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ABSTRACT

This paper examines various reasons that would account for school violence and considers ways educators can help eliminate violence from schools. The negative impact of violence in the media and easy access to guns are mentioned as probable causes of violence in youth. Students who do not feel part of the school community often resort to violence to solve interpersonal conflicts. Schools do not help the situation when they are overcrowded, offer poor instruction, and do not structure opportunities for pro-social peer interactions. Schools have increasingly adapted a law enforcement model instead of an educational model to support violence reduction. Use of searches; metal detectors; sniff searches; boot camps; video monitoring; and extra police patrols around schools point to the punishment orientation that predominates the reactions of schools towards violence today. Several actions are identified that can help schools move to a proactive solution. Smaller class sizes; emphasis on character development rather than behavior management; teaching anger management and conflict resolution skills; and increasing contact between youth and appropriate role models are all recommendations that will help students rethink their perspective on violence. Ultimately violence control is a community problem that must be addressed through social reform measures. Working towards eradicating poverty; alleviating family stress; improving job opportunities; and curbing gun and drug access in neighbors all help families and youth combat the problems of violence. (JDM)

Accountability Issues in School Violence

by

Adel T. Al-Bataineh

Accountability Issues in School Violence

"School violence may be defined as any deliberate act that harms or threatens to harm a student, teacher, or other school officials, and which interferes with the purpose of school" (Jones, 1998). A review of recent literature reveals a variety of motives for school violence, and identifies many strategies to reduce violence in the school system (Baker, 1998; Caty, Heller, Guarino, & Michael, 1998; Fatum & Hoyle, 1996; Hyman & Perone, 1998; Jones, 1998). The purpose of this paper will be twofold: a) to focus on the reasons for school violence, and b) to examine ways that educators can help eliminate it from schools.

School Shootings in the News

To listen to the media one would think the recent plague of school shootings are America's tragedy and that violence has become a part of the curriculum for the nation's children. "Despite public perceptions to the contrary, the current data do not support the claim that there has been a dramatic, overall increase in school-based violence in recent years" (Hyman & Perone, 1998, p. 9). Yet, sensationalized news stories are abundant. On February 2, 1996 at Frontier Junior High in Moses Lake, Washington, a 14 year old walks into his algebra class and takes aim at his classmates. Can this be correlated with Stephen King's book, Rage, about a disturbed high school student who opens fire in his algebra class, killing his teacher and taking students' hostage? If so, credence can be given to violence in books, movies and videos as possible causative factors for violent acts at school. The influence of media violence on children has received considerable attention, and according to Jones (1998) "a relationship has been found between television violence and children's aggressive behavior" (p. 5). This further supports negative impacts from media.

At Westside Middle School, in Jonesborough, Arkansas, on March 24, 1998 two children (11 and 13 years old) assembled a small arsenal (3 rifles, 7 handguns and 100 rounds of ammunition) and took 27 shots in which they injured 10 children, killing four girls, and mortally wounding a teacher who was shielding other students on the playground. Two months after Jonesborough, a 15 year old at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon armed himself with 2 handguns, a 22-caliber rifle, and pulled a trigger 52 times, killing two, and wounding 19 classmates before being subdued by a wounded student. Can teenage violence inside

of schools, as well as outside, be traced to the prevalence and easy access of guns to kids? If so, President Clinton's call for reducing the "appalling ease" with which young people can get guns through establishing sensible gun control laws becomes a salient factor to consider.

According to Caty, et al., (1998) "the availability and use of guns continues to play a major role in the lives of adolescents," and they suggest that it is important for educators to "remain aware of the dangers our young face as a result of chronic exposure to firearms and the ease to which these weapons are made available to children" (p. 4). Findings from a National Survey conducted by Sheley and Wright (1998) also did "little to dispel the common perception that juveniles can obtain firearms relatively easily" (p. 4). However, as Hyman & Perone (1998) point out, although "the easy availability of guns has resulted in a significant increase in firearm fatalities among youth in the inner cities...relatively few of those deaths each year occur in schools (p. 9).

The most recent school shooting to have gained media attention happened on April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Two armed teenagers murdered classmates with rifles and pipe bombs, in one of the deadliest school shootings on record, before turning the guns on themselves. News reports identified poor peer relations and psychological distancing from the culture of the school (social ostracization) as plausible impacts on their use of violence. Baker (1998) concurs with those reports, positing that school violence reflects a failure of community (relational bonds between individuals) in schools. This idea can be further explained by the following:

> "Adolescents may endure insults, name-calling, put-downs, and other types of peer harassment, both mental and physical. Negative social interactions cause anxiety, frustration, anger and fear which have deteriorating effect on self-image and self-esteem and an adverse effect on how these adolescents see themselves in their social order (Fatum & Hoyle, 1996, p. 29).

Additionally, DeJong (1994) discussed a culture of violence by identifying "readiness to use violence as a means of resolving interpersonal conflict" (p. 2).

Causes of school violence might also be related to the "aims" of violent behavior. Lockwood (1997) identified: a) retribution-punishing someone for something done, b) compliance-convincing someone to stop an offensive course of action, c) defense of one's self or others, and d) promotion of one's image-by saving face, defending honor, enhancing or maintaining one's reputation as frequent reasons given by adolescents in his study. Other potential motives mentioned by Jones (1998) include an exposure to family violence, being a victim of abuse, abusing controlled substances, perceiving insults to self-esteem, losing a love relationship, emotional deprivation, and psychiatric or psychological disorders as predisposing factors that could trigger violent occurrences.

Of particular interest to this author, in addressing ways that educators can help eradicate school violence, was the notion that "schools participate in violence problems" (Baker, 1998, p. 36), and that "student victimization by school staff should receive more attention in relation to student misbehavior and violence" (Hyman & Perone, 1998, p. 8).

How Schools May Perpetuate Violence

Baker (1998) states that failure "to provide students with meaningful social contexts within which to function" has precipitated the participation of the school in violence problems (p. 36). "Many schools exacerbate the situation by allowing overcrowded classrooms and schools" (Jones, 1998, p. 5). Hyman & Perone (1998) suggest that "victimization of students by school staff, most often in the name of discipline, is seldom recognized as a problem that may contribute to student alienation and aggression (p. 7). Baker (1998) concurs, stating that "school disciplinary practices are another contextual variable likely to exacerbate problems of violence" (p. 36). Additional school-related areas identified include: poor academic quality, ineffective teaching practices, assumptions that children are motivated to participate in and value academic endeavors, failure to teach, supervise, and structure opportunities for pro-social peer interactions.

One of the consequences of misperceptions of school violence prevalence "is that schools have increasingly adopted law enforcement rather than educational models to support violence reduction" (Hyman & Perone, 1998, p. 11). Jones (1998) labeled such procedures as reactive programs and suggested that they

are extensive in number. According to Sheley & Wright (1998), most schools have adopted some combination of deterrence activities and violence reduction education. Considerable research was found that identified the following list of recently introduced, intrusive, and sometimes-abusive procedures: (Hyman & Perone, 1998; Jones, 1998; Lockwood, 1997; and Sheley & Wright, 1998)

- Uniforms and dress codes
- Search and seizure
- Strip searches
- Use of metal detectors
- Locker and automobile searches
- Photo Ids for staff and students
- Ban on the use of beepers on school grounds
- "Sniff" Searches
- Boot camps
- Use of cameras/video monitoring
- Increased police presence in schools
- Corporal punishment
- Undercover agents
- Zero-tolerance policies
- Automatic suspension
- Non-police hall monitors
- Extra police patrols around school property

Hyman & Perone (1998) posit that these practices "reflect a shift in public policy from prevention and rehabilitation orientation, which predominated in the 1970s, to an interdiction and punishment orientation that predominates in the 1990s" (p. 13). Several authors suggest that reactive measures and disciplinary practices such as those identified may have the potential to increase mistrust and alienation, undermine student morale, change perceptions of school staff from educators to enforcers, and damage students emotionally (Hyman & Perone, 1998; Jones, 1998; Lockwood, 1997; and Sheley & Wright, 1998)

How Educators May Reduce Occurrences of School Violence

Fatum & Hoyle (1996) identify a simple proactive solution, stating that "the problem that causes the need for the violence or the weapon use should be examined" (p. 32). Lockwood (1997) adds that understanding the sequence of events, which lead to a violent incident, can "aid in identifying points for intervention" (p. 2). The literature seems to suggest that the most effective form of school-based violence prevention program is one that is proactive, rather than reactive, which also includes social skill curriculums. Jones (1998) states that "smaller classes allow educators to get to know their students and to form steady, caring relationships with them as well as allowing students to get to know each other" (p. 6). She adds, "the result may include developing skills and relationships that are critical to the socialization process" (p. 6).

Baker (1998) emphasizes classroom management practices that focus on character development rather than behavior management, suggesting that they are more likely to promote affiliation to school. DeJong (1994) identifies the importance of teaching anger management and conflict resolution skills to youth, and "increasing contact between youth and appropriate role models through sports and recreation, remedial education, and mentoring programs" (p. 6). According to Baker (1998), effective teaching practices incorporate increased opportunity for social feedback and reinforcement in the classroom, and she recommends the use of "cooperative and constructivist curricular approaches, which cause students to manipulate learning tasks in ways that are personally and socially relevant" (p. 35). Fatum & Hoyle support this contention, stating that it's necessary to "teach fundamental interpersonal skills and concepts" and "re-teach personal values, interpersonal boundaries, and techniques of respect for self and others" (p. 32).

Inherent in all the recommendations found in the literature was the concept of recognizing warning signals and preparing for action. Jones (1998) reminds the reader that determining if any warning signs or early predictors are present can help "begin corrective intervention to prevent the violent behavior" (p. 6). According to the National Association of School Psychologists, signs that students are troubled include:

- Lack of interest in school
- Absence of age-appropriate anger control skills
- Seeing self as always the victim
- Persistent disregard for or refusal to follow rules
- Cruelty to pets or other animals
- Artwork or writing that is bleak or violent or that depicts isolation or anger
- Talking constantly about weapons or violence
- Obsessions with things like violent games and TV shows
- Depression or mood swings
- Bringing a weapon (any weapon) to school
- History of bullying
- Misplaced or unwarranted jealousy
- Involvement with or interest in gangs
- Self-isolation from family and friends
- Talking about bringing weapons to school

In summary, the recommended curriculum-based programs and strategies emphasized: a) acknowledging the problem exists and accepting ownership, b) including peer mediation, c) teaching pro-social skills, d) providing conflict resolution training and services, d) addressing anger management, e)

discouraging gang activity, f) helping young people develop positive self-esteem g) teaching students how to work, cooperate, and share with others, h) personalizing the school to help students feel more connected, i) establishing and maintaining disciplinary standards and building trust in adults, j) bolstering and supporting the development of good character by helping students empathize with others and be self disciplined, k) helping students unlearn aggressive and antisocial behavior, and l) generating critical thinking skills that are needed to consider alternatives to resolve conflicts. According to Fatum and Hoyle (1996) "an effective school-based program can help students examine issues and rethink their perspectives on violence" (p. 33).

Ultimate Responsibility

As Sheley and Wright (1998) suggest, "assigning the responsibility for violence control and prevention solely or even primarily to the school curriculum may be dangerous" (p. 6). As suggested by Jones (1998) students "do have a responsibility, however, they are not alone. The community must assist by working to eradicate poverty, alleviate family stress, improve the job outlook for young people, curb violence in the media, and control access to drugs and guns" (p. 8).

> "To the extent that schools succeed in pushing violence off school grounds, it probably will be displaced into the surrounding community. The issue for communities, then, is how to dissuade youths from resolving disputes through violent means, thereby convincing them that weapons are not necessary for everyday living" (Sheley & Wright, 1998, p. 6).

After a review of current literature on the causes and remediation necessary to curb school violence, this author concurs with Jones (1998) when she states that "violence in the nation's schools is every citizen's responsibility" (p. 8).

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