purposefully selected atypically high and low violence schools. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, school safety mapping methods, policy discussion and analysis, and detailed school observations were used to further explore the nine schools identified in the quantitative phase as atypical.

### **Phase 1: Selection of the Atypical Schools From a Representative National Sample of Schools**

#### **Sample**

The nationally representative stratified sample contained 15,646 participants. Of these, 5,795 were from primary schools (37%), 6,550 from middle schools (42%), and 3,301 from high schools (21%). Of the total number of participants, 64% studied in Jewish schools and the rest in Arab schools. Of 10,018 Jewish students, 54% studied in secular schools and 46% in religious schools. Females constituted 50.9% of the sample. There were 239 schools

in the data set, with 77 primary, 83 middle, and 79 high schools. Of the total number of schools, 76 were Non-Jewish, 80 were Jewish-Nonreligious, and 83 were Jewish-Religious (see further details in Benbenishty & Astor, 2005).

## Instruments

*Student victimization.* The questionnaires used are an adaptation of the research version of the California School Climate & Safety Survey (Furlong, 1996; Furlong, Morrison, Bates, & Chung, 1998; Rosenblatt & Furlong, 1997; for a recent short form see Furlong et al., 2005). The survey was modified to the Israeli context (for details see Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Questionnaires were developed in Hebrew and Arabic with a shorter version for primary school students and a longer one for secondary school. The victimization questionnaire used by middle and high school students included references to victimization on 24 types of violent acts. The primary school questionnaire included a subset of 18 items. For each item, the respondents were asked to state, whether this behavior had occurred in school “never,” “once,” “twice,” or “three times or more” during the past month. The questionnaire also included indexes and questions regarding school climate, including policies, missing school due to fear, staff support, the severity of violence, and subjective views of the school violence situation in their school.

*School characteristics.* The Ministry of Education school databases were used to extract the following measures:

1. School class density, defined as a mean number of students in school classes
2. Students' families' socioeconomic status, defined as a mean of  $z$  scores of four variables describing the families of all students in a specific school:
  - a. Percentage of families with income below poverty level
  - b. Percentage of fathers with less than 8 years of schooling
  - c. Percentage of families with five or more children
  - d. Education Ministry Index of Deprivation (an official index used to characterize the overall socioeconomic status of a school)

*Neighborhood characteristics.* Israel's census data as maintained by the nation's Central Bureau of Statistics was processed to extract the following:

1. School neighborhood socioeconomic status, defined as a mean of  $z$  scores of the following variables describing all census tracts in which the school is located
  - a. Percentage of Non-Jews in neighborhood
  - b. Percentage of persons ages 0 to 17
  - c. Percentage of unemployed
  - d. Percentage of persons with high-status occupations (reverse-coded)
  - e. Percentage of people with low-status occupations
  - f. Percentage of employees earning 4,000 National Israeli Shekels or less

- g. Percentage of employees earning 12,000 National Israeli Shekels or more (reverse-coded)
  - h. Percentage of people with 0 to 8 years of schooling
  - i. Percentage of people with matriculation certificate or higher education (reverse-coded)
  - j. Mean household density
2. Neighborhood crime index, defined as mean of  $z$  scores of percentage of neighborhood inhabitants who committed crimes against property and against body

### **Analytic Plan for Identifying Atypical Schools From Quantitative Database**

Our conceptual definition of atypical schools is that their levels of violence deviate from what is expected given the community contextual characteristics nested around their schools. Simply put, atypical schools are schools that were extreme mismatches between the levels of violence on their school grounds and levels of violence in the community. Operationally, we defined atypical schools as those schools whose violence levels are not predicted well by a regression equation that uses the school contextual information as predictors (i.e., the schools are “outliers”). Thus, we (a) created indices of school-level-violence; (b) fitted multiple regression equations, which included all the contextual information about the school, to each of these indices; and (c) computed how well each school was predicted and represented the deviation of the school from the prediction in units of standard deviations of the residual. On the basis of these scores we identified the most extreme outliers separately for each of the nine school types in which we were interested: an intersection of three school levels (primary, middle, and high) by three ethnic/cultural groups (Jewish Secular, Jewish Religious, and Arab).

### **Identifying Theoretically Atypical Schools**

*Creating school-level victimization indices.* To create indices of victimization we carried out a series of factor analyses. These analyses are described in detail in Benbenishty and Astor (2005). The analyses indicated that two-factor solutions for victimization and one-factor solution for sexual harassment are the most consistent and most meaningful from a content perspective. The two victimization factors corresponded to mild types of victimization (e.g., pushed and shoved) and severe victimization (e.g., cut with a knife). Coefficient alphas were as follows: mild behaviors = .82, severe behaviors (primary schools) = .70, severe behaviors (middle and high schools) = .83, and sexual harassment = .80.

*Predicting victimization on the basis of school context characteristics.* To determine atypicality, we first examined what levels of violence could be expected based on the school’s context. Analyses in this stage were conducted with schools as units of analysis and on each of the three victimization



indices. All independent variables were centered on their mean. Different methods of dealing with missing values were used in the regressions (pairwise, listwise, replacement with mean), all yielding very similar results. The final analyses were conducted based on replacement of missing values with means.

In the first block of the hierarchical regression we entered background information on the schools—ethnic/cultural affiliation, school type, and percentage of males in the school. In the second block we entered to the regression their cross-products, to represent two- and three-way interactions. In the third and final block we entered mean number of students in class, the students' families' socioeconomic status, the school's neighborhood socioeconomic status, and the neighborhood crime rates. The series of regression analyses explained a substantial amount of variance in school-level victimization (adjusted *R*-square for mild behaviors = .668, severe behavior = .595, and sexual harassment = .447; details of these analyses are available upon request from the authors).

*Computing atypicality score for each school.* Each school's standardized residual scores of the three victimization indices computed in regression analyses served as indicators of school atypicality. We created a trichotomous partition of each score into (a) low victimization atypical schools with scores of  $-1$  standard deviation and lower (i.e., schools in which victimization was lower than one would predict based on the school and neighborhood characteristics), (b) typical schools with scores of  $-0.99$  to  $0.99$  standard deviations, and (c) high victimization atypical schools with a score of  $1$  standard deviation and higher (i.e., schools in which victimization was higher than one would expect based on the school and neighborhood characteristics).

We then divided all schools into the nine cells of our design (three school levels by three cultural groups). Within each cell we sorted the list of schools by atypicality scores. We sorted the list consecutively, first by the index of atypicality on severe victimization, then atypicality in mild victimization, and finally for middle and high schools, by sexual harassment victimization. We then examined schools at the bottom and top of the list (i.e., the most atypical schools) and identified schools within our geographical area. In Table 1 we first present the schools with their atypicality scores and then present their breakdown according to school level and cultural group.

## Phase 2: Qualitative Study of the Atypical Schools

### Sample

The nine schools in the qualitative sample are differentiated according to school type such that three are primary schools, three are middle schools, and three are high schools—one in each Arab, religious, and secular sector, respectively. The nine schools consist of these:

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- A primary Arab school in a Muslim village near the Jewish city of Rosh Haayin (PAM)
- A primary Jewish Religious school in a town in the metropolitan area of Tel Aviv (PJR)
- A primary Jewish Secular school in the south of the country situated on the grounds of a kibbutz (collective settlement) (PJS)
- A middle Arab Muslim school in a mixed Jewish-Arab town, in the center of Israel (MAM)
- An all-girls' middle Jewish Religious school in a settlement in the Occupied Territories (MJR)
- A middle Jewish Secular school in a small community just north of Jerusalem and over Israel's Green Line (in the Occupied Territories) (MJS)
- An Arab high school in a Bedouin community in the south of Israel (HAB)
- An all-boys' Jewish Religious high school in Jerusalem, in a high-poverty and high-crime area, not far from a bus stop where a suicide bomber killed some Israeli school pupils, some of them from the school we studied (HJR)
- A Jewish Secular high school on the border of one of Jerusalem's major slum neighborhoods (HJS)

### **Quantitative Surveys of Each of the Schools in the Sample**

We administered the survey to the chosen schools on two different occasions; once as part of our selection process of the atypical schools then again after we selected the nine schools. In each of the nine schools included in the present study we surveyed two classes for each grade level (three grade levels in primary and middle schools and two grade levels in high schools). This was done to monitor the stability of the schools over time and to see how these schools fared with national fluctuations in school violence. The final designation of our case study schools as atypically high violence, atypically low violence, or change schools was based on the outcomes of second survey data since the second wave occurred just prior or during the qualitative phase of the study. We used and interpreted the local survey information in a qualitative fashion. Primarily, the surveys helped us understand how to situate our schools over time and within the historical and national arena.

### **A Holistic Qualitative Exploration of the Sampled Schools**

*Recruitment of a research team.* The selection of a research team was guided by professional qualifications and specialization in qualitative methods in education, the special characteristics of the schools, and political-pragmatic considerations. After several months of interviewing and selecting from a wide pool of candidates, an outstanding field research team was assembled. The diverse team reflected the nature of the sample and included a Muslim female Arab, a Bedouin male, nonreligious Jewish male and female, and Jewish Religious male. Altogether, there were eight researchers (three senior university researchers and five at the postgraduate level) who went into the field. Another five researchers were later involved with data management and participated in analyses, interpretation, and distillation of the data during and after the fieldwork period.

Table 1  
**Schools by Level of School Violence and Atypicality Scores**

School Name	School Level	Cultural Group	Mild		Severe		Sexual	
			Level, %	Atypicality, SD	Level, %	Atypicality, SD	Level, %	Atypicality, SD
PAM	Primary	Arab-Muslim	29.48	-1.34	14.85	-0.97	—	—
PJS	Primary	Jewish-Secular	42.44	-0.74	8.20	-1.32	—	—
PJR	Primary	Jewish-Religious	52.15	0.09	9.90	-0.96	—	—
MAM	Middle	Arab-Muslim	54.81	1.68	28.50	2.32	18.33	0.64
MJS	Middle	Jewish-Secular	54.20	1.06	11.10	0.82	14.81	1.19
MJR	Middle	Jewish-Religious	24.33	-1.63	1.52	-1.10	4.70	-0.70
HAB	High school	Arab-Bedouin	38.38	1.52	20.00	1.62	11.04	0.37
HJS	High school	Jewish-Secular	35.95	0.54	17.06	2.55	10.92	1.04
HJR	High school	Jewish-Religious	49.17	1.46	12.50	1.61	11.07	0.99

Note. Issues of sexual harassment were not studied in primary schools. P = primary, M = middle school, H = high school, AM = Arab-Muslim, J = Jewish, R = Religious.

Our qualitative field team deliberately approached the schools without knowing which schools were designated as atypically low violence or atypically high violence schools. The field team was instructed and trained to observe how the selected school responded to events, including the implementation of procedures and policies before and after violent events. As we discuss in the findings, the schools were so remarkable or extreme in their atypicality (in real life) that within a few visits and processing of the trips the field researchers almost immediately knew the project was exploring the extremes. The researchers became familiar with the field site and learned to understand the culture to form empathetic relationships with teachers and children. Since field researchers were from the same cultures as the culture of the schools, they were studying and were fluent in language, traditions, and practices of each cultural group. This facilitated more sensitive and accurate interpretation of the linguistic and cultural practices in each school.

*Ongoing research seminars.* Monthly research seminars were held with the team. The research seminars had several aims: (a) to train the field researchers in the methodological concepts of the research and to acquaint them with the principles of the research, (b) to create a research environment that was supportive and encouraging, (c) to invite specialists in the field to lecture and share their experience surrounding specific qualitative methods used in our study, (d) to act as a debriefing center and forum to discuss field problems and ethical dilemmas, and (e) to exchange ideas and discuss issues which emerged in the field.

Table 2 represents the type of research tools used and how frequently they were employed in each school setting.

*Participant observation.* The basic and most important tool selected for use in our study was participant observation. This approach required additional energy, time, and personnel. However, given the wide array of qualitative tools used in the study, participant observation was a way to provide a backbone to the various techniques used. It was an umbrella method that allowed researchers to observe the various themes and issues that emerged from the interviews, mapping, surveys, policy analysis, and photographs. The observation processes moved through several phases from nonspecific descriptive observations to focused observations. In focused observations, the perspective increasingly narrows to selective observations toward the end of data collection (Spradley, 1980).

Observations were carried out in the nine schools during class periods, recess, during transition periods, and before and after school. They also occurred during teacher meetings, school events, school trips, and class sessions. Through observations, the researchers could examine the links between aggressive behaviors in different physical areas of the school. The school playground, for example, was an ideal venue for studying peer interactions and processes. Observations included specific locations and practices directly related to those locations, such as the playground, hallways, assemblies, and

Table 2

**Matrix of the Frequency of Use of Methodological Tools According to School**

	HJR	MJS	HJS	MJR	PJR	PJS	MAM	PAM	HAB	Totals
Participant observation	10	13	15	18	12	10	16	16	7	117
Focused observation	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	72
Teacher interviews	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	72
Counselor interviews	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	11
Principal interviews	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
Parent interviews	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	54
Mapping tool	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	15
Number of classes	3	3	3	2	1	2	4	3	2	23
Focus groups	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	14
Totals	41	44	46	47	39	40	47	45	38	387

the social environment of the school. It also included the security used to screen students upon arrival at school and teacher and principal actions after violent events. A total of 117 observations were written up as field reports. Participant observation was useful in documenting physical behavior and patterns of response around violence. However, they are less helpful in understanding the rationale or reasons why students and teachers behaved in certain ways.

*Interviews.* As a supplement to the participant observations, we conducted interviews that combined structured and open-ended questions. These interviews were particularly useful for understanding reasoning and specific cultural interpretations of the school activities carried out. In-depth interviews were carried out in the nine schools with the school principals, with eight teachers in each school, the school counselor, and a sample of six parents. All interviews with school personnel and parents, formulated by the research team, were semistructured. All principals were formally interviewed once in each school. However they were informally interviewed an additional two or three more times (i.e., between meetings with staff, after parent assemblies, and in the halls) by the field researchers. Usually these informal conversations were short and “in passing.” A total of 72 formal interviews were carried out with teachers, and an additional 11 interviews were conducted with counselors, school psychologists, or personnel in charge of school discipline. In total, 92 members of the school staff were interviewed. All interviews, observations, and data collection took place in the participants’ native language by interviewers and observers who are from that culture and are fluent in the linguistic/cultural nuances of each culture.

*Mapping tool.* Mapping violence hot spots and the school’s responses to violent events has been developed as a qualitative methodological tool (see Astor, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Meyer, 2006; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2004; Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Benbenishty, Astor, & Estrada, 2008). With this tool, the researcher asks students, teachers, and principals to identify violence-prone

locations in and around their schools. Each student/teacher uses a small school blueprint and marks with stickers where the three most violent events occurred during the past month. They then write down (a) the age and gender of the participants, (b) what was done by the student bystanders and school staff, and (c) what should be done to reduce such events. The student maps are compiled into one large school map that shows danger areas and organizational strengths and weaknesses in responding to aggressive behavior. Students and faculty are then asked to give their explanations on why these areas are violence prone and how they think the school is responding to events. Fifteen mapping tools in 23 different classes were administered in the nine schools.

*Focus groups.* The focus group is a highly efficient methodological tool for securing rich information from youth about interpersonal violence (e.g., Johnson et al., 2005; Squires, Kohn-Wood, Chavous, & Carter, 2006). Utilizing the mapping tool as a stimulus, the students discussed the violence-prone areas in a focus group, moderated by a field researcher. A total of 14 focus groups were organized around the mapping tool, and discussions were conducted on violent spots in schools and school practices regarding violence. This tool helped us better understand the peer dynamics and the organizational response of the staff to events. It also clearly showed the physical times and places that were most vulnerable in each school. We then used observations and interviews to find out why these areas are either safe or violence prone.

*Photography.* We used photography as a supplement to participant observation to capture visual images of violent hot spots or locations and of school cultural aspects, such as posters and decorations depicting cultural symbols and messages. This tool helped document how school grounds were kept. Prior research suggests that undefined public places are often uncared for and unsafe. These were indicators of how the school staff, community, and students cared for these locations and places. Unkempt areas and locations could also contribute to an overall feeling of being unsafe at school. As Margolis and Romero (1998) argued, photography can reproduce the physical relationships of schools but cannot capture the social relationships of education, such as success and failure, resistance, everyday oppression, repression, intellectual verve, and so on. So again, this tool was used in the context of the observations and interviews.

### Qualitative Analyses

The team met regularly during the second phase to discuss the common themes that emerged from the qualitative data. To capture both the content and the emotion behind the participant's comments, techniques described by Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explaining parameters of conducting text-based and interview qualitative analyses were used. Additionally, the relationships between emerging themes were further explored using an in-depth circular process outlined by Huberman and Miles (1994) in which the qualitative

data is displayed, analyzed, discussed, and summarized, and new displays of the data emerge. Once themes emerged, we reexamined the data and layers of data generated after the new themes were created. We followed two basic processes: open ended and closed ended.

On the whole we took a positivistic approach (rather than a *strictly* post-modern, ethnographic, or narrative approach) when analyzing the various forms of data. Employing mixed methods with a more positivistic epistemological style provided our team an overarching approach and resulted in better integration of the diverse methods used, emerging themes, and diverse forms of information about the schools into a more coherent set of findings. First we explored the data along several main dimensions and broad categories based on the issues outlined in the research and practice literatures. For example, knowing that the principal's and teachers' relationships with students were important in the empirical literature we explored the data gathered to see if these and other related themes were present. This was done for other major themes mentioned in the literature review of this manuscript.

We also used the site-specific data from the quantitative phase. Each school was given the same survey used in the national survey so we could compare any changes in the school over the course of the study and see if the school changed in comparison with national norms. Even though the surveys were quantitative we used them in a qualitative case study fashion to better understand and situate our schools. Finally, qualitative methods helped identify areas where the survey fell short. For example, we were interested in knowing more about the participants' views of the ways their school reduces violence on a day-to-day basis. The qualitative portion of the study allowed us to spend several years learning how different groups thought and behaved around this issue. The quantitative and qualitative data showed an array of alternative, overlapping, and similar dimensions of the school and community context. Our processes openly used all forms of information to better understand the atypical schools. This approach helped in the triangulation of the various forms of information collected and resulted in a more seamless connection between the two types of data.

We also followed open-ended processes with all the qualitative sources of data. We explored whether there were other central concerns or areas of strength for a particular group or type of school that the quantitative methods or analyses may have ignored or missed. For this second process we used Kvale's (1996) meaning categorization method. We created main dimensions after reviewing the different data sources several times and processing the interviews/observations/texts. Once we created, reexamined, and agreed on the main dimensions, we created subcategories within main dimensions. The subcategories were created to better capture the nature of the violence events and responses to them. Using this more open coding system (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990, for further details on this procedure), the subcategories were then integrated with the broader dimensions, which helped explain the themes in greater detail. Using these processes, the various forms of qualitative data including the school map, interviews, observations,

and policy analysis were integrated into coherent themes that best described each school's stance on the themes that emerged. In some instances the themes cut across both atypical school types.

## Results

### Findings Based on Quantitative Analyses

*Theoretically atypical schools are only theoretically atypical.* Theoretically atypical schools were quite common on a national basis. Contrary to what might be expected by current theories, there were many more schools on a national level that were strongly mismatched with their community level norms. Although school violence was predicted quite well by the school context information (as evident in the high *R*-squares reported in the method section), the distribution of residuals (i.e., schools whose levels of violence could not be predicted well by their community characteristics) showed a relatively large number of schools 1 standard deviation or more "off" the prediction made on the basis of the characteristics of their context. For instance, 20% of the Jewish middle and high schools and 24% of the Arab primary schools had residuals higher than 1 standard deviation in moderate types of violence.

Additionally, schools were atypically high or low on different types of violence. This was true on both a national scale and with the schools selected for the qualitative study. Because we looked at the specific types of violence in each school we were able to see what types of violence were most represented in atypical schools (see Table 1 for examples). Some schools have a predisposition toward specific forms of victimization (see Table 1 for examples of different forms the schools reported for the quantitative part of the study). On a national level, 11.3% of schools nationally were defined as atypically low on mild behaviors, 11.7% were atypically low on severe behaviors, and 14.2% were atypically low on sexual harassment. Eleven percent of schools were defined as atypically high on mild behaviors, 11.3% were atypically high on severe behaviors, and 14.2% were atypically high on sexual harassment.

We found that atypicality scores (i.e., residuals) in the three types of violence are correlated quite highly (*r* ranging between .64 and .74). Nevertheless, schools are rarely atypically high or low on all forms of violence. This was true both on a national scale and with the schools selected for the qualitative study. For instance, both the MAM and HAB schools are atypically high on both mild and severe behaviors but not on sexual harassment, HJS is atypically high on severe but not on mild, and both PJS and PJR are atypically low on severe violence but not on the mild behaviors. Benbenishty and Astor (2005) outline different etiologies and patterns for various forms of school violence. This study adds further evidence that the type of the violence on campus does differ from school to school and some forms may be specific to certain campuses and not others. Our qualitative data will revisit this issue.



*Time, stability, and change.* Some schools were more consistently atypically high or low while other schools changed over time. In this study we were able to gather survey data in two points in time (in an interval of 3 years) both on Israel as a whole and on the nine sample schools. Because we used the exact measures employed by the national surveys at the case study sites, we were able to examine changes and compare our sample schools with national fluctuations before and during the course of the study. Atypical schools and the communities in which they are nested are heavily impacted by historical events and social patterns surrounding violence in schools and in the society as a whole.

With regard to the country as whole, there were rather large shifts and reductions in overall levels of victimization (approximately 20% to 25% depending on the type of violence, from 1999 to 2002; Benbenishty & Astor, 2003; Benbenishty, Astor, & Marachi, 2006). We believe these relatively large national reductions are due, in part, to a combination of sweeping national Ministry of Education policy changes, intense media coverage of school violence (due to the release of the national survey), and a greater general public awareness regarding the scope of the problem, all of which created sharp shifts in school practices at the local level (Benbenishty et al., 2006). Interestingly, most of the nine atypical case study schools also demonstrated significant decreases in levels of school violence during the course of this study. In some of the schools reductions were sharper than the national average.

Some of the schools in our case study schools experienced changes that reflected shifting *local* conditions. This was evident especially in two theoretically atypically high violence schools that showed great reductions (MJS and HJS) and an atypically low violence school in which reports of violence slightly increased (PJR). Our qualitative findings in these changed schools (MJS and HJS) suggest that these sharp reductions were associated with new principals who perceived violence reduction as a major part of their educational mission. These two schools had such dramatic shifts in both violence reductions and the overall global feeling of safety for students and teachers that we recategorized them as examples for positive change. The positive change schools are designated as such in our tables. Table 3 illustrates the categorization of the sample schools at survey time 1 and survey time 2 several years later. The qualitative analyses of the case study schools were based on the categorizations listed in Table 3.

The most significant finding is that changes in the high or low violence schools were almost entirely associated with the school's change in principal. The new principal's dominant role in organizing the changes was reflected in the qualitative data.

### Convergence of Qualitative and Quantitative Data

There were strong convergences between the quantitative and qualitative data. The atypically peaceful schools were immediately described as exemplary "special places" by each team member who observed them. This view of each atypically peaceful school as "an oasis" was true despite differences

Table 3

**Categorization of the Sample Schools at Survey Time 1 and Survey Time 2**

School Name	School Level	Cultural Group	Survey Time 1	Survey Time 2
PAM	Primary	Arab-Muslim	Atypically low	Same status
PJS	Primary	Jewish-Secular	Atypically low	Same status
PJR	Primary	Jewish-Religious	Atypically low	Negative change school
MAM	Middle	Arab-Muslim	Atypically high	Same status
MJS	Middle	Jewish-Secular	Atypically high	Positive change school
MJR	Middle	Jewish-Religious	Atypically low	Same status
HAB	High school	Arab-Bedouin	Atypically high	Same status
HJS	High school	Jewish-Secular	Atypically high	Positive change school
HJR	High school	Jewish-Religious	Atypically high	Same status

in culture, religion, language, and political orientations. Similarly, our atypically high violence schools were schools that were openly recognized by the research team and school members as having many organizational and safety problems. These findings are strengthened since our field researchers were unaware of the designation of the schools as theoretically high or low, nor were they initially aware of these hypotheses before and as they entered school sites. However, fairly quickly the team realized they were studying schools at the extreme ends of nonviolence versus violence.

Take for example the following observation entry about atypically low school from a field researcher:

The PJS school is beautiful and peaceful. Grassy areas separate small and new pavilions. Teachers are in the yard with students talking to them softly and sharing with them food, calling them to have a candy or food. Children walk into the teachers lounge to get something and come out smiling. A maintenance person from the kibbutz comes in and brings refreshments and plays the role of a mail person, as part of a class that takes place in open air. The security guard plays with children, lifting them up in the air as they cry with joy. Children are playing in the yard with very little conflict. Teachers look happy and talk to each other and to the principal amicably. They are overheard speaking fondly about their students. Feels like the school we wished our children would attend.

Observation entries surrounding the atypically high violence schools were quite the opposite:

In the hallways and the yard we saw many instances of aggressive interactions among students. Some of the violence was part of "violence games," but another part of the violence involved aggressive teasing, pushes, battering, severe strangling, etc. The students report physical violence by the principal and some of the teachers. (MAM)

This general positive or negative feeling was consistently reflected in the surveys, in the mapping tool, focus groups, and individual interviews and in the many observations. Table 4 provides further quotes and observations depicting some of the violent behaviors that occurred in atypically high violence schools.

### Findings on Victimization Rates and Overall Feelings of Safety

The findings suggest there should be a clear distinction made between (a) reductions in victimization rates and (b) schools that feel safe. This was especially true for schools that were at the extreme high end of violence. Drops in violence rates over time did not always translate into feelings related to safe school climates. In fact, sometimes, reductions in violent behaviors and subjective assessments of feeling safe went in opposite directions. For instance, MAM experienced major reductions in levels of violence reported in students' surveys. In the first survey MAM had a residual of 2.32 standard deviations in severe behavior. The school was remarkably successful in reducing some forms of violence (e.g., 30.7% reported receiving severe beating on school grounds in survey 1 and only 7.2% in survey 2). However, they were unsuccessful in reducing other forms of severe violence (e.g., seeing a student with a knife in school was 61% in both survey 1 and 2). Moreover, in our second survey several years later, more students felt that the school as a whole had a very severe violence problem, 57.4% compared with 40.9% 3 years earlier. The qualitative data also strongly suggested the overall feelings that this was an unsafe school.

The qualitative research team observed that in this school (MAM) the practices of the principal intended to reduce violence were contributing to a "war-like" atmosphere. Extreme tactics such as massive expulsions of disruptive students (e.g., over 50 students in a year), physical intimidation of alleged gang members by school staff, heavy-handed search and security procedures, and other punitive measures contributed to the sharp decreases in some types of school violence. Ironically, these same measures decreased the students' sense of safety. Data from the focus groups, mapping, and participant observations all converged with the survey data to portray an oppressive environment. Parents and teachers often spoke in secrecy to members of the research team and under a shroud of fear. The school felt like a high-security prison that could erupt in violence if the staff did not employ draconian measures to suppress it.

### Major Findings Based on Qualitative Methods and Analyses

Our qualitative findings indicate that the theoretically atypically low violence schools have a combination of organizational and social climate school factors that are implemented effectively by staff and under the leadership of a visionary principal.

Table 4

**Multiple Descriptions of Open and More Severe Conflict in Atypically High Violence Schools**

School	Field Observations and Student Reports
HJR	<p>Two students walk in the hall and they look very upset. One of them states, "One day I will blow him up in a beating that he will never forget." He says it in a menacing loud voice and it seems to be intended to the student walking ahead of them who looks back and quickens his pace.</p> <p>"Give me back my five shekels," a student says to another student in a loud and threatening voice. The other one responds in a weak voice; I cannot hear him but he seems to be saying that he does not have the money. "Go and try to get it," yells the other student and repeats it three times. The other student responds, "Koos Emack" (literally, your mother's vagina, a common curse word in Arabic). They start beating each other and kicking each other in the behind.</p> <p>I am getting the impression something is happening elsewhere. Two of the students next to me intend to go there and one of them says, "Come'on you sadist, there is a fight." I walk to this place near the bushes. Two students stand in the middle of circle. "Shut up," says one. "Come'on, lets see if you are man," answers the other. They start pushing each other and calling, "Come'on." One of them pushes and is stronger and one of them falls down holding the other student's leg and drops him to the ground. They hold each other and roll on the ground, one holds the other in the stomach and the other one responds with blows. I hear a voice as if one of them is choking and is going to puke. At that moment other students intervene and stop the fight. No teacher in sight. The bell rings and the crowd disperses slowly. The two are still challenging each other, "Come'on, lets see if you are man." But the fight dies down.</p> <p>As I follow the crowd, two boys are engaged in an exchange, "With whom?," shouts one of them. No answer. "With whom?" he yells again and jumps on the other student's back and starts strangling him. He receives the answer (I could not hear), gets off his back and they both walk together to class. My understanding is that, in contrast to the fight, here I observed a friendly exchange between peers. (Same day) I hear loud voices. I turn my attention and hear one student shouting, "Shay, I will screw you! I will fuck you up! Why don't you answer me? How come you take five shekels and do not return?" Shay does not respond. The other student starts hitting him. Shay covers his body not to get hurt. Another student approaches and says, "He will bring it on Sunday." Everything is over. Each goes his own way.</p>
MAM	<p>A group of students held a student by the head and dragged him on the floor toward their class. On their way they banged into a female teacher. A male teacher who saw that yelled – don't you see? The female teacher also yelled at them angrily but they did not seem to mind and continued. Two students were fighting in earnest and were choking each other. A teacher intervened to stop it; the students stood up and went to class and continued their fight.</p> <p>Students were holding metal rulers and were hitting students with them. A student was hurt in the yard. Students injured him in the head and he was brought inside. In the halls students continued their violent fights.</p>

Table 4 (continued)

School	Field Observations and Student Reports
HAB	<p>Two students were fighting real hard choking and scratching each other, to the point in which one of them was bleeding seriously.</p> <p>“A couple of weeks ago we had a big fight between two groups of students that belong to different tribes. The fight developed and other students who are their relatives joined in. Pens and pencils were used as weapons and many were hurt.”</p> <p>“I am really worried about the knives that students bring to school” (our quantitative surveys indicated that many students saw knives in this school).</p>

The overall strength of school social climate and organization emerged as the core variables distinguishing both violent and nonviolent school settings. This included the nature of teacher-child relationships, the presence of clear procedures (carried out by staff who believe in the effectiveness of these procedures), an articulated school safety approach that fit with the academic and social mission of the school, a strong school educational mission, and the use of indigenous cultural values to convey the schools safety mission. When taken together, these effects appeared to be very strong across all school types and cultural settings.

These potent factors did not occur in a reductionistic manner. In atypically low violence schools, nonviolence was infused in many aspects of the school life and evident in all contexts. These schools had a “whole school” approach toward school safety. Most of the interventions ensued from the administration and staff rather than from outside sources.

Interestingly, not one of our atypically peaceful or violent schools had evidence-based programs. The primary forces in shaping safe atypically low violence schools were the staff and relationships rather than empirically based violence prevention programs described in research and practice literatures. Consider the following observation entry of a staff meeting on safety:

There was strong consensus amongst the teachers and principals that [anti violence] programs fail unless they emerge from a broad philosophy concerning the meaning of the school and involve the community of teachers and students. Educators felt that their safety approaches worked best because they believed in them, they created them and were invested in the long-term success of their joint efforts.

In our atypically low violence schools all these variables were organized, prompted, and initiated through the role of a strong, visionary, influential, and well-respected principal. The extraordinary efforts of these principals often garnered the admiration of staff, students, and parents. In three of the more peaceful schools principals were able to inspire their staff to create safe settings. This resulted in a sense of shared mission among

school personnel that was evident through the consistent ways staff responded to students. A major difference between the successful and unsuccessful principals centered on their ability to sway, mobilize, endear, convince, and delegate their mission to the school community as a whole.

The following are examples of how these principals' roles were described by our field researchers after conducting interviews and observing the schools.

The principal emphasizes an extreme importance of the school as a value cultivating place. She is seen as a positive leader who moves the whole team forward. The teachers stressed the fact that the principal fully trusts them, allows them to act in an autonomous manner and doesn't interfere in cases when they act independently as well as does not insult their authority. The teachers describe the staff relationships as positive. (PAM)

The school's principal is the dominant character in the school. She stands behind the school's educational vision and represents an educational authority accepted by the teachers, the students, and the parents. The teachers treat students in a personal and warm way. The students and their parents feel and appreciate the constant supervision and hang on it the fact that different incidents mostly do not evolve into a significant case because the close presence makes fast reaction possible which in its turn prevents and neutralizes the clashes. (PJS)

As a whole, the opposite kinds of observations were made about the lackluster, unfair or authoritarian style of principals in the atypically high violence schools:

One of the teachers said that whenever a meeting is planned with the principal one should realize that it won't take place on time "because he is busy in everyday business." There is an inaccessible principal and little direct attention to change. (HJR)

### **The Principal's and Staff's Role in Creating a Social and Physically Safe School Environment**

*Staff-student relationships.* One of the most visible and distinguishing characteristics between atypically low and high violence schools centered on observable positive or negative relationships between the students and staff. Through personal example, the principals of the atypically peaceful schools set the tone for the teachers and students in atypically peaceful schools by promenading the halls and engaging in numerous positive physical and verbal exchanges with students. These transactions were often accompanied by smiles and humor. The principals and staff in the low violence schools demonstrated these traits through authentic contact with students. These behaviors created a positive "emotional tone" in the school that was observable and experienced. In the atypically low violence schools researchers would commonly see the positive emotional and physical contact expressed

in the adult-child relationships (hugging, arms around each other, smiling, laughing, encouragement and positive reinforcement, teachers kneeling and talking to students at eye level). These manifestations of a positive school climate were captured through hundreds of photographs and scores of observations. These types of transactions were common and continuous in classroom and nonclassroom spaces and times.

The principal is seen by the school as having a central role in driving the school agenda. He has imposed limits, regulations, and discipline and at the same time has made the students feel the warmth and care emanated by him. He spends much of his time outside the office engaging with students and knows what occurs on campus. The relationships inside the teachers' staff are close, warm, and full of support. The teachers love their students and take care of them, and the children keep positive and friendly relationships with their mates and attend the school willingly. (MJS)

The high violence schools had many observable and reported instances of principals and teachers yelling, reprimanding, and unfairly punishing, lecturing, or ignoring the students. The principals in these schools seemed more detached from the student and teacher body.

The principal emphasizes the schools' learning goals and makes a large effort to increase the success rate in the *Bagrut* exams (matriculations). The principal does not leave his room and does not visit the school grounds. Some of the teachers interviewed expressed their dissatisfaction with staff relationships and support from the principal. We heard of a sense of discrimination on the part of the administration toward teachers who are not related to the principal, and of favoring family/tribal members. A number of students also complained about misbehaviors of staff members connected with the principal that offended and insulted them without them doing anything wrong. (HAB)

*The physical condition and specific areas within the school.* The generalized feeling of being "safe" or "unsafe" extended beyond observable relationships between people to the care of the physical school environment. The principal's and staff's care of the physical environment clearly distinguished between the atypically safe and unsafe schools. Furthermore, children, teachers, parents and observers saw and experienced these physical manifestations of neglect or care immediately as they walked on school grounds. In high violence prone schools, physically neglected areas such as bathrooms, hallways, spaces behind buildings, and playgrounds covered with trash were commonly documented themes of observations and photographs. In these schools neither the teachers, students, nor the community made efforts to keep the physical environment attractive.



**Figure 1. School grounds for (a) atypically low violence and (b) atypically high violence schools.**

By contrast, our low violence schools were aesthetically pleasing settings that had many physical signs that people were caring for the environment. Figure 1 represents a visual depiction of the contrast in physical settings between an atypically low violence and high violence school.

This neglect of the physical environment and its connection to the staff's disorganization or lack of care was reflected in observations of the internal classroom spaces as well as external spaces:

I enter into one of the 11th grade classes that is empty for whatever reason. I am shocked from the dilapidated images before me. Piles of paper on tables with no order or organization. Tables broken into pieces and covered with writing. The cubicles are covered with jackets and remnants of a roll with chocolate spread on it. The chairs are spread across the class in all directions and with no order. Papers, fruit peels, potato chip bags, nylon bags, all spread on the floor and tables. There are no decorations on the walls at all. Shoe marks are present on many of the walls even though they just painted the walls recently. When I look into the other classes that are in session, I see that this situation is not atypical but rather the norm. The other classes have the same mess and chaos but they have students and teachers in them. (HJR)

This type of disorganization and neglect was not observable in any of the low violence schools. In our atypically peaceful schools the staff's efforts geared toward caring for the buildings, plants, and artistic value of



the physical grounds were connected to the goal of making the school feel welcoming.

*Procedures and supervision within violence prone and undefined places.* In addition to the physical care and neglect of the school grounds, the supervision and procedures were tied to physical subspaces and times within the school. Often these violence-prone locations were the same as the physically neglected areas of the school. However, atypically high and low violence schools differed in how they approached the school response to violence when they occurred. When undefined areas were found in atypically low violence schools, the staff reclaimed responsibility for these places. The principal took the lead in monitoring these places.

The principal took it upon himself to ensure that every place in the school was owned by the school's rules and norms. He showed up in the yard and played with the students and made sure they were playing by the rules. Furthermore, when he heard that students were planning a fight between two groups after school and off school grounds, he intervened and intercepted that plan, taking responsibility for the students' safety even after school hours. (MJS)

In low violence schools, staff positively redefined procedures and responsibility to reduce the potential risk in those locations. For example, consider the following entry description of what atypically low violence schools did to ensure student safety on the bus:

The bus station was identified as a serious source of danger to students. The place was unsafe because students had to wait for their younger siblings to finish school before they could get on a bus, hence spending a relatively long time in an unsupervised place that did not "belong" to the school. Further, the bus traffic posed dangers to students who were playing and running eventually into the road. This weak spot was identified by the school and a series of actions followed, emanating from a whole-school committee that took responsibility to increase safety in the bus stop. (PJS)

The collective and systemic way staff responded to violence in *all locations and times* corresponded closely with a school's designation of being atypically low or high. Normally, procedures were implemented with great consistency and associated with a clear supervision policy. Consider this observational description of a positive change school:

There is a clear policy intended against violence, that there is a constant supervision and that the teachers respond, mostly by referring students to those who are in charge of discipline issues [the principal and vice principal] and coping with violence at school. In this school we have

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noticed that the teachers were highly responsible for discipline, aware of their students' conduct, and responded thoroughly and with personal concern. In the cases when the principal or a teacher saw a student sitting in the corridor during a lesson time they did not ignore it, asked him what is he doing and directed him to enter his lesson. (HJS)

The observation entries show an opposite trend was true for atypically high violence schools:

There is no school code of conduct which defines ways of coping with different levels of violence. Even in cases where there were teachers on duty, the general feeling was that they do not focus on the students and their behavior. The need for more significant and consistent presence of teachers at different places in school should be pointed. Our impression is that the school did not define school violence as a central issue for concern, does not implement systematic programs, and did not define a school code of conduct and acceptable means of action. (HAB)

*Principals and staff with a socially outward orientation.* The atypically low violence schools had an outward orientation that centered on societal purpose of "education." The major impetus for this orientation was the principals, who were able to create a collective awareness and personal responsibility for action in the school. The principal, school staff, mission, and practices explicitly emerged from this perspective that aimed toward social action. Along with the academic mission, the principal and staff in each of the low violence schools defined this kind of socially active education as the primary function of good schooling (similar to the way that Dewey saw democracy as function or outcome of civically minded education). Atypically low violence schools manifested these values through daily interactions, their curriculum, programs, and the way they lived life at school. This quality was evident in diverse cultural settings. As examples, Arab and Jewish atypically low violence schools often shared a safe haven outward orientation.

A Jewish school (PJS) reflected a self-defined "humanistic" orientation emphasizing equality, peace and inclusion between all peoples. The school deliberately accepted a broad range of both Jewish and Arab Bedouin students from nearby villages. The school principal and staff created an educational environment where diverse socioeconomic and cultural groups could co-exist and thrive. The social action and political outward orientation was clear.

Similarly, in an Arab school (PAM) the principal's vision was an attempt to create a cadre of modern Arab citizens who are proud of their religion, heritage, and traditions. She also wanted the school to be a model for constructive peace by creating ongoing dialog between her Arab students and Jewish students from other schools. This was reflected in numerous pictures on the wall depicting religious symbols as expressions of the quest for peace. Students were engaged in ongoing exchanges with Jewish students, both groups sharing cultural heritage and (often painful) history.

*The visible and authentic use of culture: Walking the talk.* The atypically low violence schools used their cultural traditions to encourage nonviolent peacemaking. These were visible on the walls and in the public spaces of the school. In the atypically low violence schools there was a close match between the cultural message of peace and actual behavior of staff and students in the schools.

The walls of the classroom and hallways are covered with the pictures and quotes of Rabbis who advocated for peace, mutual respect, and reciprocity between people. (MJR).

Cultural symbols were sometimes present in atypically high violence schools. However, cultural images were often passive, piecemeal, and not part of the school organization. Side comments from students and teachers to our field researcher often pointed out that the purpose of these displayed messages was to impress outsiders and that they were not a genuine element of school practices and beliefs. Our experience in assemblies and class discussions supports the notion that culture was exhibited on the walls but rarely talked about or shown in behavior.

Figures 2 and 3 depict photographs of cultural symbols of peace displayed on the hallways wall of two atypically low violence schools. In Figure 2 a poster shows how people from different cultures, ages, relationships, religions, and ethnicities can live in peace together through communication, friendship, and conflict resolution. In Figure 3, the bulletin board shows pictures of Orthodox Jewish children holding doves with Hebrew quotes such as “we are all responsible for each other,” “your hand should only be lifted in acts of peace,” and “you should not be happy when a friend falls.”

*Inclusion and diversity as philosophical examples.* Interestingly, the two very different, atypically low violence primary schools mentioned above (PJS and PAM) selected similar ways to express their ideology of inclusion and openness. The Jewish school had classes designed for students with cerebral palsy. This is one of the few integrated cerebral palsy programs in Israel and in the world with such a large number of students. Integration was on most intimate levels.

Students engaged in friendly and caring chats with the children using wheelchairs. Able bodied students kiss and hug the children in wheelchairs and vice versa. No teacher asked them to attend to the needs of the children with cerebral palsy but they did in a gracious, joyous, and harmonious way. The ambulatory children truly included the children with cerebral palsy in their playing. (PJS)

The Arab school admitted a large group of deaf children. In the PAM school students and staff learned sign language. Deaf students were playing with the other students and sometimes were “adopted” as buddies by older students.



**Figure 2. Poster displaying how different cultures should co-exist through positive and clear communications.**

Messages of inclusion were visible throughout the school. The following field observation entry describes the visual images seen:

The school walls have murals and pictures describing the hearing process, how hearing loss happens, and the structure of the hearing aid. In numerous wall decorations the idea of inclusion is expressed. For instance, in a picture of Noah's Ark, those approaching it included Jewish and Arab children and children using wheelchairs.

These examples show how the missions of atypically low violence schools go far beyond the immediate social context of the school. Figures 4 and 5 are photographs showing visual examples of such displays in the school hallways. It is important to stress that most of the school walls were decorated with these kinds of educational social action oriented messages.



Figure 3. Teacher- and student-made bulletin board using cultural quotes to promote peace.

## Discussion

### There Are More Truly Atypical Schools Than Expected

The national proportion of schools that are atypical was much larger than anticipated. This finding should be examined in other countries and incorporated into theory, practice, and policy. Researching a large pool of atypically peaceful schools may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to protect children from the effects of community violence (Benbenishty et al., 2008; Marachi et al., 2007a, 2007b). The presence of a rather large number of atypically high violence schools also suggests that the way schools are organized can contribute to higher than expected rates of violence. Consequently, it is important to refine conceptual frameworks to understand what makes these schools outliers. The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings in our selected atypical schools was high. The atypically low violence schools generated a strong sense of safety with school members and the field researchers. Conversely, atypically high violence schools felt unsafe. Therefore, our study suggests that it is possible to find these atypical schools on national or state levels by using surveys in conjunction with qualitative methods.

### The Principal, Principal, and Then Again the Principal

Inspiring principal leadership in the atypically low violence schools was the most dominant theme that cut through all of the qualitative findings. The



Figure 4. Photograph showing how hearing works and the use of hearing aids on the school hallway walls.

strength of this finding is quite surprising given that the sample of atypical schools was selected quantitatively from a national, random sample of atypical schools. The research team had no prior expectation that the role of the principal would be so pervasive in a sample of schools we had never seen and had little “real life” knowledge about. Yet, the effectiveness of the principal as a change agent differentiated between the atypically high and atypically low violence schools. In turn, the strength of the school organization, mission, philosophy, and collective awareness emanated from the stance of the principals in the atypically low violence schools. The principals in these schools were strong leaders who could mobilize staff, students, and parents. They had overarching philosophies of education that connected school safety directly to the organization and mission of their schools. Each had beliefs that the school could change the lives of students and society.

Under the leadership of these principals, the atypically low violence schools aimed beyond mere safety to a goal of creating caring, inclusive, and nurturing environments. This included how they maintained and celebrated both the social and academic work of students in the hallways and classrooms. It included how they smiled and used positive encouragement during



Figure 5. Photograph showing posters on the inclusion of wheelchair students.

supervision in violence-prone areas such as hallways and playgrounds (rather than draconian law enforcement methods). It encompassed how the staff organized to be consistent and procedure driven so that the response to violence was clear and fair.

This is not an unexpected finding if viewed from a school reform research perspective (see a recent volume edited by Townsend, 2007). Even so, the role of the principal and quality of school organization are rarely researched in evidence-based school violence prevention approaches (e.g., Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004). The school violence literature has noted the role of the principal mostly in the context of facilitating implementation of evidence-based programs (Smith et al., 2004). This inquiry suggests that the selection of an organizationally strong and visionary principal may be the single most important intervention that reduces the incidence of violence in a given school.

Our emphasis on the role of the principal should not be misconstrued as reducing the whole issue of school safety to questions of charisma, personal qualities, and leadership of the principal. Many of the positive organizational

factors we observed have been mentioned in the school safety and school reform literature. What made these factors work in such diverse cultural contexts were the principals. Among the important components in their approach, certain factors stand out and are described below.

*A school-wide awareness of mission, ideology, and procedures.* The principals established a school-wide mission and procedures associated with school safety. The principals were able to inspire, convince, and organize the school staff to follow an approach that clearly linked the school's academic mission with a school safety mission. Teachers, students, and parents in the peaceful schools understood the societal purpose of education in their school. This kind of consensus was not present in any of the theoretically atypically high violence schools.

This consensus facilitated a naturally occurring collective, whole-school approach to dealing with violence. These findings reflect the long-standing assertions of some voices in the school safety literature that procedures, clear policy, and role definition are essential for maintaining safe schools (e.g., Gottfredson et al., 2005). The evidence-based program school safety literatures (for a set of reviews, see Astor, Benenishty, Marachi, & Pitner, in press; Jimmerson & Furlong, 2006) do not strongly emphasize these issues. However, in this study a peaceful school depended on the role principals played in organizing their staff to respond to violence. The procedures related to safety in the atypically low violence school flowed from the organization and mission of the school. This kind of finding has been mentioned in prior qualitative and case studies (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Devine, 1996; Meirs, 1995).

It is important to note that the missions within the atypically low violence schools were not only aimed at creating a safe school environment but had an outward orientation geared toward changing society as well. For example, one school's inclusion of both Jewish and Muslim Bedouin students was a social statement about the co-existence within a future society they wished to influence. Likewise, one of our schools situated in the occupied West Bank was purposefully established in a highly ideological and religious vein (Ultra Orthodox Jewish West Bank Settlers). Ironically, in midst of tremendous political strife (you needed an armored vehicle to get in and out of the school and settlement), the principal and students created one of the most peaceful schools the researchers have ever observed. Yet another Arab-Muslim school focused on creating a peaceful society in a conflicted community that had high crime and involvement in terrorism. The philosophy of schools developed in response to social, political, and religious realities surrounding them.

The staff in the atypically peaceful settings believed that the school should elevate students so that they can improve the world and be contributing members of a democratic community. This is not an entirely new idea and resonates well with the goal and mission of the school that Dewey (1916) outlined so many years ago. Theorists such as Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg (1991), and Noddings (1992) have advocated for such schools. These atypical schools revive the notion that the school plays a key civic and



societal role of democracy toward a more just society. Knafo, Daniel, and Khoury-Kassabri (2008) report that adolescent values and life principles are protective factors for potential victimization. The schools that students attend contribute to this protective factor.

The atypically peaceful schools missions created a real life acceptance and understanding of diversity. They aimed at creating a better society where regular education students and students with disabilities are educated in the same classrooms. The school's inclusion of hearing impaired and cerebral palsy students had the purpose of integrating children with disabilities into the school and educate well-bodied students to live in a society with people who are physically different than them. The Arab school that included hearing-impaired students and taught all of the regular education student's and teacher's sign language was creating a social example to their community. Similarly, the school that admitted Jewish, Bedouin, and students with cerebral palsy from different ethnic and religious backgrounds was a living example of how society should deal with the state of ethnic and social strife in their community. By creating an alternative reality of inclusion, care, and peace, the atypical schools believed they were changing society.

*Warm physical and emotional displays of care.* The outward social mission extended to visible manifestations of how people in the school setting treated each other. Signs of care, humor, and social support were openly displayed on the campuses of atypically low violence schools. We cannot stress enough how important these images are for creating a positive school climate that feels caring. Again, this went beyond "school safety" to environments that demonstrated care. For instance, students holding hands and hugging, teachers and students laughing on the playgrounds, principals walking the hallways and commenting positively with a smile to almost every child (addressed by name) were all common interactions in atypically low violence schools. These continual, pervasive, ongoing, and defining transactions were something that could be seen by our observers at almost any time frame during the day. They were particularly evident in times and places outside the classroom. These images of personal care stood in stark contrast with the punitive and disorganized experiences in the theoretically atypically high violence schools. Once again, the scholarly work of Noddings (1992), Osterman (2000), Power et al. (1991), Skiba, Simmons, Peterson, and Forde (2006), and others advocates for these kinds of caring and purposeful school settings.

These positive images of care also contrast with experiences in normative schools we have seen across the globe. Often we notice teachers and principals afraid to touch, laugh, or cajole students either due to policy, fear of liability, or a sense that they may not be seen as professionals. Some research suggests that this may also be happening because of fear of accusations of sexual, physical, or emotional misconduct (Astor & Meyer, 2001; Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Astor et al., 2001; Behre et al., 2001; Meyer, Astor, & Behre, 2002; Meyer et al., 2004). However, these kinds of fears did not hinder the principal and staff of the atypically low violence schools to

have warm emotional and physical contacts with their students. Virtually no discussions of these kinds of overtly caring behaviors stemming from the staff currently exist in the school safety literature.

*Care of school grounds.* The visual manifestations of care were evident in the way the school grounds were kept and decorated. We believe it is quite probable that almost anyone from the general public would be able to take the hundreds of photographs we took of the school yards, bathrooms, bus stops, gates, hallways, classrooms, drinking fountains, and sports areas and accurately sort the peaceful and more violent schools into the correct piles. The atypically low violence schools were well kept, had many bright decorations (mostly created by the students or teachers), and had live vegetation. Signs of physical maintenance communicated to students, parents, and the community that the school is cared for, nurturing, uplifting, educational, and an important place (see Kozol, 2005). The atypically high violence setting communicated the exact opposite messages with trash, dead vegetation, torn and faded decorations, broken machinery and objects strewn about, peeling paint, unkempt classrooms, and many security devices such as locks and gates.

This does not suggest that beautifying an area creates peaceful schools. Rather, the relationship between unkempt school grounds and high violence is most likely an outcome of disorganization and lack of ownership (Pitner & Astor, in press). The care and ownership of school grounds are critical components in communicating a feeling of safety (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Sutton, 1996). In a case study of an Israeli inner-city school, Benbenishty and Benbenishty (2007) illustrate how the remodeling of school grounds was an essential part of positive change in the school climate. The associations between care, neglect of the community environment, and neighborhood violence-prone locations are well established in urban planning, public health, and women's studies literatures. These findings can be extended to the internal and external spaces within schools (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999). Some European school violence intervention programs actually suggest school beautification as part of the process related to school safety (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Even so, more studies need to explore how school beautification and maintenance can be integrated into school safety programs. More studies are needed to explicate the symbolic safety meanings that school beautification efforts may have on students, teachers, and parents (e.g., someone is taking care of what's outside and inside the school).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Cultural differences between schools were not as prominent as expected. In this study we were hoping to better understand how different Middle Eastern cultures dealt with violence on schools grounds. However, perhaps because we selected schools that were at the extremes of the continuum, culture did not emerge as a distinguishing variable between the atypically high and low violence schools. Instead, it was the authentic and

meaningful way the atypical schools employed cultural traditions and symbols that made them more effective. This was true across the various cultures in our study. The atypically high violence schools sometimes used culture as a way to talk about nonviolence but attempts felt hypocritical since their actions did not reflect cultural goals. Authentic use of culture that was consistent with actual staff behavior toward students was essential for the effective use of culture. The principals and staff of the atypically low violence schools used peace-oriented culture in a way that brought values represented in the cultural metaphors to life.

Similarly, we suspected originally that there may be different ways that primary, middle, and high schools dealt with violent situations. However, once again, the type of school did not matter as much as the principal, school organization, and overall mission of the school. In fact, we had several schools from each category change either from positive change to negative change or vice versa. All these changes were very much related to the arrival of a new strong principal or a departure of one.

Future studies that explore more normative settings may find more variation. These atypical schools that have very low rates or high rates of violence may function differently than school types at the normative levels. So caution should be taken in interpreting beyond the pool of atypical school we discuss in the study. But in this study, the very caring high school looked and felt very similar to the caring and nurturing middle and primary school. The caring atmosphere we observed may be analogous to the positive way that some unique and specialty charter/magnet schools are described at the secondary levels. So it is possible that school type is not as important in more intimate, well-organized, and caring schools.

How schools change over time from negative to positive safety should be studied more. In our study the quantitative and qualitative data suggested that the arrival of new administration was connected with those changes. This should be studied at the city, school district, and state levels as well. The quantitative findings suggest that due to national historical circumstances, there were great fluctuations in violence rates both at the national level and within our case study schools. This type of reduction is often evident with other countries addressing the issue of school violence (for discussions on this issue see Cornell, 2006; Dinkes, Cataldi, & Lin-Kelly, 2007; and Smith, 2003). There has been little dialogue on how reductions in national rates affect individual schools or school districts. This study is one of the first to examine how schools may change over time within a national historical framework (for a national example of historical change, see Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2008).

History and changing dynamics within schools need to be included in research paradigms if we are to understand how schools are able to sustain safe environments. Currently this is not part of any school safety research dialogue. For example, since 1992 there have been reductions of over 50% in severe and lethal school violent events on school grounds within the United States (Dinkes et al., 2007). Yet the general public and local schools

are mostly unaware of these national reductions. Most local schools are not aware how their school is situated within their region or nationally (Benbenishty & Astor, 2007). How certain schools are more effective in withstanding adverse changes may be a productive future research endeavor.

From a policy perspective, the quantitative findings indicate that the school and community contexts should be considered simultaneously when monitoring school safety. Future studies may want to examine how these mismatches inform the sustainability of school reform efforts in districts that only have a few exceptional schools compared with those that have many. These studies could provide very useful information to large school districts and state departments of education. Understanding community rates of violence surrounding schools as they pertain to actual violence rates within schools is an important way to understand the efforts needed to maintain nonviolent schools. A range of capacity-building interventions may include an increase in educational resources, staff training, and support services. Atypically low violence schools could be identified as “home grown” models for other schools struggling with the effects of community violence. Theoretically atypically high violence schools could be assisted to overcome their difficulties. Using this method, the Ministry of Education in Israel has already started a process of identifying Green (safe) and Red (unsafe) schools. The green schools will be used as examples and as “mentor schools.” The red light schools are targeted for further intervention and self-study. This is an approach that can be used in concert with evidence-based programs so schools will be equipped with various resources aimed at producing safe, nonviolent learning environments.

This study raises important questions regarding the self-efficacy that schools must demonstrate when integrating, implementing, and connecting school safety with their overall purpose. Our atypically low violence schools took a holistic stance and argued against piecemeal interpretations of separate variables that made their schools safe or unsafe.

Overall, more empirical work needs to be done on theoretically atypically low and high violence schools. This study should be replicated in other countries and with different cultures. Future studies of atypically high and low violence schools could further illuminate how principal leadership and school organization reduce victimization on campus.

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