Understanding the Dangers and Challenges Facing Today’s Schools

Project Eight Research Paper

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**Introduction**

Schools today face a daunting number of challenges. Beyond test scores, behavior management, and academic achievement schools are forced to confront the seemingly basic issue of protecting students and teachers from the threat of serious harm. There are a number of reasons why schools have to face these challenges and a corresponding number of causes for such violent incidents. Educators must be more aware than ever of the threats that may impact them on a daily basis. Teachers in particular should be aware of the signs of bullying and be able to recognize the characteristics of bullies and their victims. They must also be prepared to confront and support an ever more diverse student population, and to be vigilant against the threats faced by these minority student groups.

**Unsafe conditions in schools**

There are three general terms to describe the unsafe conditions with which schools today must cope. These conditions include aggression and violence, bullying, and environmental design.

**Aggression and violence.** Violence and aggression are an unfortunate feature of the modern public school experience. Instances range in severity and vary across schools and school districts, and it is difficult to tell whether schools today are more or less safe than they were before the advent of the Safe Schools movement in the 1990s. According to the latest National Center for Education Statistics’ *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* (2014) report, there were 31 violent deaths on school grounds (including staff, students, and administrators), while nonfatal victimization was on the decline (down to 52 from 181 per 1000 school population). There was also a decline in the last twenty years in the percentage of students who felt threatened while on school property. While these reviews are mixed, it is evident that these are still very real and present issues for many students and educators today.

**Bullying.** Bullying has a long history in the public school environment, and it remains a serious threat for many students. In addition to the issues of physical encounters and rumor-spreading, a more modern form of peer victimization, cyberbullying, has been added to the bully’s arsenal. Bullying in any form has the dangerous side effect of increasing the likelihood that a victim will contemplate or commit suicide (Manning & Bucher, 2013). This is especially true of students who exhibit characteristics typically seen among the victims of bullies. Modern technology and the interconnectedness of today’s society have made bullying a more pervasive force among students from elementary through secondary grades.

**Environmental design.** The U.S. Department of Education recognizes environmental design as a serious potential threat to many schools today (2008). Safety-related school design is associated with facilities that are easy to monitor and secure and that provide a productive and positive learning environment. Schools today tackle this concept in a number of ways. Some older facilities have opted for advanced metal detector systems and an increased security presence in the hallways at all times. Others have opted to remodel or build entirely new schools with safety as the top priority. While teachers have little control over the design and construction of an educational facility, there are actions they can take in their own classrooms to foster a safe learning environment; for example, they can create seating arrangements and employ management strategies that teach personal responsibility and cooperation.

**Causes of school violence**

While the percentages of violent behavior on school property vary widely from school to school, and there is even some contention over how much violent activity is truly occurring, the causes of such behavior follow a clear pattern. The major causes of violence is school include gangs, hate-motivated behavior, and dugs.

According to a report by the Principals’ Partnership (2013), gang activity is on the rise and is present in every kind of US community. Additionally, gangs are experiencing the fastest growth in membership from the middle grades. The presence of competing gangs in schools is a negative force in the educational process. The activity of these organizations is limited in the number of individuals directly involved, but the disruptive and destructive effects of gang recruitment and activity have a serious and negative effect on the whole school community.

Hate groups manifest in several forms in the public school system. These groups are often bound by an interest in defaming or intimidating a minority group, such as the LGBTQ community, racial or ethnic minorities, and religious minorities. Evidence of hate group activity can be seen in school graffiti (Elias, 2015), direct or indirect threats (Thomas, 2009), and online cyberbullying (Thomas, 2009).

Drugs have a strong link to violence and misbehavior on school grounds. According to the 2014 *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* report, 23% of students grades 9-12 admitted to using marijuana, and 6% of those students reported using while on school grounds. Other drugs reportedly used by students in this age group include unauthorized prescription drugs (20%), hallucinogens (12%), ecstasy (8%), and cocaine (2%) (Eckes & Russo, 2012). Violence and the use of illicit substances go hand in hand; Zhang and Johnson (2005) found that students classified as heavy smokers were 80% more likely to carry a weapon and 90% more likely to threaten and/or hurt another student with this weapon.

Gang activity, hate groups, and drug culture have a significant presence in schools nationwide. Despite the small number of students directly participating in such activities, the impacts of their illicit and violent actions are destructive to efforts to promote healthy productive schools.

**Bullying, bullies, and victims of bullying**

Bullying is a persistent deleterious force that has been present in our schools since the inception of the public school system (Manning & Bucher, 2013). Bullying can be categorized by the type of activity perpetrated by the bully on the victim. Bullies themselves can be recognized by several distinct characteristics; likewise, their victims have distinctive traits and mannerisms indicative of their position in the bully-victim dichotomy.

**Categories of bullying.** Bullying methods are grouped based on the primary method of aggression used by the bully on their victim. The four major categories include physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual bullying (Manning & Bucher, 2013). Physical bullying causes minor to moderate physical harm to the victim. These behaviors might include poking and tickling, to more serious infractions like beating or strangling. Verbal bullying is another category familiar to most students and teachers; this involves name calling, gossiping, or other methods of verbally “making fun” of others. Emotional bullying is similar to verbal bullying but is more subtle and can often be difficult for the teacher to detect. This type of bullying involves the defamation of another’s character, manipulation of the victim or the victim’s associates, and threatening or otherwise inducing fear or isolation on another student. The last category can have characteristics of the other three, but is much more likely to escalate into delinquent or even criminal behavior (Horne Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003). Sexual bullying can involve non-physical contact, such as voyeurism and exhibitionism, and/or physical contact, including harassment and assault.

**Characteristics of bullies.** Despite the variety of ways bullies can act out, they tend to share some common characteristics. Being aware of these as a teacher can go a long way to preventing bullying in the classroom. Horne et al. (2003) discuss the characteristics of bullies by comparing them to the characteristics of “well adapted children.” They state that bullies, or “aggressive children,” view others as the instigator, use force to settle differences, lack respect for and understanding of others, and act out violently due to a misinterpretation of the words and actions of people around them. They are also more likely to have parents who are distant or who model violent behavior. By contrast, “well-adapted children” consider others’ feelings and viewpoints, collaborate and cooperate in order to solve problems, practice self-responsibility, and value the differences in others; their parents are more likely to be warm and involved. Manning and Bucher (2013) further add that bullies do not act sporadically or randomly. The abuses they commit against their victims form a familiar and predictable pattern of behavior over time. Bullying is rarely a one-time event and the victim is singled out for a specific reason in the bully’s mind.

**Characteristics of victims of bullies.** It is important for educators to be aware of the characteristics of the victims of bullies. Some characteristics to look for include anxiousness or low self-esteem, passiveness in confrontation, having few friends and poor social skills, and being (or perceived as being) weaker than the other children. Unlike bullies or well-adapted children, bullying victims tend to have parents who are overprotective and don’t encourage assertiveness in their children. Students exhibiting these characteristics may or may not currently be bullied, but they are more likely to be or to become the victims of bullies.

**Prevention and intervention efforts**

Everyone involved in the school community has a responsibility to work together to create as safe and supportive an environment as possible. It is crucial to enlist the skills, thoughts, and ideas of teachers, students, parents, and community members in the development of the school environment. When problems cannot be prevented, intervention strategies like peer mediation and conflict resolution can provide good alternatives to aggressive or violent problem-solving methods.

**Working with teachers.** Teachers form one important component of the school community. Teachers can work together to foster a positive learning environment and model desirable behaviors for their students (Swafford, Bailey, & Beasley, 2014). They can also work directly with students, teaching them problem-solving techniques, collaborative skills, self-reliance, and accountability.

**Working with students.** Students are another resource in the fight for safe schools. Students are present in their schools for most of their day and can help develop a fun and secure learning space for each other (Asiyai, 2014). Teachers and administrators should be open to the ideas of students and work to incorporate them into the school safety conversation.

**Working with parents and community members.** When children are not at school, they are likely under the supervision of parents or other adults in their community. These people directly impact the school environment, and ideally help to create a positive one (Adamski, Fraser, & Peiro, 2013). By encouraging parents and community leaders to attend to the activities and social interactions of students, educators can develop a better understanding of student behavior and predict their activities at school through this valuable feedback.

**Peer mediation.** Peer mediation is an intervention tool that relies on the affective skills of students, under the supervision of qualified adults, to help settle problems as they arise. This represents a proactive and non-violent avenue to settling a dispute between students, and one that can help both students grow and better themselves (Lane-Garon, Yergat, & Kralowec, 2012).

**Conflict resolution.** Conflict resolution is another mediator-led intervention option that schools can use to ease tensions between students. This intervention is directed and controlled by the mediator (who is a trained adult or school counselor), while the students are engaged in listening and working toward a peaceful resolution to the issue at hand (Lane-Garon et al., 2012).

**Inclusive classrooms**

The inclusive classroom is a relatively new phenomenon. The last fifty years have seen the introduction of students with special needs into the general classroom setting, but the motivation and the extent of this movement have been mixed (Manning & Bucher, 2013). Some believe that students with special needs should begin their education at home or in a controlled environment. By contrast, the inclusive classroom is place in which all students begin in the general classroom and students with special needs are moved to an alternative setting only when it is deemed legally and educationally necessary for their academic and social development; in other words, the inclusive classroom will host all students, including those with disabilities, as long as it is considered the least restrictive environment for them (Heward, 2014).

**Differences among students and classroom management strategies**

Educators must be cautious about reacting to other differences they may notice in their students. As schools become more diverse gender and cultural differences will be more prevalent than ever before. One group of students who are particularly vulnerable to the threat of bullies and violence at school are the LGBTQ community. Two educators interviewed by Short (2013) agreed, “...that homophobia, heteronormativity, and heterosexism are at the root of the bullying of sexual minority students… (and that) the threat to the safety of queer students is broader than mere physical violence.” Teachers and administrators can take steps to help protect sexual minority students and make their schools and classrooms safe and welcoming environments for learning. Educators can manage the learning environment more effectively by educating all students about the positive nature of their non-heteronormative classmates, providing a support network for these students, and working with other staff members to build an understanding of sexual minority students (Weiler, 2003). Efforts like these will contribute to better managed classrooms with lower incidences of anti-LGBTQ discrimination.

Teacher education and increased sensitivity to the differences among students is also a critical skill for working with a diverse student population. Cultural differences come in many different forms and may encompass values and belief systems, traditional customs, communication styles, and interpersonal relationship patterns. Teachers can increase their understanding of a student from a different culture by first considering their own cultural heritage, then taking time to appreciate and value the student’s cultural heritage. Other students can learn to appreciate their classmates from different backgrounds through teacher-facilitated learning experiences, such as storytelling, playing sports or other games from a different culture, and having students prepare a favorite food from their own culture and sharing it with the class (Manning & Bucher, 2013). Excellent teachers will make the effort to learn about the differences among their students, educate others about the valuable insights these students have to offer, and celebrate the potential each student brings to the classroom community.

**Conclusion**

Violence and aggression are an all-too-real challenge to teachers and students across the country today. While schools have always had to deal with issues of student achievement, behavior management, and even bullying, these issues are far more severe and their presence is felt by more school-goers than ever before. It is important to recognize the conditions that put schools at risk and the causes of the violence and aggression that can occur there. It is equally important for teachers to recognize the danger of bullying and the far-reaching implications bullying behavior can have on the bullies themselves and their victims. This is especially applicable to minority students, who are at a higher risk of peer victimization than other groups of students. Supporting all students and working to understand and defend cultural, gender, and educational minorities must be among the top priorities of educators working in the public school system today.

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