

Safe Schools and Zero Tolerance: Policy, Program and Practice in Ontario

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Abstract

This paper examines zero tolerance discipline policies in Ontario's public school system legislated as the *Safe Schools Act (SSA)* 2001. The intent of our paper is to argue that the SSA set within a discourse of zero tolerance as the panacea to the problems of violence in schools has had a detrimental impact. Since the SSA is part of the episteme of standardized solutions to complex problems, Ball's interpretation of "policy as text" and "policy as discourse" serves as the guiding framework for the study in which we examine the perspectives of professionals who implement these measures. In conclusion we state that the discursive frames within which zero tolerance policies are situated have shifted to some extent in order to consider other possibilities to the zero tolerance approach.

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Discipline policies in our school system have shifted towards treating children in ways that increasingly resemble the adult criminal justice system. This shift is exemplified in “zero tolerance” policies built upon the premise that a coherent set of guidelines must be designed to determine what constitutes unacceptable behavior. A set of predetermined rules are subsequently applied to determine the appropriate consequences and punishments for such behaviors (Holloway, 2002). Most rules refer to suspensions, notification to police or expulsion of the troublesome student. Zero tolerance means intolerance of violence and includes some consequences for action. These policies cover a series of behaviors that range from verbal threats and physical violence to dress code violations. The concept of zero tolerance appears to set high standards and to send a clear message to all students. Its public appeal lies in its seemingly clear and no-nonsense approach to dealing with the problem of violence in our schools. Zero tolerance policies have become the ‘episteme’ in an age of standardized solutions to complex issues. In recent years, however, these policies have come under intense criticism for their blanket approach to addressing behavior problems, their disproportionate adverse impact on students from disadvantaged groups and their questionable effect on the overall safety and security of our students. This does not imply that we discard all discipline policies; however, researchers have been arguing that we need to examine the long and short-term effects, and to seek solutions that are equitable and socially responsible.

The intent of our paper, therefore, is to argue that the *Safe Schools Act* (2001) in Ontario set within a discourse of zero tolerance as the panacea to the problems of violence and behavior issues in schools has had a detrimental impact. In particular, the SSA has dealt a blow to issues of equity especially for students from minority status backgrounds and students with disabilities. We bring findings from extant literature to substantiate our small scale research that explored the ways in which professionals working in schools interpreted the SSA.

This paper begins with the conceptual framework that guides the study. In the second section a description of the episteme within which the SSA was implemented is provided. The third section is a brief description of our study. In the fourth section we analyze the impact of the SSA and its ensuing measures by presenting voices from the field. In the fifth section we inquire whether we perceive a shift in thinking in light of all the research that has shown that zero tolerance is not the answer. In conclusion we state that the discursive frames within which zero tolerance policies are situated have shifted to some extent in order to consider other possibilities to the zero tolerance approach.

Conceptual Framework

We cannot define policies in simplistic terms. Since we argue that the SSA is part of the episteme of standardized solutions to complex problems, Ball's interpretation of "policy as text" and "policy as discourse" serves as the guiding framework for the study. Ball (2006) argues that "policy is not one or the other, but both, they are implicit in each other" (p. 44). In keeping with Ball's conceptualization, the SSA occurs within a discourse of zero tolerance that becomes a 'regime of truth' that limits the possibilities for thinking differently. Although policy interpretations might vary in different contexts, these are limited by the discursive frames within which policies are designed, formulated and implemented. As Ball further elaborates, "Policy texts are set within these frameworks which constrain but never determine all the possibilities for action" (p. 44). We conduct a micro level investigation to understand how the SSA unfolds in our local context while at the same time also examining its outcomes to show the limiting effects of the discursive frames of zero tolerance. "We may only be able to conceive of the possibilities of response in and through the language, concepts and vocabulary which the discourse makes available to us" (Ball, 2006, p. 49). However, these discursive frames are constantly moving as will be shown by recent government initiatives in Ontario and through examples of alternatives to the zero tolerance approach.

Our research sought to answer the following key questions: (1) How do professionals in schools make sense of the SSA? What are their perceptions and beliefs? (2) How are these perceptions, interpretations and actions limited by the episteme that shapes the discursive frames within which they are played out? (3) What are the possibilities for thinking differently and finding alternatives to the zero tolerance approaches?

Zero Tolerance: Episteme of an Age

The primary function of zero tolerance is the assertion of authority (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In the United States, this policy is translated into adopting measures like metal detectors, surveillance cameras and security personnel. The problem arises from the assumption of zero-tolerance policies that individuals act/transgress in a rational manner, and is based upon the premise that if the possibility that they will get away with the transgression is zero, they will not do it. Therefore, we are dealing with a rational subject, whose system of incentives is knowable and can be manipulated (Sugai & Horner, 2001). However, most choices are based not upon a clear dichotomy between good versus bad choices, but between contradictory choices (Slattery & Rapp, 2003) and even the most explicit policies leave room for different interpretations (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Hence, the principles of zero tolerance highlight the ruptures, the dilemmas and the futility of standardized solutions.

Research Findings in the U.S.

Two major themes, the perception of violent acts and discrimination, arise from studies in the US that analyze the impact of zero tolerance policies to examine whether they achieve the original purpose: to combat school violence and to provide a safe school environment.

Skiba and Peterson's (1999) study analyzed the realities and perceptions of school violence. Although much attention was directed to high profile events, data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) suggested that the most frequently cited problems at all levels were the less violent behaviors. They argued that "perhaps there are some behaviors that shake us up, whatever their absolute frequency" (p. 3). Moreover they

state that as the fear of violence increased, the net of zero tolerance broadened to include a host of minor misbehaviors leading to a near epidemic of suspensions and expulsions.

The Advancement Project and the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University study culminated in the widely acclaimed report entitled, *Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline Policies* (2000). It was the first comprehensive national report that used a multi-disciplinary approach to review the impact of zero tolerance policies. The main problem, according to the report, was the over-zealous approach taken in the name of promoting safety. The report argued that school administrators, in most cases, failed to apply the discretionary clauses provided in legislation and policies. It shed light on the troubling effects of policy measures that relied exclusively upon the deontological stance in interpreting zero tolerance as a discipline measure in an episteme of standard approaches to various social issues.

Casella (2003) emphasized that “zero tolerance strengthens the link between schools and prisons that began a century ago with the development of truant officers” (p. 884). Other studies (Hoffman, 2005; Cooper, 2000; Henault, 2001) reached similar conclusions. In fact, these measures had negative effects on the emotional health of students, their graduation rates and their life chances. Further, these policies denied students the fundamental right to an education. (Hoffman, 2001; Cooper, 2000; Henault, 2001). Sughrue (2003) commented upon the Harvard project to state that when schools enforced severe disciplinary consequences for minor infractions, students felt isolated and abandoned at a time in their developmental continuum when they most needed support.

The Harvard report discussed the disastrous impact of zero tolerance policies, especially for children from minority and low SES backgrounds. The report delved deeper into the question of the subjective application of these policies, inherently alluding to racial discrimination, by supplying data that revealed a high rate of referrals for black students even for such subjective offences as ‘disrespect’ or ‘disruption’. Vavrus and Cole’s (2002) study of the discursive construction of school suspension further supported the above claims. Their analysis demonstrated that removing a student from class for disrespectful and/or disruptive behavior was a highly subjective and contextualized decision based upon subtle race and gender relations that were not adequately addressed in discipline policies. Despite the extensive research conducted in the U.S. on zero tolerance policies and its effects on issues of

equity and social justice, here in Ontario, a similar measure, the *Safe Schools Act*, was introduced as a political solution for an educational issue.

The Safe Schools Act (2001) in Ontario

The *Safe Schools Act* 2001 appeared in an 'episteme' that was fertile for the introduction of such measures. Previously, the *Education Act*, Section 23 limited the authority to suspend principals, and expulsions only to school boards. Part XIII of the *Education Act*, is more complex and, reflecting the zero tolerance philosophy of its proponents, mandated a tougher approach in dealing with behavior, discipline and safety concerns. However, even before the SSA, most boards in Ontario had already begun to formulate policies and regulations that subscribed to the principles of zero tolerance described above. For example, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) adopted a *Safe Schools Foundation Statement Policy* with a zero tolerance focus prior to the legislation. The promise of zero tolerance gained further legitimacy when the Minister of Education introduced a *Code of Conduct for Ontario Schools* (April 2000). A month later, the Minister introduced the *Safe Schools Act* giving legal backing to the *Code of Conduct*.

Perhaps the most significant change in the new law was the provision for **mandatory** suspension, **mandatory** expulsion and police involvement. The SSA provided for mitigating factors, whereby the suspension or expulsion of a student was not mandatory in specific circumstances, such as those in which the pupil did not have the ability to control his/her behavior, the pupil did not have the ability to understand the foreseeable consequences of that behavior, or the pupil's continuing presence in the school did not create an unacceptable risk to the safety of any person.

Furthermore, in considering the type and duration of a suspension/expulsion, the principal or school board must take into account the student's history, circumstances and other factors prescribed by regulation. The 'mitigating factors' clause, it might be argued, precluded the SSA from being characterized as zero tolerance. Although the term 'zero tolerance' is not used in the *Education Act* or the SSA (which amends sections of the *Education Act*), Bruce Cameron of the Toronto District School Board (in an interview with Pugh, 2004) said that this phrase is employed in many school discipline policies, and also concurred that the SSA is much more prescriptive than previous legislation (Daniel, 2006).

Research Methods and Study Limitations

The context

Our small scale qualitative study explored the ways in which people within an organization understood their work around the SSA within the discursive frames of the zero tolerance paradigm. The study was conducted with school personnel in five public schools (two elementary and three high schools) in a mid-sized urban centre in Ontario. Two of these high schools and one of the elementary schools were located in an urban centre with a diverse population in terms of socio-economic status, race and ethnicity. The other high school and the elementary school were located in affluent neighborhoods that had quite a diverse population, although not as much as the schools in the first group. Two of the three high schools were large; approximately 1000-1400 students in each. The third high school that offered alternative programs was small; no more than 100-120 students at any given time. Students who did not complete their high school credits due to suspensions, expulsions or a variety of other reasons arrived here. Both the elementary schools in our study had about 450-500 students in each.

Data sources and analysis

The main sources of data were qualitative semi-structured interviews with school administrators, counselors, social workers, and teachers. We noted that all our participants were of Caucasian descent. All our participants had a minimum of 10 years experience in the school system. We conducted 16 interviews in total that served as the primary sources of data for the study. Most of the data were collected in the high school setting because the majority of the problems occurred at this age group, although the elementary schools were by no means immune to such issues. We used documents (Ministry guidelines, regulations, policy memoranda; school/board policies) as secondary data. These documents were also useful in framing the interview questions that allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the manner in which policies were interpreted. The semi-structured interview questions were guided by the research questions noted above. An interview protocol was created to ensure consistency across the five schools. The research team also made ethnographic field notes during school visits. Interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for member checking. These transcripts were coded, and then analyzed specifically in relation to the objectives and questions noted above and more generally in keeping with the conceptual framework of the study.

It is not feasible to draw conclusions for all schools from the emerging themes; rather, the intent is to point to the processes and outcomes of the SSA as perceived by professionals involved in its implementation. Hence, we purposefully delimited our study to professionals. Understandably, the study could have been broader and more comprehensive had we included the perspectives of students (the ones directly affected by these measures) and/or their parents. Budgetary and time constraints prevented us from expanding the project at this time. Further, we noted that school boards were not eager to grant us permission to interview students, although we had received clearance from the research ethics board at our institution. This issue required us to make changes to our original plans for this project.

Gauging the Impact: From the Perspectives of Practitioners

This section distills the findings from our study to examine the perceived impact of the SSA in an episteme of a zero tolerance discourse that shapes policies and practices. Four main themes emerged from our research; the perceived positive impact, the deterrent factor, lack of resources, and issues of fairness and equity. Each one of these is discussed below and augmented with a sampling of voices from the field.

Positive attributes of the SSA

The biggest appeal of the SSA was that it provided clear and consistent guidelines within a school and across schools in the province. Our data revealed that the notion of “consistency” was all-pervasive. Our participants liked the SSA because it set guidelines and educated the general public as well about what was unacceptable behavior in schools, and the consequences for these behaviors. In this section we present a sampling of voices that captures the emerging theme of most of our interviews.

“I think they realize that there are some parameters that the government has set up for us to follow. We have some discretion but not a whole lot. I think there are some good things about it.” (Administrator, high school # 1)

“If you’re very consistent with who is getting a suspension and why they’re getting a suspension then the rest of the student population kind of falls in line.” (Guidance Counselor, high school # 1)

“Certainly in terms of the school, what we have discovered over the last number of years that I have been here is that the persistence and consistency of expectation and enforcement of those standards, regardless of who the student might be... We’re seeing benefits from that. We now are at a stage where the students know. If you do this, if you’re involved in this, there will be consequences and these are what the consequences are.” (Teacher, high school # 2)

“The expulsion route, in my experience, has been good because we have been able to get the student into a Strict Discipline program. They get counseling and their schooling continues, and by and large, the students when that’s been completed, have returned to us. We have seen a major change in their behavior and their life has gone on and it’s been better for them.” (Administrator, high school # 2)

These quotes clearly demonstrate that our participants generally thought the SSA brought consistency which they equated with fairness although they had some misgivings as noted in the section below.

The deterrent factor

Suspensions and expulsions did not deter the students they were designed to discipline. The students affected by the Safe Schools Act had many special needs. Many of the students who acted out were dealing with a lot of issues. Most often they had several social, socio-economic, psychological and behavioral issues that precluded them from doing well in school. These students had special circumstances that affected their behavior and problem solving abilities in school. They might not be capable of foreseeing the consequences of their actions prior to acting out.

“[The SSA] doesn’t work for the kids we use the *Act* with.” (Administrator, elementary school #2)

“No [the SSA] doesn’t work. Not with difficult kids. Your regular, everyday kids who might get suspended once or never in their lives, certainly. But not for the kids who need help.” (Teacher, high school # 3)

“For the habitually suspended student, the student that I have suspended over and over again, a lot of them view it as a day off. I know that there are students who operate in our building who don’t care what they do because they treat a suspension as a vacation. If I get a few more, I might get a five-day [suspension].”

(Administrator, high school # 2)

“There’s a percent that’s chronic and at that point you hope you have a good guidance department so the guidance person needs to intervene. The other thing is that very often I think what we’re seeing more and more is mental health issues, coming forward more so than ever before. I don’t know why but I’m seeing more and more.” (Guidance counselor, high school # 3)

“I think a lot of our students have trouble with attendance, maybe peer relations, their home life is not what it should be and they have trouble maintaining progress... They’re used to reacting and they’re used a consequence; they’re used to being yelled at... These kids are necessarily not [here to learn]. I think the kids here know the parameters, the Safe Schools Act is there but I don’t think, for a lot of them, it is going to make a difference between whether they behave properly.” (Administrator, high school # 1)

“It’s behavior or attitude or even mental health issues that haven’t been addressed. Or it may be something going on in the home that’s eating away inside of someone and they lose it.” (Social worker # 2)

Most of the students who acted out were in dire straits. In our review of documents from one school we found that 35% of those suspended had multiple suspensions (2 or more suspensions); indicating that suspensions were not very effective.

Zero tolerance policies are based on the assumption that students make decisions based on costs, benefits and consequences. While this might be true for the majority of the

students, many students affected by this policy might not have the mental or psychological capacity to think out their actions in advance (Casella, 2003). One commonality in most students expelled from schools was these students had poor school performance. Since students with learning disabilities were exempt for expulsion, could it be possible that these students had not been identified? If so, they might have gone through the school system without any accommodations made for their special needs and felt a sense of failure throughout. In these cases, students might not have had the ability to understand the consequences of their behavior or have adequate conflict resolution skills (Morrison, 1997) .

A 2003 report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (ORHC) found that since the implementation of the SSA, an increased number of students with disabilities were being suspended/ expelled for their behavior. This was occurring despite the mitigating factors included in the SSA. The increase in punishment for this population indicated that the schools were not well-equipped to deal with students with special needs. (The opportunity to succeed: Achieving barrier-free education for students with disabilities, 2003). Instead of looking into why children with *emotional* or *social* disabilities misbehave/act out, schools were excluding them.

Lack of resources and supports

All our participants concurred that schools needed additional resources to support students in need. Suspensions and expulsions alone were not the solution. They wanted to see more programs and services in place in order to address the causes of these behaviors.

“We need some type of personnel in there to allow the students to understand a) what has gotten me into this situation, b) how can I stay current with the curriculum and still work towards [credits].” (Administrator, high school # 3)

“An ideal situation would be that these kids have an alternative place to go to on that time. That’s where they would spend there suspension. And during that suspension they would have to review the reasons for suspension, and, how they’re going to correct it next time. We don’t have that.” (Teacher, high school # 2)

In some cases, students had to have catastrophic behaviors before appropriate services were offered. It was only through full expulsion that students received the counseling services they so desperately needed.

“You have to be a disaster before you get help. Things have got to change. We are not going to make any dent with the Safe Schools policy. No matter how we change it, no matter how we save, no matter what we do, until we get away from reacting and start looking at prevention.” (Teacher, elementary school # 2)

Issues of fairness and equity

All our participants held the belief that the SSA did not target specific minority groups. They espoused the “color blind” theory that rules apply equally to all students who misbehave.

“There’s the idea that it discriminates against minorities and students that are weaker academically. I try to treat each student as their own individual and try to work with them.” (Administrator, elementary school # 1)

“In terms of suspensions, at least here, I don’t think that there’s any one group that is [suspended] more.” (Administrator, high school # 1)

“I don’t find it discriminatory. I find in terms of the disabilities that there is a section where it says “If a child is not aware...” Sometimes a child is not aware once, twice, three times, but if it’s repeated we have to protect our school. The child might not be aware, each and every time there is an issue, but then that moves beyond whether the child is aware to -protecting for my environment.”
(Administrator, high school # 3)

All 16 participants echoed similar sentiments when questioned about the discriminatory aspects of the SSA. Even when we pointed out to them the results of a large Canadian study conducted by Ruck and Wortley (2002) in which they found that racial/ethnic minority students perceived discrimination with regards to teacher

treatment, suspensions, and police treatment, our participants declared that it did not happen at their school. Clearly, their responses were limited to the parameters of the discourse within which this policy was created and implemented. It should be noted that suspension and expulsion data-keeping is mandatory in Ontario. However, these data only include information when a student has been identified as having an exceptionality or special needs, not about his/her race, ethnicity or socio-economic status. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that students from minority status backgrounds and males receive harsher consequences for transgressions, but there is no statistical data to support these claims.

On July 8, 2005, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) released a statement indicating that despite concerns that were raised in their previous report (Bhattacharjee, 2003) regarding the discriminatory effects of the SSA, “little progress had been made”. This investigative report outlined the known problems inherent in Zero Tolerance policies as documented by research in other countries. The OHRC made several suggestions for the Catholic School Boards in Ontario to collect data on suspensions and expulsions, but to date, this has not been done consistently (Poirier, 2005). The Ontario Human Rights Committee (Bhattacharjee, 2003) has issued complaints against the Ministry of Education and the Toronto School Board insisting that the SSA failed to provide equal rights and a fair trial for all students and for punishing minority students more harshly. The committee made several recommendations to prevent the continuation of discrimination in the school system. They recommended the collection of statistics on the racial profile of the students suspended/expelled and removing all references to “Zero Tolerance” while setting up alternative education programs for all students suspended/expelled, and providing more in-school options instead of suspensions and expulsions. In light of these debates, in our next section we inquire whether there is a shift in thinking beyond the simplistic confines of the zero tolerance solutions to the problems of discipline and safety in our schools.

A Shift in Discursive Frames?

Based on interviews with school teachers, counselors, social workers and administrators who were involved in the implementation of the SSA in Ontario, participants acknowledged that school violence was a societal problem that extended beyond the

boundaries of the classroom. They indicated that family issues, peer pressure, mental health issues, media glorification of violence and community breakdown were at the root of school violence. However, despite these convictions, participants suggested that firm treatment of problem youth in a school setting was necessary to act as a warning for potential offenders, even when they admitted that suspensions and/or expulsions did not deter the students these policies were designed to discipline. Thus, while society at large was to blame for the problem, schools were left to solve it with measures combining infrequent counseling, suspensions and expulsions. This paradox may reflect the desire for quick solutions, while at the same time recognizing the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the implementation of these measures.

Zero tolerance policies fall under the category of retributive justice (i.e. “You get what you deserve”). The problem with this type of justice is that they may be biased based on the punisher’s beliefs. There is no insurance that justice will be done for all. New Zealand’s *Children, Young Persons and their Families Act* have used conferences to help to resolve the problems of young persons. These conferences incorporate the family and caregivers of the youth, and also the schools to determine what punishment should be given and what supports should be put into place to prevent the cycle from reoccurring. This is an example of restorative justice, where the focus is on helping the youth to recognize the social and emotional consequences of his or her behavior and to restore the situation with the victims and to themselves. This teaches the young, impressionable youth to take responsibility for their actions, to take the other’s perspective, and learn what could have been instead. The punishment is given with a learning objective, as opposed to isolating the troubled youth (Drewery, 2004). Two local school boards in Ontario have adopted this notion of retributive justice instead of adhering to zero tolerance policies. They acknowledge that although the restorative justice process cannot replace suspensions and expulsions, it plays a role in reintegrating students, mending relationships and creating positive connections (Arnott, 2007).

Despite evidence of systemic discrimination, school administrations continue to support the tenets of zero tolerance and often claim that school discipline policies that treat all students equally regardless of their particular social context are non-discriminatory. Jull (2000) suggests that this kind of reasoning presupposes that the social contexts of interpersonal interactions are irrelevant when dealing with students who have committed an infraction against a school code or discipline policy. It also assumes that all students share equal advantages and have

the same social and academic opportunities, and that neither a student's socioeconomic status nor academic standing plays an important role in one's ability to access school resources, perform well academically, or receive the social and academic support of school personnel. To claim that equity and fairness can be achieved through the implementation of a so-called unbiased zero tolerance school discipline policy is to believe that discriminatory practices could be eradicated by implementing policies that are blind to personal or individual social and/or cultural contexts. Equal treatment in an unequal social and academic environment is discriminatory.

Is it time for meaningful change?

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education is piloting new programs to serve students who are at risk for dropping out of school. The following programs are being offered (Programs, Strategies and Resources to Help Students Succeed in Grades 7-12, 2005): *Credit Recovery* helps students earn the credits they failed to complete. This program focuses on improving learning strategies and may include behavioral or other supports. *Alternative Education* is for students who have difficulty succeeding in regular classroom or are returning to school after dropping out. This program provides social and emotional support, flexible timetables to accommodate student employment, modularized course delivery, and cooperative education opportunities. *Student Success in Grades 9 and 10*: is a program that offers strategies to struggling students in their first two years of high school to assist with credit accumulation. The services are purported to increase student's level of participation and sense of engagement, provide varied supports to meet the level of the student's needs, assist with developing semester timetables, and monitor attendance and participation. A Student Success teacher is appointed to each school participating in the pilot study. *Program Pathways to Apprenticeship and the Workplace* provides a combination of courses and workplace learning experiences to prepare students for work and enable them to receive credits towards graduation. The intent of *College Connections* is to develop an awareness of college programs to students. It may include students taking high school level courses at the college or enrolling in college level courses. Another is the *Success for Targeted Groups of Students* that offers specialized programs for certain groups of students (i.e. Aboriginal, low income, homeless, ESL) whose cultural and social needs keep them from succeeding in the regular classroom.

Implications and Conclusion

Enhancing Preventative Measures

Casella (2003) argued that in order to be successful, a discipline policy must not criminalize youth. School discipline policies should entail two parts: violence prevention initiatives such as providing positive social models and engaging students, and school discipline initiatives that keep them in the school and involve students in their discipline process. By engaging students in a problem-solving process, students could learn how their behavior affected others and how to think out their problems in the future. By working with the students, positive relationships could be fostered between administration and the students, making them less likely to feel criminalized and more engaged in the school community. In order to shift the trend from the criminalization of youth, both Casella (2003) and Verdugo (2002) recommended that two fundamental principles be followed: Firstly, no child should be deprived of an education and secondly, all school disciplinary measures should be fair, equitable and individualized.

Gagnon & Leone (2001) also made a similar cogent argument for policies that included the appropriate educational setting and supports for each student and that all students be given the right to education in all situations. They advised the use of preventive measures to avoid a crisis before it happens. Dohrn (2001) provided a set of guiding principles in order to reduce violence in schools. Smaller schools were safer: when personal relationships and trust were fostered, this led to safety and learning opportunities. Noguera (2001) recommended schools and parents should advocate banning the practice of removing students from schools and using social capital to prevent violence in the schools and he also stressed the importance of making personal connections with students. He suggested developing partnerships with external health and counseling support services, advocated the use mentors for students who needed positive role models, and called for creating a climate of respect by responding quickly to minor infractions. In his list of recommendations, he also advocated for replacing suspension with a punishment that is accompanied by counseling and regular communication with parents. Another important suggestion was to provide students with numerous opportunities to become deeply engaged in their school and activities because students who were more engaged in their school were less likely to commit infractions.

Each of these researchers offer alternative conceptions for creating learning spaces that encourage greater dialogue and responsibility on the part of the student and school teachers

and administrators. Furthermore, they encourage a shift from the current norms of treating misbehaviors as a criminal act in the sphere of education. As our study has shown it is difficult for professionals to step outside the discursive frames within which our policies are formulated, such that they become 'regimes of truth' and the only tools they depend upon to construct reality. We believe that once they understand the constraints of these discursive frames, they might seek alternatives to the current taken for granted policies and practices. We also have seen a profound shift in recent developments in Ontario. The OHRC reached a landmark settlement with the Ministry of Education (April 13, 2007) to "promote school safety while ensuring that all students, including students with disabilities and racialized students, are given the opportunity to reach their full potential." Further in the terms of the settlement the Ministry of Education confirmed that "the concept of 'zero-tolerance' has no place in legislation, regulations or policies. We will continue to monitor the changing discourse in disciplinary policies and practices in our schools.

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