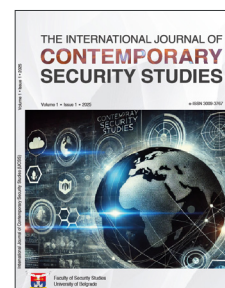




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Article

A Holistic Approach to Multidimensional Aspects of School Safety

Admir Metić^{1*}

¹ Faculty of Pedagogy in Jagodina, University of Kragujevac, Milana Mijalkovića 14, 35000 Jagodina, Serbia.

* Correspondence: admir.metic@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

School safety is a complex and multidimensional concept that includes physical, social, and psychological aspects of the school environment. The aim of this paper is to investigate how different dimensions of safety affect students' and teachers' perceptions of safety and to evaluate the importance of an integrated approach to improving the school climate. The analysis of relevant literature and evaluation studies shows that physical-technical factors (such as architectural solutions and surveillance systems) significantly contribute to the objective sense of protection, while social-psychological factors - the quality of interpersonal relationships, the sense of belonging, and teacher support - have the most significant impact on the subjective sense of security. The organizational aspect, based on the school's cooperation with parents, the local community, and institutions, proves crucial to building a long-term culture of safety and the school's resilience to risks. The results indicate that an integrated, holistic approach, which combines physical protection measures with the prevention of violence and the development of a supportive climate, contributes most to perceptions of safety and the overall quality of the educational process. Applied multidimensional analysis provides guidelines for the development of school safety policies by linking legal, organizational, and psychological factors.

KEYWORDS

Dimensions of school safety; physical-technical and social-psychological factors; integrated approach to safety; quality of school climate; prevention of school violence.

1. Introduction

Safety in schools is a complex, multidimensional concept encompassing physical, social, psychological, and organizational aspects of the school environment. In the scientific and professional literature, there are two basic approaches to defining school safety: the narrower one, which emphasizes the absence of violence and the preservation of the physical and psychological integrity of students and teachers, and the broader one, which sees safety as a dynamic process that includes a favorable school climate, the quality of relationships, student participation in the community, and support for their personal and academic development (Cornell & Huang, 2016). Based on this understanding, modern research indicates that a safe school is not only an institution without incidents but also an environment that fosters a sense of belonging, trust, and mutual respect (Cvetković, 2015; Cvetković et al., 2024; Jankovic et al., 2023). Achieving that goal requires an integrated approach that combines physical protection measures (technical equipment, architectural solutions, and emergency response procedures), social-psychological factors, and organizational measures.



This paper aims to analyze the multidimensional aspects of school safety and to highlight the importance of a holistic approach that integrates physical, psychological, and organizational components into a unified model. The paper seeks to identify which factors most influence students' and teachers' perceptions of safety, as well as how cooperation among school, family, and community contributes to building a culture of safety (Sprague & Walker, 2021).

The research question is: how does an integrated approach to school safety improve the sense of safety and well-being in the school environment?

The research hypothesis is based on the assumption that an integrated model of school safety, which combines physical, psychological, and organizational measures, contributes to greater well-being, a better school climate, and a higher level of students' academic success.

The structure of the paper follows this setting: In the first part, the methodological foundations and research approach are presented. In the second part, theoretical models and conceptual demarcations of school safety are analyzed (Bear, 2020).

The third part is devoted to multidimensional approaches and factors influencing the school climate. At the end, there is a conclusion and recommendations for improving school safety practices. A holistic approach to school safety, which combines physical, psychological, and organizational measures, creates an environment in which students and teachers are not only protected but also actively involved in building a culture of trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility.

2. Integrated Approach to Safety in the School Environment: Formal and Subjective Aspects

The issue of school security is a fundamental condition for fulfilling its educational functions. The most common definition of school security, a complex phenomenon, refers to the condition in which the school is safeguarded against all security threats, meaning there is no danger to students' lives and health or the integrity of school property (Metić, 2025). Educational institutions are legally obligated to conduct a risk assessment of disasters and develop a protection and rescue plan for all facilities where education takes place (Cvetković, Nikolić & Lukić, 2024). Formal or objective aspects of school security refer to institutional mechanisms, regulations, and measures that ensure the physical protection of students and employees. This level of security is based on laws, regulations, and procedures that regulate the functioning of the school system, as well as on technical and organizational solutions that prevent risky situations (Klinger, Klinger, 2018). In practice, formal security entails the application of risk assessments, behavioral protocols for emergencies, evacuation plans, and physical-technical protection systems, such as video surveillance and access control (Tadić, 2022; Dada et al., 2025; Janković et al., 2025; Popović Mančević, 2025; Vidović & Beriša, 2025). An example of good practice is the introduction of a school safety protocol in cooperation with the local police and fire department. That measure, which includes regular evacuation drills and employee training, resulted not only in better organizational preparedness but also in increased trust among students and parents (Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2017). In this way, formal rules and procedures serve as the foundation of a safety culture, but by themselves they are not sufficient to create a complete sense of safety in the school. Subjective aspects of school safety refer to individuals' personal experiences of safety and trust within the school community. This includes how students, teachers, and parents perceive the school environment, their relationships with each other and the level of support they receive (Calabrese, 2018).

While the formal aspects provide structure and procedures, the subjective aspects build confidence, motivation, and a sense of inner stability. It is their connection that forms the essence of an integrated approach — only a school with balanced institutional mechanisms and a favorable social climate can be permanently safe and stimulating for all actors of the educational process.

2.1. School Safety: Conceptual Distinctions and Multidimensional Approaches

The concept of school safety in the literature is most often considered through two basic approaches - narrower (minimalist) and broader (holistic). Both approaches start from the common assumption that the school must provide conditions in which students, teachers, and other employees can function without physical and psychological threats. However, they differ in the depth and breadth of the observation of that term (Bo, 2021). In a narrower, minimalist approach, school safety is defined as the absence of violence, threats, and undesirable behaviors that disrupt the educational process. According to this understanding, a school is safe when the physical and psychological well-being of students and teachers is protected, and all actors can fulfill their roles unhindered in an atmosphere of respect and safety (Duke, 2022; Đurić, 2008). This approach emphasizes formal and preventive measures, such as behavioral control, supervision, disciplinary rules, and physical-technical protection. In contrast, a broader, holistic approach views school safety as a dynamic process that encompasses not only the absence of risk but also the development of a favorable school climate and a sense of belonging and mutual support within the school community. In this model, safety is integrated with educational quality, student well-being, and collaboration between school, family, and community (Mayer & Cornell, 2017; Bucher & Manning, 2015). Although these two approaches seem contradictory at first glance, modern research shows that the most effective model is the one that integrates them, i.e., combines objective protection mechanisms with a subjective sense of security and trust within the school. It is this synthesis that forms the basis of the multidimensional approach, which, in this paper, represents the theoretical basis for the analysis of school safety.

Table 1. Comparison of narrow and broad approaches to school safety

Criterion	Narrower (minimalist) approach	Broader (holistic) approach
Basic understanding	Safety = absence of violence and risk.	Safety = favorable school climate and student well-being.
Basic understanding	Duke (2022), Đurić (2008), Squelch (2014).	Mayer & Cornell (2017), Bucher & Manning (2015).
The main goal	Physical protection and incident prevention.	Development of a sense of belonging, trust, and psychological security.
Dimensions	Formal measures, discipline, supervision, risk control	Social-psychological relations, cooperation, and student involvement.
Typical questions	Is the school free of violence?	Do students feel accepted and supported?
Limitations	Ignores internal emotional and social factors.	Difficult to measure indicators and to assess subjectively.
An example from practice	Introduction of video surveillance and access control.	Programs for building school climate and student mentoring.

By summarizing the various definitions in this form, the enumeration of sources is avoided, while their essential contribution is preserved. The table visually shows the differences and indicates that the modern approach tends to integrate narrow and wide models, which aligns fully with your work and the professor's expectations.

3. Multidimensional Approaches to School Safety

The concept of school safety can be most fully understood through a multidimensional approach, which integrates different models - risk management, violence prevention, and shaping a favorable school climate. These approaches complement each other: the first emphasizes institutional mechanisms to prevent risky situations, the second focuses on psychological and social factors that influence student behavior, and the third emphasizes the importance of the school environment as a community that fosters a sense of security and belonging. Contemporary research (Đurić, 2008; Juvonen et al., 2020; Aleem & Moles, 2023) indicates that their integration yields the most significant preventive and educational effects.

The physical-technical dimension includes all measures that contribute to the structural protection of the school space and the reduction of opportunities for risky situations. These include architectural solutions, security systems, evacuation plans, and regular training for employees and students (DeWitt, Slade, 2014). Analysis of risk management shows that measures combining technical and organizational elements, such as clearly marked exit routes, video surveillance systems in common areas, and regular security exercises, had the most significant preventive effect. In addition to infrastructure, the physical environment also has a psychological function: well-lit, orderly spaces reduce anxiety and foster a sense of control. Therefore, the assessment of physical and technical safety must include not only the functionality of the equipment but also the way the space is perceived as predictable, organized, and conducive to learning (Henrich et al., 2016). Methodologically, this dimension can be measured using indicators of infrastructural security (degree of surveillance coverage, existence of security plans, frequency of training) as well as perceptual indicators (subjective feeling of protection for students and teachers).

The social-psychological aspect of safety refers to the quality of interpersonal relationships, the sense of belonging, and the level of emotional support within the school. Research shows a clear correlation between positive relationships and perceived safety (Buhs, Ladd & Herald, 2016). In schools where teachers show empathy and consistently enforce rules, students are less likely to report feeling fearful and more likely to participate in activities.

Risk factors in this dimension include emotional isolation, peer violence, and lack of communication. Early signs of risk – such as social withdrawal, aggressive behavior, or declining academic performance – can be identified and addressed in time by introducing mentoring, peer support, and counseling programs. According to Hawkins, Lishner, and Catalano (2021), early recognition of social and emotional deficits has the most potent preventive effect. Measurement of this dimension can be done through survey instruments that assess trust, communication, and sense of belonging, as well as through qualitative methods (focus groups, interviews) that provide deeper insights into the school climate experience.

The third component is the school's cooperation with parents, local institutions, and social organizations. It provides social support and long-term resilience of the school to risks. Quality cooperation with parents increases trust, while partnership with the police, social work centers, and health institutions enables a faster response in crises (Cvetković et al., 2024). Best practice examples show that inter-institutional agreements and joint prevention programs (e.g., non-violent communication training or training of school patrols) have led to a significant reduction in the number of incidents and a strengthening of the sense of collective security. That cooperation contributes to the development of a "safety culture" that extends beyond the school and encompasses the entire community (Đurić, 2008; Calabrese, 2018). Methodologically, this dimension can be analyzed through indicators of connection and engagement (number of partnerships, joint activities, degree of parental involvement) and outcome indicators (level of trust, number of reported risks, success of interventions).

A multidimensional approach to school safety has twofold research value:

- (1) enables the identification of priorities in interventions - which measures have the most significant effect in specific contexts;
- (2) provides a basis for the development of measurement instruments that can quantify the level of physical, social, and organizational security (Lazarus, Sulkowski, 2024).

The operationalization of these dimensions requires the application of combined methods: quantitative (surveys, risk indices) and qualitative (interviews, case studies). In this way, security is seen as a dynamic system that can be measured, analyzed, and improved.

4. Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of different theoretical approaches and practical models of school safety showed that this phenomenon requires an integrated, holistic approach, in which physical-technical, social-psychological, and organizational aspects are viewed as interconnected elements of a single system. From a theoretical point of view, the work contributed to the synthesis of existing security concepts, showing that a safe school is more than an institution without violence; it is a space where physical protection, a favorable school climate, and supportive relationships that build a sense of belonging and trust come together. Such integration enables a deeper understanding of security as a dynamic category, the essence of which lies in the balance between formal protection measures and the subjective feeling of security. From a practical perspective, the results of the work indicate that effective management of school security is achieved by applying preventive and developmental strategies that combine physical measures (architecture, surveillance, evacuation plans), psychological support (counseling centers, mentoring, interpersonal communication), and partnerships with parents and local institutions. The application of these principles in school practice contributes to a greater sense of security, a better school climate, and encourages the academic success of students. At the same time, the work emphasizes that safety is the collective responsibility of all actors of the school community and that it can only be maintained through continuous education, cooperation, and adaptation to new social and technological challenges.

In terms of future research, the paper indicates the need for empirical validation of the proposed multidimensional model of school safety. Future research could aim to operationalize indicators for each dimension – physical, psychological, and organizational – and analyze the correlation between perceived safety and educational outcomes. In addition, an in-depth study of the impact of digital technologies on student safety is recommended, as is the development of innovative forms of cooperation among schools, parents, and the local community. Synthesizing theory and practice, this paper confirms that a safe school is not only an institutional goal but also a social value that unites the knowledge, trust, and responsibility of all actors in the educational process.

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