

School Violence: Perception and Reality

by Peter Joong and Olive Ridler

Emmet Fralick, 14, of Halifax, shot himself at home in April 2002. He left a suicide note saying he was tormented by bullies at school.

In November 2000, Dawn-Marie Wesley, 14, of Mission, B.C., hanged herself. She left a note naming three girls at her school she said were "killing her" because of their bullying.

High-profile cases like these have made the public aware of the horrific consequences of bullying and school violence and have left educators wondering whether our schools are safe places for students and staff alike. Although it is not clear whether violence in schools is actually getting worse, "many people perceive that it is."¹ According to an Angus Reid poll conducted by telephone in March-April, 1999, among a representative cross-section of 894 Canadian teens between 12 and 18 years of age, one third (35%) said that violence had increased in their schools over the past five years; four in ten (41%) said it had stayed the same; and 23% believed it had decreased. Younger teens, aged 12 to 15 (40%) were more likely than older teens to say that the amount of violence had escalated in their school over the past five years. Teens living in BC (40%), Alberta (39%) and Ontario (37%) appeared to be more likely to say the incidence of violence in their schools had increased in recent years.²

Whether or not these perceptions are true reflections of the levels of school violence, educators have good reasons to be concerned. The fear of violence gets in the way of the business of teaching and learning.

In an attempt to better understand what teachers and students really think about school violence, we recently investigated the current state of school safety and violence prevention programs in Ontario from teachers' and students' perspectives. Over 2000 students and 400 teachers at 24 middle and secondary schools in Ontario were asked about violent incidents in school, including bullying, fights and sexual harassment. Respondents were asked to rate their impressions of school safety, frequency of occurrence of violent incidents, and the violence prevention programs practiced at the school, using a 5-point Likert scale. The following results give a snap-shot of both teacher and student perceptions of safety in their schools.

1. The aggregated mean school safety scores were 2.19 and 1.88 out of five for students and teachers respectively. This indicates that, while both teachers and students felt that their schools are often/sometimes safe, violent incidents do sometimes occur.
2. The five top causes of school violence from students' perspectives were bullying, peer group pressure, put-downs, frustration and racial conflict. The top four causes were the same for teachers, their fifth was lack of respect for property.

The study also investigated what types of violent incidents were occurring in the sample schools. Incidents that 'often' occurred include arguments, name calling, insults and teasing. Incidents that 'sometimes' occurred include fighting, being beaten up, physical threats, sexual comments, inappropriate touching, and racial comments. The study also contained a number of open-ended questions inviting students to describe incidents that had happened to them and/or that they had witnessed. A summary of those descriptions revealed the following:

- Most incidents involved bullying, fights, assaults, and sexual harassments.
- About half of these involved a gang of two to six students.
- About half of the victims ignored the incidents, the other half felt anger, hurt, fear, powerlessness and/or humiliation. About one-quarter of the respondents wanted to fight back, a few didn't care, and some did not want to be alone.
- Most victims did not report the incidents. More than half of the victims pretended nothing had happened, and about one-third told the administration.
- After reporting, most claimed that nothing happened and were not happy with how the incident was handled. Maybe this is one reason most did not report.
- Those who did not report the incident claimed that they did not want to make things worse, the problem was not serious enough, or they just did not want the hassle.
- About 40 percent of the respondents claimed the violent incident occurred again.

Students felt that name calling and arguments between students occurred often. While on the surface these acts seem minor when compared to more serious acts like threatening or assault with a weapon, research shows that students who come into contact with persistent verbal abuse often experience serious long-term problems.³ Quite a few students and teacher respondents noted that minor incidents can escalate into major incidents.

The incidents and frequency documented in this study are similar to those reported in an earlier study,⁴ implying that, despite our knowledge and implementation of the Ontario Safe Schools Act (2000), not much has changed in the last five years. School violence is not increasing, but it is not decreasing either, despite the attention from educators, the government and the media. Although schools are ideally positioned to teach students alternatives to the use of violence,⁵ it appears that they are not incorporating policies and practices designed to have an impact.

The use of school curricula as a method to curb violence is promoted by the Safe and Responsive Schools Project funded by the U.S. Department of Education.⁶ Other research material strongly supports the introduction of instructional programs to teach proper behaviours and prevent aggression, e.g. character education, social skills lessons and mediation programs such as conflict and peer-mediation to resolve conflicts. But are schools using this strategy? A quick glance at the data obtained in this study shows that traditional methods of enforcing school policies related to student conduct are the prevention strategies still most in use – suspensions, detentions, enforcing rules and codes of behaviour. Instructional or mediation-based programs –

using classroom activities to promote peaceful coexistence and teaching conflict resolution, anger management and violence prevention strategies – are seldom used in the sample schools.

Classroom as a Community is one classroom approach that has been shown to reduce violent incidents. Within a community focused environment, students and teachers find out more about each other and determine whether everyone feels safe at school and in the neighbourhood. Together they work on projects that will make the school safer. Activities might include, for example, an open discussion on how or why violence starts at school and what a student or teacher can do when faced with an uncomfortable incident. Further discussions can include how to stop trouble before it starts or what to do if you or your friends are threatened with violence. Classroom activities such as drawing a picture, writing a poem, designing a poster, putting on a play, or writing a song can help students understand how to deal with a violent incident, either as a victim or as an onlooker. This type of discussion followed by a concrete thoughtful action can help to promote a safe school environment. Further discussions can focus on how to recognize and avoid possible violent situations, and how to behave if confronted by violence.⁷

Numerous instructional programs are available for elementary schools, but only a few seem suitable for secondary students.⁸ It is possible for secondary school teachers to integrate violence prevention skills into their subject-specific curriculum, as academic subjects develop the students' cognitive skills. These same skills (e.g. reasoning, weighing consequences, using language to solve problems, decision-making, social skills) will also help students reason their way through stressful and conflict-laden situations.⁹ Teachers can also teach skills that enable students to manage their anger, solve problems, negotiate with their peers, listen actively, communicate effectively, and resolve conflict.¹⁰ Interactive teaching methods (such as group work, cooperative learning, and class discussions) give students opportunities to practice positive social skills. In addition, when students have the opportunity to become involved in conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, they have an opportunity to further practice the skills that could assist them in making non-violent decisions when confronted with a possible violent incident. Violence prevention is an ongoing process in which positive behaviors are modeled and reinforced.

Administrators and teachers are sincere when they state that they want to prevent violence and alleviate students' fears. But results of this study indicate that sample schools have more work to do in implementing the Ontario Safe Schools Act. With 40% of our students claiming that violent incidents occur at their schools, it is obvious that school violence is having an adverse effect on teaching and learning. It is also obvious that policy-related prevention strategies, such as dealing with disruptive behaviours, are not effective in reducing the incidence of violent acts. Is it not time, then, to seriously look at developing and implementing a comprehensive safe school plan that includes policy related prevention strategies as well as curricular based programs that will help students choose non-violent means to settle differences between their peers?

Peter Joong and Olive Ridler were secondary school teachers/administrators for thirty years before becoming professors at Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario. At this time, they are both working with staff, parents and students to create a variety of Safe School plans.

REFERENCES

- ¹ P.K. Smith, *Violence in Schools: The Response in Europe* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2003), 2.
- ² IPSOS News Center, *Canadian Teens Voice Their Opinions on Violence in Their Schools*, May 3. 1999.
- ³ T.R. Nansel, M. Overpeck, R.S. Pilla, W.J. Ruan, B. Simons-Morton, and P. Scheidt, "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth: Prevalence and Association with Psychosocial Adjustment," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, 16 (2001): 2094-2100.
- ⁴ P. Joong, *SafeSchools: An Investigation into the Causes, Effects and Prevention Programs for Violence in Schools* (Toronto: OSSTF, 1999).
- ⁵ D. Walker, "Violence in the Schools: How to Build a Prevention Program from the Ground Up," *Oregon School Study Council* 38, 5 (1995): 1-58.
- ⁶ R.J. Skiba and R.L. Peterson, *Safe and Responsive School Guide* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Education Policy Center, 2003).
- ⁷ *Safe Schools: Idea Book for Students*, Ontario Ministry of Education (1994).
- ⁸ J. Juvonen, "School Violence: Prevalence, Fears, AND prevention," RAND Issue Paper. 2001.
- ⁹ D. Prothrow-Stith, "Building Violence Prevention into the Classroom: A Physician-Administrator Applies a Public Health Model to Schools," *The School Administrator*, 51, 4 (1994): 8-12.
- ¹⁰ *Safe Schools, Safe Students: A Guide to Violence Prevention Strategies* (Washington, DC: Drug Strategies, 1998).

Copyright © Canadian Education Association 2005. ISSN 0013-1253 Education Canada, Vol. 45 (4). Reprinted with permission. If you wish to make additional copies of this article, please contact the publishers or ACCESS Copyright (1-800-893-5777).



Crisis Prevention Institute, Inc.

**3315-H N. 124th Street, Brookfield, WI 53005 USA
1-800-558-8976 • www.crisisprevention.com**