

Addressing school violence in the 21st century

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to address and review school violence and the implications it has on educators and school systems in today's society. It will lead a discussion on the current state faced by North American educators and school systems and the possible solutions that could be implemented to reduce school violence. This report is divided into four distinct sections. The first section will begin to define violence, both from a narrow and broad perspective. Moreover, a broader definition will also be provided so that it may be applied to concepts that will be discussed through the rest of the report. The second section will proceed to review and discuss past and recent incidents of school violence that have occurred in North American society. Section three will specifically explore schools and violence, and the contextual factors that influence violent activities in schools and among students. The fourth section will provide a general overview of strategies that can be implemented to foster a healthy school environment and thus prevent and decrease the manifestations of violence.

Addressing school violence in the 21st century

Over the course of the last century, North America has benefited from the profound changes and advancements that have influenced and affected nearly all aspects of society. During this time, the changes occurring within the North American society typically reflected the dominant cultural and political ideologies. Similarly, educational institutions have also had to experience and endure changes which were influenced by the dominant ideologies in society. The demographic changes that the North American society experienced during the last several decades also reflected the similar changes that

were occurring in educational institutions and the communities which surrounded them. During this time, the student demographics became far more diverse and greater in size. These changes placed a great amount of demand on schools to meet the needs of the new student population. In the past industrial era of school systems, the typical goal was to produce productive and useful citizens for the growing economy. However, in response to the changes in the schools and society as a whole, school systems had to focus on meeting the needs of the large and diverse student population by promoting a sense of community and belonging in order to preserve a healthy and productive society (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001). Through the decades, the abundant emergence of large schools emphasizing compliance and control with strict preoccupation with grades, competition, and individual success have created an atmosphere in where students are made to feel alienated, isolated, and rejected (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001). These changes coupled with growing societal problems such as poverty, disorganization, and overcrowding in communities have contributed to the emergence and recent increase in school violence. (Smith & Smith, 2006). School violence is a phenomenon that is growing in number throughout schools in North America.

This report will serve to address and review school violence and the implications it has on educators and school systems. As this report progresses and serves to facilitate discussion in several key areas of interest, it will lead to discuss the current state faced by North American educators and school systems and the possible solutions that could be implemented to address and reduce school violence.

This report will be accomplished by discussing key areas in several sections. The first section will begin to define violence, both from a narrow and broad perspective.

Moreover, a broader definition will also be provided so that it may be applied to concepts that will be discussed through the rest of the report. The second section will proceed to review and discuss incidents of school violence that have recently occurred in North American society. Cases that will be highlighted include incidents from those at Columbine High School in Colorado, Dawson College in Montreal, and the Amish Elementary School in Pennsylvania. Section three will specifically explore schools and violence, and other contextual factors that influence violent activities in schools and among students. Factors that will be discussed will pertain to community, environment, class sizes, and school locations. The fourth section will provide a general overview of strategies that can be implemented to foster a healthy school environment and thus prevent and decrease the manifestations of violence. Lastly, the fifth section will present a conclusion of all the main concepts which were presented throughout the report. It will serve to highlight and discuss school violence in its entirety while drawing a unified closure to the report.

Violence

In attempting to define violence as it manifests itself in schools, both a broad and narrow definition can be provided. A narrow definition of violence provided by Olweus (1999, p.12) can be described as an “aggressive behavior where the actor or perpetrator uses his or her own body or an object (including a weapon) to inflict (relatively serious) injury or discomfort another individual”. This definition is markedly different from the broader definition of violence which can encompass verbal aggression or relational and indirect aggression, such as rumor telling or social exclusion (Underwood, 2002). Either

definitions are appropriate and applicable pending on the type of case scenario that one is analyzing and discussing. However, for the purpose of this report, violence will be defined as:

The intentional use of physical and psychological force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation (World Health Organization, 2001).

This general definition will be more applicable to concepts that will be presented throughout the remainder of this report.

Prevalence of School Violence in Modern Society

Increasing attention has been given to the area of violence in schools since the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 in where 2 gunmen killed 13 and wounded 21 before turning the guns on themselves. Up to that date, it was the most devastating school shooting in North American history. Since then, violent acts in schools have made headlines throughout North America. With recent events making headlines such as the shooting tragedy at Dawson College in Montreal, Quebec in where 1 was killed and 19 other injured and that of another shooting in a rural Amish school in Pennsylvania, it demonstrates that violence is not confined to a particular geographical area, school type, or size. Furthermore the perpetrator of the violent act is also not confined to being a student, although most perpetrators are those whom have or had affiliations with the victimized school.

Schools and Violence

As evident in the preceding paragraph, school shootings are becoming more common and tend to be the common outlet for violence to manifest itself in schools. Although it is rather difficult to specifically profile a particular student and school for indicators for potential violence, there are however basic characteristics that violent students and schools share in general.

Student and Perpetrators

Although school shootings and other violent acts tend to occur in almost any locations throughout North America, the students and perpetrators involved in these violent acts do share some characteristics between them. Almost always, the one characteristic that is common to those involved with school violence is that they all felt detached, alienated, and rejected by the mainstream society. In essence, they didn't feel like they belonged nor were they wanted. This lack of belonging and societal acceptance within the school environment can be claimed as the root of violence occurring in schools across the North American society. Also, in situations where students didn't feel part of the school community, they also didn't perform academically well (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001). It seems that school related violence such as shootings are symptomatic of modern day society's failure to provide the essential conditions and environment that is required by many schools today.

School Sizes

The number of students within a given schools is also another factor that determines whether a school is classified as an educational community or institution.

Smaller schools throughout North America tend to foster a sense of identity and support towards its students through ample student-teacher contact. Smaller schools are far more superior when it comes to the student's sense of belonging, social bonding, and personal and academic self-concepts of students (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001). These characteristics associated with smaller schools are significant because students who feel that they belong to a school community will have an increased ability to empathize with members of the school. It is evident that where there is empathy, there is a reduced likelihood of violence and related acts (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001).

Whereas smaller schools tend to foster a sense of belonging and community, larger schools tend to be more impersonal and institution like. It is apparent that within larger schools, there are decreased opportunities for students to be in contact with teachers and other peers, thus, making it difficult to create a sense of community. In addition, as the percentage of male students in the student population becomes greater, so does the chance of violent acts and incidents occurring (Larsen, 2003). Devine (1996) advances the notion that a major factor leading to the growing number of violence in schools is overcrowding. Furthermore, larger schools also tend to affect the academic performance of its students as drop out and attendance rates are markedly higher than those of smaller schools (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001).

School Locations

As evident by recent events, school violence can occur in any location throughout the North American society. It does not limit nor distinguish itself to one particular geographical area. Schools located in rural, suburban, and urban areas significantly differed in experiences with violence. Typically, the severity and frequency of any form of violence and related acts decreased steadily from urban to suburban and from suburban to rural schools (Shen, 1997). Schools related in rural areas were less likely to report incidents of serious violence (Larsen, 2003). The only significant trend worth noting is that there is an increase in use of alcohol among the students from urban to suburban to rural schools (Shen, 1997). It is this widespread abuse of controlled substance along with illegal drugs which combine with other contextual factors such as depression and suicide, gang membership, and violence which contribute to the lack of school belonging and community, which connected with violence within schools (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001).

Fostering a health school environment for the 21st century

The increasing prevalence of violence within today's schools poses a challenge to educators and schools alike. They must recreate the image of the school as a safe and nurturing environment where students and educators can convene in a healthy atmosphere. This image to promote schools in such a manner must be maintained for decades to come. As a result of school violence, students feel the least safe when they are in school, and a recent study by Elliott, Hamburg, and Williams (1998, p. 8) revealed

that “one third of teachers reported that because of threat violence, both teachers and students in their schools were less eager to go to school”.

Special and careful consideration should be devoted to promoting this nurturing notion of schools to the school educators themselves. They provide the most effective early identification and implementation of strategies for students at risk for violence. They are able to identify those who are experiencing significant difficulties and distress. (Robinson & Clay, 2005). In addition, educators should provide students an environment within the classroom that values the following: emphasizing the primacy of human relationships as the medium for learning, cultivating contexts that bring the best of human qualities, creating communities that emphasize the development of the whole person, emphasizing cooperation rather than competition, and valuing individual differences (Malley, Beck, & Adorno, 2001). These set of values create a sense of community within the classroom and students are more likely to contribute to a community which they feel they belong to.

Conclusion

This report served to address and review the manifestation of violence in schools in the 21st century and the implications it has on students, educators, and school systems. There is no doubt that there is a growing coverage and exposure of violence in schools due to the increasing number of incidents. Past and recent events have indicated that violence in schools is not limited to a particular geographical area and school size or type. Although it cannot be denied that violence in schools are somewhat influenced by environmental and societal factors, it is also deeply influenced by contextual factors

occurring within the schools. Educators and the school systems have a daunting task to analyze the data from past trends and patterns of violence in schools. From this they must implement a strategy that sets to foster a healthy and community like environment within the schools. The recommendations outlined earlier only serves as a foundation to which educators and school systems can build upon. Although there is no denying that violence in schools are on the rise, so are the tools and resources gathered from findings in researches being made available to educators and school systems. In order for educators and school systems to address this problem effectively, they must address the issue one school at a time, more specifically one student at a time.

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