Violence Prevention in Austrian Schools: Implementation and Evaluation of a National Strategy

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A qualitative study of Austria's national strategy against violence in the public school system introduced in 2008. The national strategy developed by researchers consists of six activity domains with specific goals and projects defined for each. The evaluation (1) analyzes how the realized projects contributed to the six activity domains, (2) evaluates the national strategy at a general level, and (3) provides future recommendations. Eight members of the steering committee were interviewed at two points in the implementation process. The systematic interviews were coded according to the goals of the activity domains. According to the interviewees most of the projects have been satisfactorily implemented. Networking and cooperation with the different actors in the field of violence prevention and cooperation among steering committee members have been improved. However, the national strategy has not achieved the intended public recognition. The lessons learned from the evaluation and its results are discussed.

As a consequence of the public recognition that violence is a severe problem in schools all over the world (Currie et al. 2012) many prevention and intervention programs have been developed and evaluated in numerous efficacy and effectiveness trials (e.g., Ferguson et al. 2007; Ttofi and Farrington 2009). However, the development of national or regional strategies supported by governments is rare (examples of exceptions are Cross et al. 2011; Roland 2011; Salmivalli, Kärnä, and Poskiparta 2011), although research indicates that such strategies might be a key factor for successful and sustainable violence prevention in schools (Ogden, Kärki, and Teigen 2010; Olweus 2004; Roland 2000; see also Spiel, Salmivalli, and Smith 2011). Austria is one case where a national strategy has been systematically developed and implemented. This paper describes its implementation in Austria and an evaluation of the implementation efforts at a general level.

1. The Austrian National Strategy "Together Against Violence"

The Austrian national strategy for violence prevention in the public school system differs in several aspects from strategies in other countries (for example PREVNet in Canada: Pepler and Craig 2011; the KiVa program in Finland: Salmivalli et al. 2011; the safe schools framework in Australia: Cross et al.): (1) it was introduced subsequent to national or regional strategies in other countries and was therefore able to benefit from experiences in other countries; (2) it seeks to integrate pre-existing activities and to bring the relevant stakeholders together; (3) it activates a variety of projects designed to ensure sustainability (e.g., violence prevention and social competence promotion are defined as obligatory components of basic teacher education).

At the beginning of 2007, in the wake of a quick succession of significant events in Austrian schools Spiel and Strohmeier were commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Education, the

Arts, and Culture to develop a national violence prevention strategy. In the process of developing the national strategy "Together Against Violence" ("Gemeinsam gegen Gewalt"; for details about the development of the national strategy and its aims see http://www.gemeinsam-gegen-gewalt.at; Spiel and Strohmeier 2007; see also Spiel and Strohmeier 2011, 2012), there was an intensive exchange with international colleagues who have been involved in similar national strategies in their own countries (Canada: Pepler and Craig 2011; Norway: Roland 2011; Australia: Cross et al. 2011). Furthermore, as suggested in the prevention literature (Datnow 2002, 2005; Shokoff and Bales 2011; Spoth and Greenberg 2011), the perspectives of different stakeholder groups already involved in violence prevention in Austria (school psychologists, social workers, teaching unions) were systematically integrated in the strategy development (Spiel and Strohmeier 2007).

Spiel and Strohmeier (2007) defined three goals in the national strategy for students, teachers, and parents, as well as for society as a whole (inspired by Christina Salmivalli's KiVa game): (1) Increased awareness and knowledge about violence: *I know, we know;* (2) Increased social competence skills and strategies to cope with violence: *I can, we can;* (3) Increased responsibility and civil engagement: *I do, we do.* The strategy consisted of six activity domains: (1) policy and advocacy, (2) prevention and intervention, (3) knowledge transfer and education, (4) information and public relations, (5) networking and cooperation, and (6) evaluation and research. The application of theoretically based and evaluated prevention programs was specifically considered. For each activity domain specific goals and projects were defined and the agents responsible for realization were specified (for details see Spiel and Strohmeier 2007).

In December 2007, the Federal Minister of Education, the Arts, and Culture decided to implement the national strategy. For strategy management and implementation, a steering committee was established at the Federal Ministry with Christiane Spiel as an external member responsible for research issues. In 2008, the national strategy became part of the coalition agreement between the two governing parties and was planned through to the end of the legislative period in September 2013. Table 1 presents the projects implemented between 2008 and 2010.

Table 1: Projects implemented between 2008 and 2010

Activity domain	Projects
Policy and advocacy	The national strategy is an integral part of national government policy
Prevention and intervention	Increase the number of school psychologists
	Pilot projects by school social workers
	Implementation of behavior agreements
	Implementation of the "Faustlos" program
	Implementation of the Viennese Social Competence Training (ViSC) program
	Implementation of peer mediation
Knowledge transfer and education	Violence prevention and social competence promotion as obligatory components of basic teacher training
	Train-the-trainer course for teachers
	Train-the-trainer courses for ViSC coaches
	Information workshops for schools and kindergartens
Information and public relations	Establishment of a national internet platform
	Organization of events
	Press conferences
	Media reports
	Information material
Networking and cooperation	Establishment of a steering committee
	Conferences involving stakeholders (partners)
	Cooperation with national television networks
Evaluation and research	Documentation and evaluation of the implementation of the national strategy
	Evaluation of the prevention and intervention programs
	Development of online self-assessment instruments for classes and schools

2. The Importance of Strategy Implementation

An important factor for sustainable violence prevention in schools is the implementation quality of programs or strategies (Durlak and DuPree 2008; Fixsen et al. 2009; Berkel et al. 2011). According to Fixsen and Blasé (2009), implementation can be described as the missing link between research and practice. Shonkoff and Bales (2011) argue that the translation of research into policy and practice should be regarded as an important academic endeavor in its own right. In recent years, several research groups have formulated theoretical models of program implementation (Durlak and DuPree 2008; Fixsen et al. 2009; Berkel et al. 2011). In these models, fidelity and quality of implementation are considered important factors.

To date, most empirical research on implementation in general, and prevention programs in particular, has been conducted in Anglo-American countries (Elias et al. 2003). Datnow (2002, 2005) identifies the importance of understanding district and state contexts for the sustainability of comprehensive school reform models alongside teacher- and school-level factors (e.g., Beets et al. 2008; Cargo et al. 2006). According to Datnow's studies, the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of reform, and school change more generally, are the result of interrelations between and across groups in different contexts at various points in time (Datnow and Stringfield 2000). In other words, efforts to implement reforms are more likely to be effective when educators at various levels (e.g., state, district, reform design team, school) share goals and work together. Spoth and Greenberg (2011) show how practitioner-researcher partnerships and supporting infrastructures can support the local adoption of evidence-based interventions and produce community-level reductions in youth problem behaviors and concomitant positive youth development (see also Crowley et al. 2012). In Europe, Norway is a pioneer both in conducting violence prevention programs in schools and in evaluating their implementation on a national level (Roland 2011).

Development, implementation, and dissemination of strategies on a national or regional level involve intensive cooperation between researchers, politicians, and administrators (Roland 2000; Spiel and Strohmeier 2007, 2011) within a mutually respectful, collaborative process (Shonkoff and Bales 2011).

3. Aims of the Evaluation of Implementation

In 2010, Petra Wagner was commissioned by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts, and Culture to evaluate the implementation of the national strategy. Aims of the evaluation were (1) to analyze how the individual projects contribute to the six activity domains defined in the strategy plan by Spiel and Strohmeier (2007), (2) to analyze the national strategy at a general level, and (3) to provide recommendations for the individual projects and for the national strategy in its entirety.[1] The evaluation focuses on fidelity and quality of implementation (Carroll et al. 2007; Elias et al. 2003; Kalafat, Illback, and Sanders 2007) and on participant responsiveness (Dusenbury et al. 2003; for details see Wagner, 2011).

4. Method of the Evaluation
4.1. Expert Interviews

Expert interviews were conducted (Gläser and Laudel 2009). According to Schirmer (2009) interviewees are defined as experts if they have special knowledge related to the research interest. Expert interviews are based on a list of open questions (interview guideline).

The members of the steering committee were identified as experts for the projects within the activity domains (see Table 1) they were responsible for and for the national strategy at a general level. An interview guideline was developed consisting of the following topics: goals of the projects, schedules and application procedures of the projects, evaluation measures (where individual projects had been evaluated), and contribution to the national strategy. Concerning the national strategy at the general level, inter-

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[1]   The three aims of the strategy are formulated at a meta-level. Therefore, the evaluation described here focused on how the projects contribute to the activity domains as a necessary prerequisite for achieving the aims of the national strategy.

viewees were asked about internal changes (within the steering committee) and external changes (as consequences of the implementation of the national strategy) observed since the initiation of the strategy particularly concerning the recognition of the national strategy in the public. Additionally, they were asked to give recommendations for the future development of the strategy. The interviewees also assessed the quality of embedding at the political level (domain "Policy and advocacy") and the quality of networking and cooperation (domain "Networking and cooperation").

4.2. Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of eight members of the steering committee; one was the general project manager and seven were responsible for particular projects within the activity domains. Six interviewees were female, two male. Seven interview partners were long-term employees of the Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts, and Culture, one was an external expert.

Sixteen interviews were conducted altogether. Each member of the steering committee was interviewed twice, in September 2009 and in November 2010. After the first interview phase, results relevant to improving the projects and the strategy in general were reported and discussed in the steering committee. The aim of the second interview was to identify any changes that had occurred. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviewees cooperated with the evaluation and were motivated to provide useful information.

4.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and coded according to the interview guideline (Mayring 2002). This analytical procedure produced thematically classified protocols of each interview in tabular form. To ensure the reliability and validity of the protocols the interviewees were asked to review, revise, and authorize them. All interviewees cooperated in this procedure.

As each steering committee member was responsible for specific projects the evaluation results were based on the judgements of these single responsible members. The

protocols of the interviews served as a data base to evaluate how the projects contributed to the six activity domains.

Data about the national strategy at the general level were available from all respondents. The primary aim of the qualitative data analysis in this area was to elaborate similarities and differences between the interviews (Mayer 2008). Therefore, these parts of the protocols were summarized and correlated (Mayring 2002) and compared using the Delphi method (Linstone and Turoff 1975).

5. Results of the Evaluation

In the following, the most important results concerning the contribution of the projects to the activity domains of the national strategy are presented separately for each domain. Finally, evaluation results concerning the national strategy at a general level are presented. As no specific project is devoted to the activity domain "Policy and advocacy," evaluation results concerning this domain are presented in the context of the results on the general level. The results are presented from the perspective of the second interview and changes over time are included. Evaluation results of individual projects are not presented here. If they have been published elsewhere references are given.

5.1. Prevention and Intervention

The projects "Increase the number of school psychologists" and "Pilot projects by school social workers" (see Table 1) aim at an Austria-wide support of teachers and students with the main focus on violence prevention. Concretely, both projects are designed to foster the social competence and social responsibility of students, their ability to deal with diversity, and their learning motivation directly (e.g., by advice, treatment, and mentoring) and indirectly (e.g., by advanced training and professional support of teachers). This is expected to improve the school and class climate and reduce aggression and violence in Austrian schools.

At the beginning (2008) there were about 140 school psychologists working in Austria. To achieve nationwide support for schools the Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts, and Culture financed 40 new part-time school psychologist posts. According to the interviewed expert, long-term funding for the new school psychologists is secure.

The evaluation of this project was conducted using internal reports.

The pilot projects by school social workers were prepared from 2008 to 2010 and their implementation was scheduled to run from September 2010 until August 2012 in six Austrian provinces. The projects are co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) and are being evaluated by an external research institute.

The behavior agreements project aims to establish Austria-wide support for the school partners (students, teachers, parents) to improve social interactions in schools. The medium-term goal is not only to increase the number of behavior agreements in schools, but also their quality. This project was established some years before the national strategy and later incorporated into it. In 2009, the interviewed expert conducted an Austrian-wide survey to record the numbers of behavior agreements in schools and evaluate the current guidelines (http://www.gemeinsam-gegen-gewalt.at/materialien-links/). The results showed that these guidelines suffer several limitations. Based on the findings of the survey, the Federal Ministry planned to develop new guidelines for behavior agreements including recommendations on how to design the process to develop such behavioral arrangements.

The Faustlos ("no fists") and ViSC programs aim to promote social competence and responsibility in students and encourage their participation to enhance the school community, to reduce aggression and violence in school, and to improve the school climate. Both programs are evidence-based and are primarily oriented towards prevention.

The Faustlos program is based on the Second Step program developed in the United States (Beland 1988) but translated, adapted, and evaluated in a German context for kindergarten and primary schools (Cierpka 2005). The Faustlos material comes in the form of a toolkit and has been delivered to approximately one third of Austrian primary schools. According to the interviewed expert, all Austrian primary schools had the opportunity to request a Faustlos toolkit. All teachers who received the Faustlos toolkit were required to complete Faustlos training. The

initiative ended with the last Faustlos training event in May 2010. To analyze the quality of the implementation the expert conducted an Austria-wide online survey developed in cooperation with the author of the Faustlos program (Cierpka 2005). In sum, more than four hundred teachers participated in the study.

The ViSC Social Competence Program (Atria and Spiel 2007; Spiel and Strohmeier 2011, Strohmeier et al 2012) is a school development project to prevent violence and foster social competencies in secondary schools. Activities are geared to operate on three different levels: the school as a whole, the classroom, and the individual level. A cascaded train-the-trainer model was developed and applied to implement the ViSC program sustainably in the school system: Scientists train ViSC coaches, ViSC coaches train teachers, and teachers train their students. The immediate target groups of this project (ViSC coaches) are teacher-training lecturers and psychologists. Between academic year 2008/09 and 2010/11 thirty-six coaches were trained.

The implementation quality and effectiveness of the ViSC program was intensively evaluated in 2009/10. Evaluation results showed that the program had very positive effects on students in comparison to a randomized control group (Strohmeier et al. 2012). Furthermore, to support schools in implementing the ViSC program a manual for teachers has been prepared.

The peer mediation project aims to provide Austria-wide support for teachers seeking to improve conflict resolution in schools. Within this project, students were trained to mediate in conflicts involving their peers. These peer mediators are supported by teachers trained to coach them. According to the interviewed expert, peer mediation was established in many Austrian schools within the framework of social learning even before the development and implementation of the national strategy. In other words, this project was incorporated into the national strategy as an existing measure. In 2009, the interviewed expert conducted an Austria-wide survey on peer mediation activities in schools to document and evaluate the project. In addition, quality standards for training coaches for peer mediation have been developed.

5.2. Knowledge Transfer and Education

The projects implemented within this activity domain aim to optimize basic and advanced teacher training regarding teaching of social skills and competencies for dealing with violence. The pedagogical universities play a crucial role here. One project in this domain was therefore to examine the curricula of the pedagogical universities to identify whether and to what degree they include obligatory components of violence prevention and social competence promotion. According to the interviewed expert it was a challenge to achieve adequate commitment of the pedagogical universities, which have only recently been established in Austria. The analysis of the curricula resulted in concrete recommendations for basic and advanced teacher training for dealing with violence and aggressive behavior. Subsequently, the actual implementation of these recommendations will be examined. The aim is to create a framework for a violence prevention curriculum for teacher training and to develop corresponding modules.

Another project in this domain was a two-day train-the-trainer seminar conducted in spring 2008 to provide teachers from the pedagogic universities with evidence-based knowledge for violence prevention. According to the interviewed expert, feedback reports from participants showed high acceptance ratings.

Furthermore, thirty-six ViSC coaches have been trained (see domain "Prevention and Intervention"). ViSC coaches are working with schools applying the ViSC program and also function as trainers for teachers.

In addition, twelve Austria-wide information workshops for schools and kindergartens were organized ("Joining forces against bullying and violence"). Each workshop was designed for about thirty participants. According to the interviewed expert parents, teachers, and other interested professional groups participated.

5.3. Information and Public Relations

The aim of this activity domain is to publicize the national strategy and make information material available. Its heart is the internet platform http://www.gemeinsam-gegen-gewalt.at/, which supplies information about the national strategy and research on violence prevention in schools and provides school partners with access to materials and targeted information on violence in schools. In addition, the internet platform serves as a networking space for all partners contributing to the prevention of violence at school.

In addition, various events and press conferences were conducted, all related to different specific initiatives within the national strategy. For example, the national strategy was launched at a major press conference in December 2007 where the minister herself presented the "Together against Violence" initiative and described the initiative's first plans and projects.

5.4. Networking and Cooperation

Networking and cooperation among the initiative's partners is an important aim of the national strategy (Shonkoff and Bales 2011; Spoth and Greenberg 2011). To achieve this aim, annual conferences (see Table 1) have been conducted since 2008 to provide a platform for exchange between the different stakeholders in the field of school violence prevention. In these conferences, a common knowledge base for implementation of the national strategy should be created. In addition, the respective responsibility of the stakeholders (partners) in violence prevention should be discussed and clarified with the aim to create a platform for the schools on national and regional level and the public. These objectives are supported by the integration of national and international experts.

All members of the steering committee were interviewed about this activity domain. They agreed that the networking activities in general and the annual meetings in particular have a high priority for the national strategy. The steering committee has therefore taken a greater role in coordinating the planning process. There is also agreement among the interviewees that the planning and design of the networking meetings has developed very positively. The network meetings have been consecutively optimized on the basis of the experience and the evaluation results (participants's assessments) of the previous meetings. As a consequence, representatives of the partner groups were involved in the preparation of the third networking meeting.

5.5. Evaluation and Research

This activity domain emphasizes the importance of evaluation and supporting research for the national strategy. Both the evaluation described here and the evaluations of the Faustlos and ViSC programs are concrete projects of this domain (see domain "Prevention and Intervention").

In addition, this domain involves the development of online self-assessment instruments for schools. These tools enable principals and teachers to assess and interpret violence rates in their schools and classrooms, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions against violence. Consequently, these tools also support the sustainable implementation of violence prevention in Austria, as the presence of researchers is not needed for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The AVEO self-evaluation tool (Austrian Violence Evaluation Online-Tool) provides information about violence rates from the perspective of students and is already operating (Spiel et al. 2011). The teacher and school perspective was systematically integrated into the development of the self-evaluation tool and the development carefully evaluated (Spiel et al. 2011). An analogous tool collecting data from teachers is in preparation.

5.6. Analysis of the National Strategy at General Level

All interview partners were asked about the national strategy at a general level. Their statements on the question of what changes they have observed since the initiation of the national strategy were very homogeneous. All of them pointed to the enhanced cooperation in the steering committee and the significantly improved project management compared to the starting phase. Cooperation in the steering committee was described as well developed, constructive, open concerning communication, and conducive to the exchange of knowledge between the individual projects and to overall coordination. Synergies have been increasingly identified and used. According to the interview partners, this positive trend is also reflected in increased networking between the projects.

The external development of the strategy was more cautiously assessed by the interviewees. They agree that the initiative has not actually been recognized as intended in public and made several recommendations for improvement. One of them suggested a survey of schools to investigate awareness of the initiative, in order to acquire reliable data. In addition, some interviewees recommended optimizing and intensifying public relations (e.g., active involvement of Austrian broadcast media in the initiative). Some positive developments have been observed but further work needs to be invested. In particular, an overall public relations strategy was requested by interviewees at multiple levels (school, parents, and public) and in media with different levels of coverage (nationwide, state, and regional), as recommended in the strategy plan (Spiel and Strohmeier 2007).

In addition, strengthening the projects in the regions, establishing or strengthening local networks (schools), and raising teachers' awareness were identified as future tasks of the national strategy. Here, the increased involvement of the pedagogical universities was seen as the key by all interviewees.

Furthermore, the interviewees agreed that the fact that the political declaration has not been realized at the national and state levels as recommended in the original strategy plan (Spiel and Strohmeier 2007) has been a limiting factor for the strategy's success and for the commitment of certain stakeholder groups. According to the strategy plan there should have been a national declaration level signed by the president and the chancellor, as well as by representatives of the teaching unions, the national parents' committee, and the students' unions. Similar declarations at the state and the local level are suggested in the strategy plan. However, for political reasons the Federal Minister of Education, the Arts, and Culture did not support these declarations. This makes it clear that Austria has yet to achieve the national political commitment to violence prevention by all parties and the whole government that Spiel and Strohmeier (2007) identify as the central basis for the success of a national strategy as exemplified by the case of Norway (Roland 2011).

6. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The lessons for the development of national strategies and the promotion of evidence-based policy and practice have

recently been discussed by Spiel and Strohmeier (2012). Therefore, we focus here on the implementation of the national strategy and the results of the implementation evaluation. However, the results are only preliminary as the strategy has not been fully implemented and the implementation evaluation had a formative rather than summative focus.

Nevertheless, the results of the evaluation should be discussed concerning fidelity, quality of implementation, and adaptation to local political and social circumstances. The starting point was the strategy plan recommended by Spiel and Strohmeier (2007). However, for political reasons the Federal Minister did not realize all parts of the plan (e.g., the declarations at different political levels). Furthermore, the Federal Minister has extended the national strategy by adding some pre-existing projects (e.g. the peer mediation and behavior agreements projects). Consequently, the strategy and also the steering committee itself became less focused and more heterogeneous.

If fidelity and quality of implementation were to be assessed in terms of the original strategy plan, the results would not be completely positive. However, if the politically modified strategy plan is used as the reference, taking into account the challenges caused by the modification, the results are satisfactory – in particular if it is borne in mind that implementation continues until the end of 2013. According to the implementation evaluation the projects are proceeding well. However, whether they together achieve the goals of the national strategy remains to be proven by a summative evaluation after full implementation of the national strategy, by collecting data from teachers and students. Attainment of the third goal (Increased responsibility and civil engagement) has so far only been successfully proven at project level (by the ViSC program evaluation; e.g., Strohmeier et al. 2012).

According to previous research (Datnow and Stringfield 2000; Shonkoff and Bales 2011; Spoth and Greenberg 2011) the views of the stakeholder groups actively engaged in the field of violence prevention were already considered in the development of the strategy plan. Furthermore, one out of six activity domains explicitly focuses on networking and cooperation. However, while internal cooperation (the steering committee) has been satisfactory improved it turns out that the engagement of stakeholder groups, in particular at state and local levels, plainly needs more time (Datnow 2002, 2005). Effective steps have been already set in motion.

The main future challenges are the systematic engagement of the pedagogical universities and the public visibility of the national strategy. Responsiveness at all levels is considered an important mediator of fidelity and quality of implementation and therefore of program outcome (Berkel et al. 2011). In agreement with Shonkoff (2000) we must acknowledge that science, policy, and practice reflect different ways of thinking about violence prevention. However, we also agree with him that success in the long run is best addressed as continuous work in progress (Shonkoff 2000). Aside from this, the development of the national strategy and its implementation have already had several positive effects on a more general level. The usual practice was changed from supporting single initiatives lacking standards of evidence (Atria and Spiel 2003) to promoting evidence-based programs. Moreover, a rigorous evaluation of the ViSC program was applied using randomized trials under real-world conditions. To our knowledge, this was the first time that the Austrian Federal Ministry financed such a procedure. Last but not least, the Federal Minister and the members of the steering committee were persuaded to commission an evaluation of the implementation of the national strategy and to use the evaluation results for improvement.

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