



# THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

## **Safe Inclusive Schools Network (SISN): Reducing inequality by improving educational outcomes for vulnerable learners.**

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Improving education quality and raising learning outcomes are central to the post-2015 global education agenda. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address this concern specifically in SDG 4 by calling upon education systems to *ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*.

Inclusive education is a strategic, rights-based approach to education intended to reduce exclusion and marginalisation in schooling and increase meaningful participation in learning activities, thereby enhancing educational outcomes. Originally concerned with the educational experiences of students with disabilities, today the international consensus on inclusive education is one that extends to *anyone* who might be excluded from, or have limited access to, the general educational system within a country. This includes a much broader group of vulnerable children such as those living in poverty, newly arrived migrant children, or others who may have a non-majority ethnic, cultural or religious heritage.

However, both within and outside schools, significant barriers to learning exist. Among these, violence in childhood is increasingly recognised as a serious problem that violates children's human rights and has a profound negative impact on learning outcomes: UNESCO's 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report<sup>1</sup> recognises school based violence as a global phenomenon.

The Safe and Inclusive Schools Network (SISN) is an interdisciplinary network of colleagues working together to explore the intersections of violence in childhood, learning outcomes and educational practices. Our work aims to understand and extend the reach of inclusive education from concern with individual learning needs to understanding how issues that can affect the lives of any child can create barriers to learning. In particular, we are interested in understanding the meanings of violence against children, their effects on learning outcomes, and the educational practices that can support SDG target 4a: the provision of *safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all*. This innovative approach to inclusive education is of particular importance because the inequalities associated with the effects of violence on learning outcomes are not well understood despite evidence that experiences of violence can have serious consequences for learning outcomes such as lower grades, underachievement and dropping out of school. We believe that a much deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of the inequalities associated with exposure to violence is needed to ensure progress towards SDG 4.

We use the term 'violence in childhood' to explore violence against children, violence by children towards others and violence to which children are exposed. We conduct research and engage in capacity building activities for interdisciplinary work with academic and non-academic partners seeking to understand, define and map the intersections of exposure to violence with educational practices and learning outcomes with the goal of developing and rigorously testing educational interventions to prevent violence, respond to the effects of violence, and improve learning outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002457/245752e.pdf>

SISN aims to advance knowledge about the dynamics of inequalities with a particular focus on how they may create pathways to violence and exclusion, and, from there, to establish new directions in understanding how learning outcomes can be enhanced through the provision of *safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all*. This also includes attention to environmental context and spaces, building and upgrading facilities to ensure that they are safe.

## SISN AIMS AND ACTIVITIES

1. *Synthesise existing knowledge about the effects of violence on learning outcomes in challenging contexts*. SISN undertakes literature reviews and secondary data analysis to systematically explore and map existing academic and grey literature across geographically diverse countries on the mechanisms and contexts related to violence that lead to inequalities in learning outcomes for children.<sup>2</sup> SISN members are currently leading a global systematic review and meta-analysis of the impact of violence in childhood on learning and other educational outcomes for children.

2. *Undertake research exploring the intersections of violence in childhood, learning outcomes and educational practices*. With funding from the University of Edinburgh Challenge Investment Fund we are developing the conceptual framework required for a comprehensive study in low- and middle-income countries to explore the relationship between exposure to violence, the educational practices that aim to address it and learning outcomes for children. We have a particular interest in inclusive pedagogy<sup>3</sup> and restorative approaches<sup>4</sup> that focus on restoring good relationships when there has been conflict or harm, and developing school ethos, policies and procedures to reduce the possibility of such conflict and harm arising. In addition to the focus on prevention, SISN members are also focused on responses and are conducting research on approaches to enhance teachers' recognition, recording, reporting and referral (the 4 R's) of violence against children.

3. *Understand the relational aspects of teaching and the school environment crucial to the development of effective and sustainable interventions that reduce inequities associated with exposure to violence*. SISN members have developed a conceptual model of teacher agency for inclusion and related participatory methods and tools that enable us to study how practice develops in different contexts. This enables us to conduct robust practice-based research that explores the ways in which teachers work flexibly and collaboratively with families, other professionals, students and school staff to create inclusive school and classroom environments. SISN members have also developed and evaluated curriculum-based interventions to prevent sexual violence in schools,<sup>5</sup> as well as conducted research on new teachers' responses to bullying and other forms of violence against children that may happen or come to light in school settings in order to understand how to best support them.<sup>6</sup>

4. *Explore innovations in environmental design research and the development of social infrastructure*. In dialogue with architects who study and develop guidance for school design, SISN members are exploring the links between school infrastructure and educational practices.

5. *Explore the potential of geospatial mapping in assessing exposure to violence in different contexts*. Geospatial analysis has been used in epidemiological studies and has been invaluable in shedding light on the link between exposure to known risk factors and geographic and spatial differences affecting the prevalence and impact of various outcomes. We are developing links with public health researchers to explore the application of this approach to education.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/eapro/Preventing\\_Violence.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/eapro/Preventing_Violence.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/election-briefings/inclusive-pedagogy>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/election-briefings/restorative-approaches>

<sup>5</sup> Safe Schools for Teens in the Philippines and the taboobreaker programme in Switzerland are two examples, see the following video on taboobreaker for more information: <https://youtu.be/ZqBxPK6yjYA>

<sup>6</sup> [http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/177889\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/177889_en.html)