Listen First

How Student Perspectives on Violence Can Be Used to Create Safer Schools

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Introduction

The public reaction to the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado tell us a great deal about attitudes and perceptions toward violence in American society. First, there was the intense media coverage during and immediately after the incident. In vivid detail, the public was provided around the clock coverage which included live footage from the school, on the scene interviews with students and police officers, and multiple reports on every possible aspect of the violent rampage. For a public seeking to understand what had happened, such coverage was at first illuminating, but as the days wore on, the reporting gradually changed from news to a perverse kind of entertainment. Within a relatively short period of time, the tragedy at Columbine High School became yet another hyped up media spectacle, which like so many other recent national media events, at times seemed as cheesy and exploitive of the victims.

A similar transformation occurred in the statements made by politicians who quickly stepped forward to comment on the incident. At first their words seemed genuinely empathetic toward the victims and their families. However, as time passed their comments became more ideological, calculating and partisan. With the increased attention given to the issues related to the incident: regulation of firearms, school safety, youth culture, etc., politicians began to stake out strategic positions ever mindful of how their public stances would be interpreted by key constituents and financial contributors. At every public event - press conferences, funerals and memorial services, the occasion came to as an opportunity for politicians position themselves in ways they hoped would maximize their political advantages and minimize their losses.

Secondly, the incident occurred while the nation was engaged in an undeclared war against Yugoslavia; a war in which casualties inflicted upon civilians were rationalized as "collateral" damage incurred during what is proclaimed to be a "humanitarian" military mission. Interestingly, none of the media commentators ever explored whether there might be a connection between State sponsored violence which was officially condoned and even applauded, and the actions of these troubled teenagers. While many commentators were quick to suggest a possible link between the tragedy at Columbine and the pervasive violence present in the media, on the internet, and in popular music, few drew any connection at all to the government's use of violence in a foreign land. The unstated message was that State sanctioned violence was "good" violence, and therefore would not be questioned.

Finally, the shootings at Columbine High School produced a rash of copy cat incidents at schools across the country, with numerous school districts reporting bomb threats and students appearing in trench coats at their schools. Such incidents may be the most telling response of all. Coming on the heels of shootings in Oregon, Mississippi, and Arkansas, this incident made it unmistakably clear that violence among young people and at schools is no longer a problem associated exclusively with the innercity. The outbreak of threats, real and imagined, at schools
across the country in the days that followed, reinforced the fear that what happened in Littleton could happen anywhere. It also added to an even deeper concern and recognition: that something is profoundly wrong with American culture if our schools and our youth are indeed this vulnerable to violence.

When considered in combination and in relation to one another, these responses tell us several contradictory things about our society's attitudes and perceptions toward violence and towards children generally. First, they tell us that while violence of this kind may be repulsive and frightening it is also on another level intriguing, and perhaps even in some morbid sense, entertaining. The media consistently defends its sensationalized coverage of such events by arguing that they merely provide what the public wants, and the public's appetite for graphic depictions of violence is at times insatiable. Secondly, it suggests that though violence is prohibited in school, its use in other contexts can be rationalized as legitimate if the perpetrator is the State. Even if the targets of violence are alleged to be mentally impaired (i.e. the recent execution of Duane Babbit in California and the pending execution of Larry Keith Robinson in Texas) or non-combatant civilians in places such Iraq, Serbia, or the Sudan, State sponsored violence in defense of what are construed as national interests, is permissible. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the failure throughout much of American society to recognize the connection between the deplorable social conditions under which large numbers of children live and the increased likelihood that these same children will become victims or perpetrators of violence.

Violence is an integral part of American history and culture, and though there is a deeply felt fear of violence in many communities across the country, it is apparently not sufficient to lead a decisive break from our societal obsession. We fear violence but Americans own more firearms than any other people on the face of the earth. Politicians criticize filmmakers who produce films with gratuitous depictions of violence, yet such films tend to be tremendously successful at the box office. We deplore violence on the streets, but we applaud it on the playing fields. The search for strategies to reduce the threat of violence continues despite these contradictions. It may well be the case that without a complete purging of our societal fixation with violence, a more pervasive feeling of safety and social peace will remain out of reach. In the mean time, the search continues.

In our nation's schools, the search safety has now reached the point of desperation. Although the available data and evidence suggests that the incidence of violence in schools is not rising and that violent acts are not becoming more prevalent, among the general public there is a growing perception that schools are more violent and dangerous than ever before. In polls and surveys, students, teachers and parents all report a greater degree of fear of violent assault at school, and greater concern about safety and student discipline generally.

In response to these concerns, several states and school districts have undertaken a variety of highly visible measures intended to provide some reassurance to the public that schools can be made safe. This has included the adoption of security measures such as metal detectors and high tech surveillance cameras, as well as an increasing reliance on armed security guards and police officers to address the security needs of school sites. At many innercity schools, such measures are not new. Concerns about safety and discipline at schools in impoverished urban areas have been common for many years. However, the recent wave of shootings at predominantly white, middle class suburban schools in Mississippi, Kentucky, Arkansas, Oregon, Colorado, and most recently Georgia, have shown quite clearly that violence is no longer limited to innercity schools. Though there is no clear pattern linking the more recent violent incidents, in the national media these incidents have been portrayed as part of a dangerous national trend afflicting the nation's schools.

Given the strong reaction that an issue like school violence evokes, it is not surprising that even if statistical evidence on the incidence of violence in schools suggest that no significant increase
has occurred, policy on this issue at federal, state and local levels, will more likely to be driven by public fears than data. On such volatile and emotional issues, the facts don't speak for themselves. Even without clear and convincing documentation on the extent of the problem, policy makers and school officials feel compelled to take action. They feel compelled to adopt a variety of measures, some of which are quite costly, so that they at least appear to be doing "something" to assure a frightened public that order in schools can be maintained. Charged with the responsibility of managing our nation's schools, educational leaders, and increasingly politicians, feel compelled to take tough action, lest they be accused of being unresponsive to the public's concerns.

However, in the rush to act, policies are adopted and actions are taken, too often without the benefit of careful dispassionate analysis. As a consequence, much of what is done may not only fail in reducing the likelihood of violence, but may even inadvertently contribute to its occurrence. For example, shortly after the Richmond public schools installed metal detectors at all of the high schools in the District, two students were shot at one of the schools by an individual who found a way to avoid the newly installed security system. It may well be the case that the metal detector created an illusion of security that led to a slackening of other forms of security (e.g. adult supervision in hallways) at the school.

Many of the "get tough" measures are premised on the notion that violence in school can be reduced and controlled by identifying, apprehending and excluding violent or potentially violent individuals (Toby, 1994; Coleman, 1992). Such an approach generally treats violence as a form of individual deviance that can be rooted out through punitive and exclusionary measures. However, left unconsidered, and therefore unaddressed, are the social and environmental factors which a significant body of public health research on violence cites as being central to the underlying causes of youth violence.

It is even more problematic that research on youth attitudes and perceptions toward violence has had very little influence on the policies and measures that have been enacted to promote safety. In this chapter I will present an analysis of how a variety of social factors, specifically: race, class and neighborhood context, influence student perceptions toward violence in school, and attitudes toward violent behavior. Based on an analysis of interviews carried out at two middle schools in northern California, I will demonstrate the importance of incorporating student perspectives and concerns into the effort to curtail violence in school. I will argue that as the primary victims and perpetrators of violence in school, the perceptions, attitudes, and fears of students must be analyzed and taken into account if the strategies utilized to prevent violence are to succeed at making schools safe. My goal is to show how an understanding of student perspectives on violence can be incorporated into school violence prevention efforts and thereby increase the likelihood that schools will become safer places for children and the adults who work in them.

The Contextual Reality of Violence

In many school districts, the pressure to create schools that are perceived as safe, often becomes reduced to a numbers game. To reassure the public that actions are being taken to increase security, school officials point to statistics related to the number of weapons confiscated, the number of students suspended, expelled or arrested, as evidence that something is being done about the problem. Such reporting can be especially important when those responsible for security are competing for scarce resources. In order to secure funding for security, reports on the incidence of violence can be used to demonstrate that while valiant efforts are being made to reduce violence, the problem persists, and therefore the fight and the funding must continue. Statistics on violence prevention are also instrumental in framing public discourse about violence; even without making teachers and students feel safer, administrators can claim to be doing something by pointing to quantifiable data which shows that results are being obtained.
Yet, for parents, teachers and students who live with the reality of violence and who must contend with the threat of physical harm on a daily basis, reports on the number of weapons confiscated or the number of students who have been expelled are unlikely to allay their fears. When engaging in ordinary activities such as walking to school or playing at the park generates so much fear and anxiety that many kids feel unable to participate in them, news that arrests or suspensions have increased is unlikely to provide the assurance of safety that many desperately seek.

Still, within the context of the fight against violence, symbolic actions take on great significance, even though they may have little bearing upon the actual occurrence of violence or its perception. Metal detectors, barbed wire fences, armed guards and policemen, and principals wielding baseball bats as they patrol the halls, are all symbols of tough action. Even if most students realize that it is possible to bring a weapon into a school building without being discovered by a metal detector, and that it is highly unlikely that a principal will actually hit a student with a baseball bat, the symbols persist. They persist because without them the unstated truth would be known: those responsible for preventing violence really don't have a clue about what to do to make schools safer places.

Part of the failure of traditional approaches is rooted in their inability to address the contextual factors which influence the incidence of violence and reactions to it. Expressions of violence are certainly not limited to schools, so it may be unrealistic to fashion remedies that respond to the issue without consideration of neighborhood and other contextual factors. For example, in developing a response to the threat of violence it may be important to understand the circumstances under which violence as a learned form of social behavior may be construed as legitimate or even appropriate by young people. Similarly, we might also consider what role portrayals of violence in the media, sports and officially sanctioned forms of State sponsored violence (i.e. war or police actions) play in shaping attitudes toward violence.

Finally, given the persistence of certain characteristics and patterns with respect to the perpetrators and victims of violence, namely the disproportionate number of African American and Latino males found in both categories, it may be important to consider how the racialization of violence has shaped popular attitudes toward the issue. Orlando Patterson, a sociologist at Harvard University, recently asked the question in a New York Times editorial: "What if the killers at Columbine High School had been Black?"(6/2/99 New York Times) This is not merely a rhetorical question, for prior to the recent wave of shootings at suburban schools, the media's portrayal of youth violence has been linked almost exclusively to Black and Latino youth. To the extent that violence is now widely recognized as more than just a minority issue, there may be greater willingness to explore the underlying social and cultural factors which contribute to its expression.

Additionally, as the shootings at Columbine High School have shown, it is important that we consider how peer groups and the social climate of a school may influence attitudes toward violence. Recent incidents suggest that kids who have been socially ostracized, bullied, teased or mistreated, by school officials or other students, may be at greater risk of engaging in violent behavior. An unwillingness to confront the implications of the connections between violence and social status may prevent us from seeing how expressions of violence may be linked to broader patterns of success and failure at school. It is significant that those most likely to receive punishment for disciplinary infractions in school also tend to be more likely to have been placed in special education or remedial classes (Meier and Stewart 1989).

In schools where teachers are afraid of students, where Black and Latino students are criminalized and uniformly treated as potentially violent gang members, and where responsibility for managing school safety has been relegated to poorly paid security guards, the potential for violence is great. Instead of providing a safe venue for teaching and learning, such schools come to reflect the violence present within the surrounding community. Within such a context,
understanding the perceptions of those most at risk of violence becomes even more important for finding ways to reduce its occurrence.

- **How Student Perspectives on Violence Can Be Used to Create Safer Schools**

**Understanding Student Perceptions of School Violence**

To begin to understand how students perceived the threat of violence within the context of their everyday experiences at school, I undertook a study of student attitudes utilizing the grounded theory approach developed by Glazer and Strauss.(1977) As is typical for most inquiries that are premised on grounded theory, I had a great deal of prior knowledge about the subject matter, having worked and engaged in research with schools for many years. However, despite my familiarity with the subject I had no compelling hypothesis or causal explanation for the questions that motivated the inquiry.

I wanted to understand how students perceived the threat of violence in their environment and how this perception might influence their attitudes toward violent behavior. I was also interested in understanding the ethical judgements they made regarding particular manifestations of violence that they observed and/or experienced within their daily routines. Specifically, I wanted to know if there were circumstances in which students might regard violent behavior as legitimate or appropriate, and if so, what connection if any this had to their personal stance toward violence.

To find answers to these questions I surveyed and conducted interviews with forty-eight students at two middle schools in northern California. I chose the two schools because they provided a striking contrast along the dimensions of race, class and environmental context. I surmised that such a contrast would illuminate the ways in which social context - the community, neighborhood economy, physical environment, etc - influenced the attitudes and perceptions of young people toward violence. Additionally, I suspected that while students at the two schools seem to exist in completely separate worlds, a closer examination might reveal other ways in which the students are similar to each other as a result of their exposure to television and other media, and the more diffuse influences of popular youth culture. Understanding how these factors - the cultural and the environmental - influenced the attitudes and perceptions of students toward violence was a primary goal of this inquiry.

In order to protect the identities of those associated with the two schools, I shall refer to them in this paper as School A and B. School A is a relatively small middle school - 347 students, 18 teachers, a principal, an assistant principal and two guidance counselors. It is located in an industrial area in an economically depressed and socially isolated community; a neighborhood with a reputation for its dangerous streets, dense housing projects, and illegal dumping that occurs on its streets. The school, like the community, has a diverse non-white student population, made up predominantly of African Americans, but with significant numbers of students who are recent immigrants from Mexico, Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

School B is a medium size middle school - 812 students, 36 teachers, a principal, 2 assistant principals, and 3 counselors. It is located in a park-like setting on twelve acres of land, with large athletic fields, a swimming pool and tennis courts. It is surrounded by the homes of middle class families, the average value of which exceeds $300,000, in a predominantly white, middle class, suburban community. The community is made up largely of college educated professionals, though there is a working class side of town where most non-white families live.

Even though the actual distance between the two schools is less than ten miles, in existential terms the schools feel as though they were thousands of miles apart. The contrast is most readily apparent in the physical aspects of the two schools. The hall ways in school A are dark, and the
play areas are covered with asphalt. The hallways in school B are bright with natural illumination from skylights in the ceilings, and grass and trees cover the campus.

Similarly, the way these schools relate to the surrounding community is also a telling feature of comparison. While school A is surrounded by a fence approximately 15 feet in height which borders the perimeter of the campus, school B and its facilities - pool, playing fields, tennis and basketball courts, are easily accessible to its neighbors and the general public. The design of the two schools suggests that whereas school A regards its community with suspicion and fear, school B perceives the community as an ally and its facilities are regarded by residents as a public resource and asset.

My access to both schools was made possible by prior relationships with the faculty and administration. In years past I had been involved in professional development workshops for teachers, and spoken to groups of parents and students at both schools. To obtain their participation in this study I approached each principal with an offer to assist them in devising a violence prevention strategy for their schools that would be informed by concrete knowledge about the views and perceptions of students. Like many schools, both were faced with growing concern from parents and teachers related to the threat of violence. Though neither school had experienced any major incidents of violence in the last few years, heightened awareness about violence at other schools throughout the country prompted both principals to readily agree to participate in the study and welcome my offer of assistance.

The design called for surveys and interviews with students to be conducted in 8th grade social studies classes with the support and cooperation of the classroom teachers. Twenty-two students were surveyed and interviewed at school A, and twenty-eight students were surveyed and interviewed at school B. In both classes the study was introduced as part of a unit on violence prevention which I taught as a guest teacher over a two week period. The unit began with a lecture/presentation on the forms of violence in American society - violent crime, interpersonal and domestic violence, police and military violence, and violent acts carried out by hate and terror groups. This was followed by a discussion of how these forms of violence are represented in the media. Following a brief interactive discussion to clarify the focus of the study and definition of terms, a survey was administered which consisted of ten true/false and six open-ended questions (see Chart #2). Once the surveys were completed and collected, a discussion of the responses was facilitated with the whole group in an effort to understand why individuals responded as they did to the questions. This enabled me to get a better understanding of the logic behind the responses, and also provided an opportunity for an open discussion of related issues.

Following completion of the survey I conducted individual interviews with the students over the course of the week, using the six open-ended questions from the survey as the basis for our conversation. Each interview lasted approximately twenty-five minutes. All of the questions were designed to solicit the student's views and perceptions of violence and to ascertain the extent to which they perceived a threat of violence within the school environment. The following week I presented a unit on violence in the media for the purpose of investigating how students interpreted and responded to violent images in film. The results of that portion of the study will not be reported here, though its findings have indirect relevance to the issue of violence in schools.

Below I present an analysis of the responses of the students to the surveys and interviews conducted at the two schools.

**School A**

Of the twenty-two students who participated in the study at school A, fourteen were African American (seven boys, seven girls), five were Asian American (three girls, two boys), and three
were Latino (two girls, one boy). Among the entire student population only 3% of the students were designated gifted and talented based on their test scores on the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). In contrast, 24% of the students at school A were designated as eligible for some form of special education, while 64% were qualified for compensatory education based on test scores which on average fell below the 38th percentile on the CTBS. Over 60% of the seventh graders at school A were tested below grade level in reading, and 52% were ranked below grade level in math.

**Chart #1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Population</strong></td>
<td>347</td>
<td>812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GATE</strong> (Identified as gifted based on standardized test)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comp. Ed.</strong> (Identified as eligible for remediation based on scoring below 37th percentile on California Test of Basic Skills)</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below grade level</strong> (As determined by classroom teacher)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eligible for Free/reduced lunch</strong> (Based on household income)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weapons Confiscated</strong> (No guns were confiscated at either school in the 1992-'93 school year)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expulsions</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suspensions</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All data is based upon official district reports from the 1992-'93 academic year.

Compared to most schools serving middle class children, the academic offerings at school A are quite sparse. Science courses are offered to 7th and 8th graders, but there is no modern equipment in the science labs. There is a school library, but according to the school librarian, no new books have been ordered or received in the last ten years. Algebra is offered at the school to eighth graders, but only fifteen students were considered sufficiently prepared to take the course at the time of this study. There is also a computer laboratory, but access to students is limited to students enrolled in the computer course. The only other elective course available is Spanish which is limited to eighth graders, though a variety of ESL (English as a Second Language), special education and remedial reading classes are also offered.

School A is located in a community with high concentrations of poverty, and the effects of poverty are manifest within the school in a variety of ways. In 1993 95% of the students qualified, on the basis of parental income, for free or reduced lunch. Through a conversation with the school nurse I learned that 43% of the students were identified as asthmatic or having some other form of chronic respiratory condition; a condition which she attributed to the freeways and heavy industry which pervade the community. Finally, and most surprising to me, 68% of the students at school A live with an adult who is someone other than one of their biological parents (i.e. grandparents, relatives, foster care, etc.).

From this description of the characteristics and conditions present at school A one might draw the conclusion that this is a school where concerns about the threat of violence are high. This was indeed the case during the time I was carrying out research at the school, but as will be shown later, a heightened sense of awareness about the threat of violence is increasingly not
uncommon even at schools in communities that seem safer. In interviews with teachers and
administrators concerns about safety came up frequently, though most often outsiders and the
surrounding neighborhood were perceived as the primary source of danger to the school.

During the 1992-'93 school year, fourteen weapons were confiscated from students at school A
(one bee-bee gun, five knives, three baseball bats, and five sticks or clubs). Within the school
district of which it is a part, school A ranked tenth among thirty two middle schools for the number
of weapons confiscated. During the same period, eight students were expelled for violent
behavior (mostly fighting) at school, seventy-six were suspended, and the police were called to
campus on twenty-one separate occasions to respond to violent incidents involving students or
outsiders. Many teachers admitted that the increase in police presence was attributable to a
greater tendency to involve law enforcement on matters that previously would have been handled
by the school administration.
The school principal attributed most of the problems related to violence to outsiders and a small
number of difficult and disruptive students, who ".lack sufficient guidance at home and act out at
school in an effort to get attention".(Interview 3/16/93) Though there was only one instance of a
student striking a teacher in the last three years at school A, several teachers expressed concern
for their personal safety because of what they perceived as an increase in violent behavior from
students. This fear was expressed in the following statement from a veteran teacher at school A.
She noted that

...in the past the kids would respect you just because you were the teacher. You were a person in
authority and they knew they had to do as you said. Nowadays the kids are different. They have
their own rules, and just because you're a teacher it doesn't mean that they're going to treat you
any different than anybody else. On the wrong day, any of us could be the victim of an attack.
(Interview 3/18/93)

School B

The contrasts between school A and B are striking. Test scores at school B revealed that 17% of
students were identified as gifted and talented, and 16% had scores low enough to be eligible for
compensatory education. 18% of the students at school B entered the eighth grade below grade
level in reading, with a corresponding 12% in math. Finally, less than 5% of the students at school
B were identified as being in need of some form of special education.

Of the twenty eight students who participated in the study at school B, seventeen were white
(eight boys and nine girls), four were Asian American (three girls and one boy) and five were
African American students (two boys and three girls). The students have access to a variety of
elective courses that are offered at the school B including: Spanish, French, computers, art,
music, dance and health education. Four sections of algebra and one class of honors geometry is
offered to students who are deemed qualified. Only 15% of the students at school B are qualified
to receive free or reduced lunch, and according to the principal, the PTSA (Parent, Teacher,
Student Association) annually raised over $100,000 during the previous year to support field trips
and other educational activities at the school.

Despite the relative affluence of the school, the families it serves, and the community in which it is
located, concerns about the threat of violence are high here also. In interviews with teachers and
administrators several expressed concerns and uncertainty about what they described as a
"climate of violence". While the source of this threat was difficult to pin down, the sentiments
expressed by this eighth grade English teacher captured some of the anxiety that was conveyed
to me:

The attitudes of the children have changed. They use harsher language with each other when
they argue, and when they fight, you'd think they wanted to kill each other. Its not a place where
kids are carrying guns or anything, but something's different about kids today, and to me its a lot more scary. (Interview 4/7/93)

Mirroring the national trends previously described, the teachers concerns about violence are not matched by empirical evidence. Only two weapons (one knife and one club) were confiscated from students at school B over a three year period. During the 1992-'93 school year thirty-six students were suspended and four students were expelled. The police were called to the school on two occasions for violent incidents at school during the same period (both incidents involved students from other schools). There are five security guards at school B, an additional guard having been hired in the 1991-'92 school year in response to heightened concerns about security. Interestingly, all five of the security guards are African American males, and they are the only African American males other than the custodian who are employed at the school.

Learning from Students' Experiences with and Perceptions of Violence

Among the students at the two schools, the responses to both the survey and the interviews revealed dramatic differences, and some unexpected similarities. This was revealed both in response to the true/false questions, the discussion of the survey that followed, and in the individual interviews. For example, whereas eighteen of the twenty-two students at school A responded "true" to question #1: "In the last year someone that I know was a victim of violence and was either killed or hurt", only six of the twenty eight students at school B responded affirmatively (See chart #2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. In the last year, someone that I know was a victim of violence and was either hurt or killed.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I sometimes carry a weapon for protection.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have been in a fight in the last month.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have been in a fight in the last two months.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I hardly ever fight if I can avoid it.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Using violence to get what you want is never the right thing to do.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I enjoy watching violent movies.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I often worry about being hurt by someone when I am at school.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I often worry about being hurt by someone when I am at home or in my neighborhood.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I respect and look up to people who know how to fight well.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. If you know that someone wants to fight with you, the best thing to do is:</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Tell an adult.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Tell your friends or family members so that you have some</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
back-up.
c. Carry a weapon with you just in case you get jumped.
d. Try to talk to the person to resolve the conflict peacefully.
e. Other __________

12. If you knew that another student brought a weapon to school you would:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Tell a teacher or the principal.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Mind your own business and not tell anyone.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Talk to the person to find out what was going on.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Talk to your friends about it.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. If you know that two people are going to fight after school the best thing to do is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Watch the fight.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Help the person that is loosing.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Tell an adult.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Go home and mind your own business.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Which of the following is a legitimate reason for fighting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Someone looks at you the wrong way or says something bad about you.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Someone threatens you, a family member, or a friend.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Someone hits you, a family member, or a friend.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Someone says something bad about your mother.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Are there any occasions when violence may be appropriate? (Open-ended)

Similarly, in response to questions #8 and #9 which asked: "I often worry about being hurt by someone when I am at school (question nine asked about neighborhood), the vast majority of students at school A (nineteen of the twenty-two) responded that the statement was "true", while at school B only three students (Q-8) and four (Q-9) felt the statement was true.

Other items revealed similar patterns of difference. In response to question #2 "I sometimes carry a weapon for protection", students at school A were twice as likely to respond affirmatively (eight of twenty-two) as students at school B (four of twenty-six). Similarly, students at school A were far more likely to respond "true" to questions #3 and #4 which asked "I have been in a fight in the last month(#3); in the last two months(#4)". Nine of the students at school A responded affirmatively
to question #3, and thirteen to question #4, compared to four students at school B who answered true to both questions #3 and #4. Though the vast majority of students at both schools responded true to question #5 "I hardly ever fight if I can avoid it" (twenty one of the students at school A, twenty four of the students at school B), more students at school A responded "true" to question #10: "I respect and look up to people who know how to fight well" (eleven students at school A, four students at school B).

Differences in the attitudes and perceptions of these two groups of students were even more dramatic in the interviews and whole group discussions of the survey. For example, in response to question #11: "If you know someone wants to fight with you, the best thing to do is - A) Tell an adult so that the fight can be prevented; B) Tell a friend or family member so that you have someone to back you up; C) Carry a weapon just in case you get jumped; D) Try to talk to the person to resolve the conflict peacefully; or E) fill in your own response", the majority of students (15) at school A chose response (B) - tell a friend or family member so that you have someone to back you up. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of students at school B (21) chose response (A), "tell an adult so that the fight can be prevented", as the preferred method for handling a threat from another student.

In the discussions that followed their responses to this question, students at school A overwhelmingly felt that telling an adult if a person wants to fight with you is not a viable option because it can only provide temporary relief. According to one female student:

If you tell a teacher that somebody wants to fight with you its not like they're gonna walk you home. The most they can do is get the person sent to the office, but if the fight didn't happen yet, the person ain't even gonna get in trouble.

For these students, telling a friend or family member was a better solution because it might enable the student to avoid the fight altogether in that a show of force could neutralize the threat of violence. Another explained the logic behind such a response in this way:

When they see that you got back up if you're partners are with you, they know it ain't gonna be like they can just beat you down. Somebody is gonna get hurt and it ain't gonna just be on one side. Then they know they better just leave you unless they want some real action to jump off.

In contrast, the majority of students at school B considered telling an adult to be the most reasonable and effective way of handling a threat from another student. For these students there was no doubt that once such a matter was brought to the attention of a responsible adult that a violent conflict could be avoided. Adults at the school site were perceived as capable of protecting and supervising students, and these students believed that any individual threatening to use violence against a peer was likely to be punished severely. This certainty was conveyed by a male student at school B who asserted that

...the campus monitors at our school are really tough. If anyone wants to fight somebody they usually get caught right away by one of these guys. And they are really big. You'd have to be crazy to think that you could get away with fighting at this school, and if you tried to get someone after school, the principal or somebody will get you the next day, and kids who fight usually get suspended. You can't get away with any fighting around here, not even play fighting.

It is significant that at both schools in the study conflict resolution programs have been in place for several years, and many students, including some who participated in the study (four students at school A, three students at school B), have been trained to serve as mediators at their school. However, despite this training it is particularly noteworthy that none of the students at either of the schools chose response (D) "Try to talk to the person to resolve the conflict peacefully" in response to question #11 "If someone wants to fight you the best thing to do is...". In each
interview, after discussing the student's responses to this question, I also probed to find out why they had not chosen the other possible responses. At both schools, the most consistent explanation given by students for not attempting to resolve a conflict peacefully was that students perceived such an approach to be unrealistic and impractical. To varying degrees, all of the students were aware of the conflict resolution programs that operated at their schools, and several of the students stated that they had received training on how to use these methods. However, when confronted with the prospect of an actual fight with another student, this option was not seen as viable. The following quotes from students at school A and B provide some insight into their reasoning:

(Male student from school A)

When someone wants to fight you they usually don't give you a chance to do any talking. That stuff (conflict resolution) only works if the principal or somebody is around. If its just you and the other person you got to let your fists do the talking otherwise you could get hurt. I usually try to get the first punch in. That usually works better than trying to talk about it.

(Female student from school B)

Conflict resolution is OK if you're in class, or PE or even during recess at lunch time. If you know that adults are around its smarter to try to talk it out than to fight. I don't fight anyway, but I was one of the people that was trained to be a school mediator and I know that it only works during school, not after.

While it is difficult to discern whether or not students were being completely honest in their responses, it is important to point out that only two of the students at either school chose response (C) - "carry a weapon with you just in case you get jumped", in response to this question. Most of the students expressed the view that introducing weapons into a conflict increased the likelihood of escalation, and increased the penalties that might be imposed upon those who are caught. In the view of one female student from school A:

If you bring a knife or something then the other kid is gonna probably bring something, then it just gets too crazy. Its better to fight and get your butt kicked than to make it worse by bringing a weapon. Somebody could get killed.

For the three male students from school A who felt bringing a weapon might be an appropriate way to handle a confrontation, both stated that the use of a weapon was the best way to neutralize and prevent violence from a group of people who intended to do them harm. They also explained that acquiring a weapon, including a hand gun, would not be very difficult given that they each knew friends and family members who possessed firearms.

Similar patterns were revealed in the responses of students to the question #12 "If you knew that another student brought a weapon to school you would: A) Tell a teacher or the principal; B) Mind your own business and not tell anyone; C) Talk to the person to try to find out what was going on; or D) Talk to your friends about it". Once again, the differences in the responses of the students from the two schools was quite dramatic. Students at school A were far more likely to choose response (B) - "mind your own business and not tell anyone about it"(16 of 22 students), while students at school B were more likely to choose response (A) - "tell a teacher or the principal"(15 of 26 students). Two female students from school A said that they would attempt to talk to the person about why he/she was carrying a weapon if they knew the individual. Four students at school A and seven students at school B said that they would warn their friends that a student was in possession of a weapon so that they could avoid the individual. However, none of these students stated that they would tell an adult about the matter either because they feared there might be retaliation at some point in the future from the student with the weapon, or because they felt this was the best way to avoid trouble.
Once again, the reasons for the differences in the students’ responses to this question were
rooted in their perceptions of security within and outside of school. Repeatedly, students at school
A described feeling afraid that any attempt to report an armed student to school authorities would
make it more likely that they would become a target of aggression. These students had no
confidence in the ability of school administrators to provide them with protection. Moreover,
several of the students expressed an unwillingness to violate school and community norms
related to "snitching". This sentiment was summed up aptly by the following student:

Why would you report someone for carrying a weapon in school? They probably need it for
protection on their way home from school 'cause usually people don't use no weapons at school.
Anyone who rats out (reports) somebody to the principal or the police deserves to get hurt. If they
don't like it they should mind their own business. That's the best way to stay out of trouble.

Such views were in stark contrast to those articulated by many of the students at school B. For
these students, reporting another student to an adult was the most responsible way to respond to
a student in possession of a weapon. These students had no doubt that school authorities would
be able to protect them, and few even mentioned the possibility of reprisals from the reported
student. Some of these students even expressed the view that by telling an adult about an armed
peer they were actually helping the armed individual because their actions could prevent the
student from hurting him/herself or someone else. According to one student:

I would let one of the security guards know because they know how to deal with kids that have
problems, and any kid who brings a weapon to school has problems.

In the interviews, students were also asked what they would do if they knew that two people were
going to fight after school, or if they were afraid of violence in their neighborhood (Question #13).
Again, similarities emerged with respect to their interest in serving as spectators to fights among
their peers. At school A, sixteen of the students said that they would want to watch the fight, while
at school B seventeen students said they would watch. At both schools students expressed some
pleasure in watching other students fight, describing it as “fun”, “exciting”, “good action” and
“hecka cool”. What is interesting about this reaction is that it shows an important contradiction
related to student, and I believe, societal attitudes toward violence: while many are afraid of
becoming victims of violence, they (we) may still derive vicarious pleasure from observing others
engage in it.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between students at the two schools concerned their
perception of safety in their neighborhood(Q-9). While only three students at school A said they
felt safe when walking in their neighborhood, nearly all (26) of the students at school B reported
feeling safe. In fact, students at school A said repeatedly that they felt safer at school than
anywhere else in their neighborhoods. There was no similar split in the perception of students at
school B with respect to school and neighborhood safety. Students at school B consistently
reported feeling unafraid to walk home from school, or to play in parks or on the streets in their
neighborhoods. Hence, while both groups of students may find some aspects of violence
entertaining, the perception of the threat it posed to them varied significantly.

Responding to the Threat of School Violence

An examination of student attitudes and perceptions toward violence in school provides insight
into how environmental factors influence their sense of vulnerability and safety. In this study,
students at both schools, the middle class suburban school and the low income innercity school,
shared important similarities with respect to their attitudes toward violence. For example, the
majority of students at both schools thought of fights between students as exciting and
entertaining. Similarly, conflict resolution was not perceived by students at either school as an
effective means of preventing fights when adults were not present.
Differences were evident with respect to the taboo against snitching among students at the two schools. Although most of the students seemed reluctant to report classmates who broke school rules, students at school B were much more willing to report an armed student to an adult, than students at school A who said they were more likely to mind their own business. The unwillingness to communicate with adults about a matter so important to the well being and safety of students at school A is very significant. It suggest two things: 1) that the pressure to not report another student who may pose a danger to others or himself is powerful; and 2) that the inability of the school to insure the safety of its' students makes it unlikely that students will risk reporting their peers. Given the threat posed by the increased accessibility of weapons, the continuation of a taboo against snitching among young people adds considerably to the dangers schools and students face.

This difference in attitudes among students at the two schools is also directly related to their perception of the threat they face within the school and the environmental context. Students who believe that adults can and will protect them if they are threatened are much more likely to call upon adults to intervene and to prevent conflicts. They have a certainty that fights can be avoided and their safety assured by adults who are charged with securing the school environment. In contrast, if students feel vulnerable outside of school they are likely to feel afraid within school as well because they may believe that there is no way for adults at school to protect them once they leave, and therefore no way to avoid the threat of violence. The most telling evidence of the inevitability of violence among students at school A came from the fact that none of the students considered telling an adult a viable strategy for avoiding a fight. This was true among both boys and girls, and even among children who were seen by adults as unaggressive and non-violent.

How can we use information related to student's perceptions of violence to promote safety in schools? The first step is to recognize that what students think and feel about this issue matters, and must be taken into account when policies are being adopted and implemented. Their perspectives matter because in most schools students are more vulnerable to the threat of violence than any other constituency - teachers, administrators, or others. Consulting with students increases the likelihood that the policies enacted to insure safety actually addresses their fears and concerns about violence. Moreover, because the social reality of adolescents - their values, norms and ethical standards, is generally very different from that of adults (Erickson, 1968), it is not uncommon for adults to be totally unaware of incidents, threats, brewing conflicts, or the circumstances under which students feel most threatened. Incorporating their perspectives on security issues will increase the possibility that their concerns are addressed and that policies are relevant to the real dangers they face.

When the perceptions and experiences of students are not taken into account, the policies adopted to help young people often miss the mark and may even generate greater polarization and antipathy toward authority figures. Additionally, there is evidence that when kids are afraid to walk home from school, they may be less likely to participate in sports and extracurricular activities, and they may be frequently truant (Steinberg, 1996).

The question is not whether action should be taken to prevent violence, but rather what form of action will be most prudent and effective. Elsewhere I have argued that the preoccupation with controlling student behavior has inadvertently weakened the school's ability to insure safety (Noguera, 1995). This occurs because the fight against school violence has turned some schools into prison-like facilities without responding adequately to the basis of fears felt by teachers and students. Just as closer connections between neighbors has been shown to be more effective in reducing crime than adoption of individual security measures (Currie, 1985), solutions to violence in schools may also come from greater connections between adults and students rather than increased security.

John Devine, author of Maximum Security (1996), in his study on school violence in New York City, takes a different approach. Borrowing from Foucault he characterizes the current climate or
approach to safety in some of the worse schools as the “anti-panopticon”; environments where the effort to construct the disciplined individual have been abandoned. He describes such schools as places where “teachers have lost all authority to discipline students; hallways and cafeterias have become sites where violent assaults occur regularly unless actively patrolled by guards; and the most disruptive and violent students freely intimidate their peers and their teachers.” (1996 p. 98)

While such schools certainly exist I believe that they have come to be that way because the desire to control student behavior is all that is left of the educational mission in some schools. In many of the schools located in the poorest inner-city neighborhoods, the need to create an atmosphere where teaching and learning are central to the operation of schools, has been replaced by a fixation on security and order. Standards of behavior like, academic standards, have been lowered, and the authority of teachers has been undermined by policies and practices which have removed them from the disciplinary process. (Devine, 1996 p.115) The focus on order and control remains even if it is now delegated to administrators, security guards and increasingly, the police. This can be seen most clearly in budgetary expenditures which prioritize the hiring of more security guards over the hiring of teachers and librarians. In some districts, the acquisition of new metal detectors and surveillance cameras has taken precedence over purchasing books, computers and lab equipment.

I concur with those like Devine who decry the response to the threat of violence in schools as weak and ineffective. However, I do not believe that this is because schools have given up on their mission of social control. Instead, I believe that the response to school violence has failed because it fails to address the source of teacher and student fears. Schools, especially those in economically depressed urban areas, have become less safe because they have ignored the need to promote supportive relationships between students and adults in environments that are nurturing and supportive. The schools I have visited which are described by students and teachers as safe, don’t rely upon guards and metal detectors to prevent violence. Instead, they pursue strategies which insure that all students are known by adults and feel supported. Advocates of school reform have called for similar reforms in an effort to increase student achievement (Sizer 1992). Such schools construct systems that allow teachers, counselors and administrators to have a high degree of personal contact with their students, and they promote security by encouraging a sense of collective responsibility for the school environment rather than relying upon intimidation and coercion (Meier 1995).

Schools that succeed in producing safe environments are more likely to find solutions through the quality of human relationships they encourage than in the security measures they adopt (Noguera 1995). In this regard, it is especially important for schools to recruit and retain personnel who command the respect and admiration of students, not because they are physically intimidating, but because they possess what Durkheim has called “moral authority”(1973). The authority of such individuals is rooted in the values and norms of a community. Those who possess moral authority can exert authority with young people without relying upon formal titles or coercion. They are deferred to as leaders because of what they represent to students socially, culturally and historically.

Such a figure was hired to work as a security guard at school A after my study was completed. One of my recommendations to the principal was that she attempt to recruit individuals who resided in the surrounding neighborhood to work at the school so that they could serve as a social bridge between the students, parents and teachers. Shortly thereafter, an elderly woman who had previously served on the school's site committee, was hired as a security guard. Unlike the other guards this grandmother did not rely upon physical intimidation to deal with disruptive students. As a person familiar with the experience of the students outside of school, she was able to draw on her knowledge of the students and their culture to discipline, counsel and console students without relying upon threats or intimidation. Within a short period of time, she was
recognized as a valuable member of the school community, someone who could be counted on to maintain peace, order and safety within the school environment.

I believe that this is precisely the kind of approach that schools must take if they are to succeed in making schools safer. If there is not a willingness to reconsider traditional approaches to school safety, to critically examine why our schools are now more vulnerable to violence, and to listen to the perspectives of students, it is unlikely that we will find answers to the problem of violence in schools.

Attempting to understand the attitudes that students hold toward violence is the first step that can be taken toward challenging its normalization. Without the benefit of such an understanding, efforts to promote safety are likely to fail and miss the mark because they are not based on a reading of students' perceptions of reality. It is only by understanding the attitudes, perceptions and experiences that students have in relation to violence that we can devise strategies that succeed in making our schools safer places. Moreover, through dialogue about the problem and all of its complexities, students and adults can work together in conceptualizing new possibilities for eliminating the threat of violence, and new strategies can be envisioned and created.

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