

Education in Risk Situations: Gangs and New Challenges for Schools and Teachers

In the past, a major concern in regards to students with ties to gangs was the high dropout rates; however, gangs never abandoned the school. In El Salvador, public schools are generally considered an integral part of gang territory.



1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Describe and analyze how the presence of gangs, together with the sense of insecurity that this may provoke, affect the daily functioning of public schools and the role of teachers.



2. METHODOLOGY

- An exploratory and qualitative case study design.
- Six schools from rural and urban neighborhoods, located in three different subnational departments.
- Interviews with teachers, principals, parents and technical assistants from the Ministry of Education.



3. RESULTS

The presence of gangs in the surrounding areas of the school:



Provokes the erosion of pedagogical authority

- Students close to the gang often behave in a defiant and threatening way, calling into question the teacher's authority.
- Students' impositions in the classroom can be understood as an "inverse coercive authority".
- When others follow their defiant behaviors, these students acquire a leadership role.

b Intimidates educational relationships

- Students' threatening behavior creates anxiety and fear among educational staff.
- The relationship between teachers and students erodes, resulting in the deterioration of educational processes.
- Teachers resort to distant but cordial relationships with students.

d Stresses the scarce resources available to achieve quality and education integration

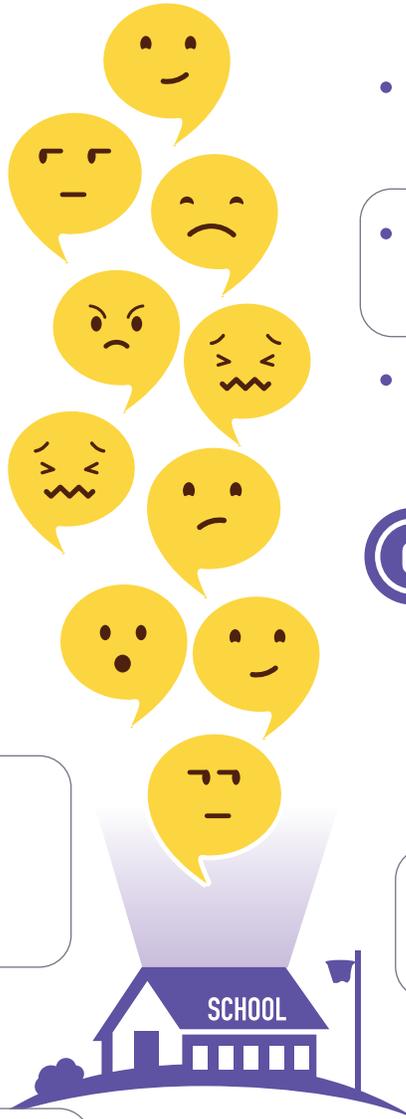
- Public schools have few resources to offer attractive education.
- Teachers employ the 'school handbook' to achieve discipline; at the same time, they protect themselves from reprisals by emphasizing that its guidelines are communally agreed upon.
- Support from the families of students with difficulties is scarce. Some schools deny enrollment of allegedly problematic youth.
- However, the success of these coping strategies depends often more on the families and gang leaders, than on the school itself.

c Affects the quality of education and the participation of students

- The atmosphere in the classroom deteriorates and the quality of education diminishes.
- The efforts of students to advance with their studies are hampered.
- Some students drop out of school.

e Provokes fear, individual coping strategies and risk of teacher isolation

- "Having patience," "not showing fear," and "not complicating one's life" are common strategies for teachers.
- Nevertheless, fear and anxiety affect their health and motivation.
- Some teachers isolate themselves socially because they distrust their students and colleagues.
- Professional training does not prepare teachers for the clash between their pedagogical authority and an inverse coercive authority.



4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

a

Address the presence of students collaboratively with the school, the neighboring community, and the education system.

b

Support collective efforts among the school, families, local community and authorities and state and non-governmental organizations, improving pedagogical relationships between teachers and students and promoting appealing educational processes.

c

Strengthen the cohesion of the teaching staff and the principal's leadership.