

*Consistent and cooperative actions are key elements for effective bullying prevention and intervention. The ViSC Social Competence Program fosters a school development process and offers training to work against violence.*

# 6

## ViSC Social Competence Program

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Research activities on the topic of violence prevention in Austrian schools were initiated in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, a national report summarizing existing initiatives to prevent violence and bullying in Austrian schools showed that they were neither evidence based nor successful.<sup>2</sup> Several initiatives had been undertaken by teachers in Austrian schools, but they did not meet scientific quality standards, and as a result, these uncoordinated efforts were highly ineffective.

At the beginning of 2007, as a result of a quick succession of several spectacular events in schools and the ensuing public discussion on the high rates of bullying among Austrian youth, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education commissioned researchers to develop a national strategy for violence prevention in the Austrian public school system.<sup>3</sup> The goal was to develop a procedure that had the following components: (a) making bullying prevention a

common goal of as many stakeholder groups as possible in Austria, (b) learning from research and international examples, and (c) applying evidence-based programs in Austrian schools.

The national strategy, Together Against Violence, covered six activity domains:

1. Policy and advocacy
2. Information and public relations
3. Networking and cooperation
4. Knowledge transfer and education
5. Prevention and intervention
6. Evaluation and research

In 2008, the national strategy became part of the coalition agreement between the two governing parties and has been extended and financially supported until 2013. Examples of activities within the national strategy were the development of a national home page, the organization of annual conferences for stakeholder groups, the development of an online self-evaluation tool for schools, and the implementation and evaluation of the ViSC program.<sup>4</sup>

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### *Goals and target groups of the ViSC program*

In accordance with the Austrian national strategy, the main goal of the ViSC program is to reduce aggressive behavior and bullying and foster social and intercultural competencies in schools. The ViSC program is a primary preventive program designed for secondary schools. In Austria, secondary schools serve grades 5 to 8, with students aged eleven to fifteen years. The ViSC program intends to install the mission of the national strategy, Together Against Violence, as a commonly shared principle in schools, approaches the school as a whole, and uses a systemic perspective. The prevention of aggression and bullying is defined as a school development task, and the initial implementation of the program lasts one school year. During the first semester, the program covers interventive and preventive measures at the school, and

teachers are the primary target group (see Table 6.1). Preventive measures at the class level are introduced to the teachers during the second semester. During this semester, the target groups are both teachers and students.

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### *Bridging research and practice*

To foster sustainable knowledge transfer between research and practice, a cascaded train-the-trainer model has been developed and applied: scientists train ViSC coaches (who are called multipliers), multipliers train teachers, and teachers train their students.

A ViSC course for training multipliers was offered at the University of Vienna for three consecutive years. Each course consisted of three face-to-face workshops held at the University of Vienna within one academic year (between September and June) and the simultaneous implementation of the ViSC program in one school during the same time span (for details, see Table 6.1). The ViSC coaches were recruited by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education through official invitation letters that were sent to all rectors (top administrators) of the teaching universities and the heads of the school psychology services in Austria. The idea was to train permanent staff working at the teaching universities or in the school psychology services to enable sustainable knowledge transfer between research and practice.

The ViSC courses aimed at providing ViSC coaches with state-of-the-art knowledge about bullying research, introducing them to the philosophy and the tools of the ViSC program, and offering them detailed instructions on how best to implement the ViSC program in schools. The implementation in schools consisted of three informative meetings during pedagogical conferences: two in-school training sessions and several individual or small group coaching sessions (for details, see Table 6.1). All materials necessary for these training sessions (for example, worksheets and guidelines) were provided to the ViSC coaches during the ViSC course and by an online-learning platform. There was no cost to attending the ViSC course at the University of Vienna, and the

**Table 6.1. The ViSC course for ViSC coaches**

<i>Month</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Content</i>
September	Two-day workshop at the University of Vienna	State-of-the-art knowledge about bullying research Knowledge about standards of evidence Overview of the ViSC program Detailed instructions on how to implement the program at the school level
September	First pedagogical conference in the school	General information about the program to all teachers
September–October	In-school training	Definition and recognition of the problem Tackling acute cases How best to implement preventive measures at the school level
October–February	Coaching of the school team	How to engage as many people as possible in the school How to involve parents
February	Second pedagogical conference in the school	Reflection about the implementation process at school level and how best to continue the activities
February	Two-day workshop at the University of Vienna	Reflection on the implementation processes in the schools and the professional role of ViSC coaches Detailed instructions on how to implement the program at the class level Continuation of implementation at the school level
February–March	In-school training	Preventive measures at the class level: Content and implementation of the class project
March–June	Class and school team coaching	How to continue activities at the school level How best to implement the units of the class project
June	One-day workshop at the University of Vienna	Reflection on the implementation processes in the schools and the professional role as a ViSC coach
June	Third pedagogical conference in the school	Reflection on implementation of the program and how best to continue the activities in the next school year without the ViSC coach

ViSC coaches received the standard salary usually paid by teaching universities for in-school teacher training.

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### *The implementation process in the schools*

The main goal during the program implementation is to create a school development process during which as many teachers as possible are committed to work together against violence. The ViSC program aims to foster shared responsibility among teachers, which in turn implies that as many teachers as possible in the school have worked out a common understanding of the problem, agreed on procedures for tackling acute cases, and jointly implement preventive measures at the school and class levels. The theory behind this approach is that bullying is promoted in an environment in which the problem is not taken seriously or is overlooked and that bullying can be stopped in an environment in which there is a consensus that such behavior will not be tolerated.

The ViSC coach has a central role during this process. This person is an expert who provides state-of-the-art knowledge and introduces specific procedures for how best to tackle the problem and implement preventive measures at the school and class levels. This person is also a coach who must be able to integrate the existing expertise of the teachers in order to commit and empower as many of them as possible. The ability of the ViSC coach to foster ownership of the program by the school staff is considered central to a sustainable school development process. Besides the implementation of this philosophy of the program, the ViSC coach also offers many practical tools during the in-school training for the teachers.

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### *The teacher training*

Two in-school teacher trainings are offered (see Table 6.1). During the first session, which is offered at the beginning of the first semester, teachers are trained on how to recognize bullying, how to tackle acute bullying cases, and how to implement preventive

measures at the school level. In accordance with the philosophy of the program, the training contains many interactive elements to foster the development of a commonly shared perspective among as many teachers as possible.

In accordance with the training goals, the first in-school training is divided into three parts.

### *Definition and recognition of the problem*

To provide an overview of the understanding of violence, aggression, and bullying versus teachers' social and intercultural competence, the ViSC coach prompts a brainstorming discussion. The goal is to collect ideas without judging them as right or wrong. During the discussion, it becomes clear whether there are contradictory opinions among the teachers and whether and to what extent teachers have already worked on these issues. Next, the coach introduces the scientific perspective by discussing the broad definition of violence from the World Health Organization and the much narrower definition of bullying.<sup>5</sup> The scientific definitions of social competence are also discussed.<sup>6</sup> By acknowledging the previous knowledge of the teachers, the ViSC coach leads them to the insight that it is very helpful for prevention and intervention to have a common understanding of the problem and that bullying is a serious issue that needs to be tackled.

The teachers next work in small groups and analyze hypothetical cases. The goal is to discuss how to detect bullying and how to differentiate it from reactive aggression, rejection, shyness, or voluntary solitude. These discussions usually reveal that it is not always easy to detect bullying and that it is very helpful that teachers work together to get the information needed.

### *Tackling acute bullying cases*

It is very important for both intervention and prevention that the teachers follow a common procedure in addressing acute bullying cases. Based on the work of Roland and Vaaland and in line with their suggestions, a best practice procedure is introduced to the teachers.<sup>7</sup> To tackle a bullying case, the teachers need to talk with

the victimized student first. Second, they need to talk with the bullying students by clearly stating that this behavior is wrong and needs to be stopped immediately. These conversations need to be firm but respectful. If a group of students has bullied another student, the conversations need to be conducted in such a way as to weaken the social bonds of the bullying students. Third, it is necessary to inform the parents. The teachers are provided with a detailed manual including examples of sentences for how to conduct these conversations. Extending the work from Roland and Vaaland, the manual also covers example conversations with students who both bully others and are victimized by others and their parents.

### *Preventive measures on the school level*

Even before participating in the ViSC program, many schools have already implemented some preventive measures. The ViSC coach aims to integrate these existing measures in a common schoolwide approach to prevent violence. For instance, some schools have already implemented peer education approaches that are suitable complementary methods to the ViSC program. Some teachers are experts in peer mediation techniques; these are not suitable for tackling bullying cases, but they can be integrated in a schoolwide approach to solving conflicts between parties of equal strength.

The task of the ViSC coach is to clarify which method is suitable for which goals. The coach aims to commit teachers to tackling acute bullying cases according to the guidelines presented in the manual and works on an agreement that clarifies who will be responsible for conducting these conversations. The teachers who are willing to coordinate the activities at the school level are nominated to be part of the school team. These teachers also prepare information sheets about the ViSC program for students and parents. Finally, the ViSC coach works on an agreement as to how best to implement a ViSC class project during the second semester. It needs to be clarified which classes will participate in the class project, which teachers will implement it, and how the teaching units needed for the class project can best be integrated in the curriculum of these classes.

The second in-school teacher training is offered at the beginning of the second semester. Its main goal is to introduce the philosophy and materials of the ViSC class project to all teachers to enable them to implement it in their classes. This training also contains many interactive elements like role plays and interactive games because it is intended that teachers apply some of these methods in their classes when they implement the class project.

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### *The class project*

The class project aims to empower students to take responsibility for what happens in their class. The project is divided into two parts. During units 1 to 8, the students work together to find ways to prevent aggressive behavior in their class. During units 9 to 13, the students work together to achieve a positive, common goal (for details see Table 6.2).

Thus, the class project is not an antibullying program in a narrow sense. Instead, the goal is to train a broad spectrum of competencies considered important for the development of social and intercultural competencies (see also Table 6.2). The idea behind this approach is that different students need to learn different competencies. In many classes, a rather large group of students neither feels responsible for what happens around them nor intervenes in critical situations.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, all students are trained to feel responsible when something negative is going on and to react in a way that is likely to improve the situation. Second, in lower secondary school, there is still a group of preadolescents who are not able to manage their negative emotions in a nonaggressive way.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, all students are trained to recognize their own emotions and the emotions of others and to cope with these emotions in a positive, nonaggressive way. Third, it is necessary to empower students who might be victimized easily because they often invite attacks with their nonassertive behavior.<sup>10</sup> Thus, all students are trained how best to react when others are picking on them. The class project does not include units to directly change

**Table 6.2. The ViSC class project**

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Content</i>
Unit 1	What is the class project, and why are we participating? Why are rules important in our lives, and what rules do we want in our class?
Unit 2	How can we recognize critical social situations, and what can we do to help improve the situation?
Unit 3	How can we recognize the emotions of others, and what can we do to help them feel better?
Unit 4	How can we recognize our own emotions, and what can we do to cope with them to feel better?
Units 5–6	What can we do if we are treated in a mean and unfair way by others? What is the best thing to do in such situations, and why?
Units 7–8	What can we do if we don't understand the behavior of our classmates who come from another country? What is the best thing to do in such situations, and why?
Unit 9	What have we learned during the project so far, and what do we want to learn in the remaining units? Which common activity do we want to carry out during our project day? How can we plan and organize the common activity in a way that every classmate is able to make a valuable contribution?
Units 10–13	Carrying out the common activity by creating a process that leads to the experience of a common success.

the behavior of bullying students; instead the class project aims to create an environment in which it is less likely that bullying will occur.

To train these competencies, concrete materials are provided in the manual. Each unit is designed for a two-hour lesson and consists of worksheets for individual students, sheets for small group work, summary sheets, and a detailed implementation plan. The task of the teacher is to lead the class and work with the materials provided in the manual. The units are designed to foster exchange and discussions among the students. The teacher is encouraged to use interactive games, role plays, and other interactive pedagogical methods that were demonstrated to them during the second in-school teacher training and explained in the manual.

During unit 9, the focus of the class project changes. Whereas the students worked on hypothetical situations and prepared mate-

rials during units 1 to 8, now they take responsibility for the remaining units. To transfer the social competencies into real life, the class is assigned to find a common, positive, and realistic activity that can be carried out together during a project day. The role of the teacher is to create a group process that enables cooperative learning and the experience of a common success. Thus, the teacher helps the students find a cooperative structure and supervises them as they plan and carry out the activity. A huge variety of activities has been carried out during ViSC project days. Some classes produced photos, short films, songs, or newspapers. Others conducted interviews with students in other classes, people on the street, and local politicians and asked them about their contribution to preventing violence. Still others organized parents' meetings during which they wrote a performance to demonstrate what they had learned during the class project.

To summarize, the theoretical idea is that aggressive behavior is less likely to occur in an encouraging, structured, and friendly environment where students are able to feel part of a group and are able to create common successes.

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### *Evaluation studies of the class project*

In a pilot phase, the ViSC class project has been implemented four times, and program evaluations have confirmed encouraging short-term results.<sup>11</sup> However, the evaluations also demonstrated that the class project was not effective to prevent aggressive behavior in the long run. Therefore, the evaluation results were used to improve the structure and materials of the ViSC class project and to develop the final ViSC program, which also covers teacher training, measures at the school level, and actions to take.

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### *Large-scale evaluation of the ViSC school program*

Between May 2009 and December 2010, a large-scale evaluation study was conducted. It was possible to realize a randomized intervention-control group design and to collect data from 2,042

students on four occasions.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, 338 teachers participated in a survey at pretest and posttest.<sup>13</sup>

Yanagida and colleagues investigated the short-term effectiveness (pre- and post test) of the program with respect to aggressive behavior and victimization.<sup>14</sup> For this study, three self-report scales to measure aggressive behavior and three self-report scales to measure victimization were used. A multiple group latent change score (LCS) model to compare the control and intervention group was applied.<sup>15</sup> Gender and age were included as covariates to control for baseline and intervention effects. The multiple group LCS model imposing strict measurement invariance fit the data well:  $\chi^2(181) = 544.065$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , CFI = .922, RMSEA = .044. Results showed that the latent mean of the aggression change score in the intervention group differed significantly from 0 ( $M = -0.23$ ,  $p = .013$ ), indicating a decline in aggressive behavior. For victimization, however, the latent mean of the change factor was not significantly different from 0 ( $M = -0.16$ ,  $p = .108$ ). Age did not have any effects on aggression and victimization; boys scored higher in aggression at time 1 and had a lower decrease over time. In accordance with the main goals of the ViSC program, aggression could be reduced in participating students.

Burger and colleagues investigated whether teachers used different strategies to tackle bullying cases before and after the program.<sup>16</sup> Data was collected using the Handling Bullying Questionnaire (HBQ) to evaluate the effectiveness of the program regarding the strategy use of teachers.<sup>17</sup> Results showed that teachers who participated in the program used more nonpunitive strategies to work with the bullies and more strategies to support victims compared with teachers who did not participate in the program.<sup>18</sup>

However, investigating goal attainment is only the first step in the research program. Future studies will investigate the theoretical model and underlying mechanisms of the intervention effects in depth. Furthermore, subgroups of students (such as onlookers, bullies, victims, and bully-victims) will be the focus of further analyses. Because follow-up data were collected, additional longitudinal analyses will be conducted.

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