

Proactive Thoughts on Creating Safe Schools

Constance M. Perry

Since the tragic deaths in school shootings across the United States, much more attention has centered on school violence and ways to make schools safe. Even as the 1998 Annual Report on School Safety by the US Department of Education and US Department of Justice reports that the overall school crime rate has declined since 1993 and fewer students are bringing weapons to school, people's concern has risen ("A Primer on School Safety," 1998). That such violence has occurred on school property, in rural America, has shocked millions. The belief that "it can't happen here" has been shaken. Complacency has been replaced by fear. No longer is school violence seen as only an inner-city problem. It can and has happened in a variety of locales across the United States, and many educators, educational organizations, government policy makers, and ordinary citizens are wondering how to prevent violence in all schools.

Metal detectors, student I.D. badges, security guards, locker searches, and zero-tolerance policies are some of the methods being implemented to curb violence. These reactive measures may indeed reduce or prevent weapons from being used in schools, but a much broader, more proactive approach seems to be needed if violence is to be curbed for the long term. "Schools that impose order, rather than cultivating it, may win no more than an uneasy truce while at the same time losing the hearts and minds of their students" (Gaddy, 1987, pp. 28 - 29). Building a more respectful, caring learning environment could be a long-term proactive answer to limiting violence in schools. There are three overlapping educational initiatives that together could be instrumental in creating respectful, caring, and safe schools. They are:

- Building a caring community within a school where children evidence belonging,
- Implementing a multifaceted character education program, and
- Teaching conflict resolution strategies.

Early reports from an extensive evaluation of thirteen leading violence prevention efforts state that “preventing school violence involves comprehensive programs that forge close, trusting relationships and help young people develop a host of healthy behaviors including conflict resolution and anger management skills” (Halford, 1998). Together the three overlapping educational initiatives above can create such comprehensive, preventive programs.

Caring Community / Belonging

Work by Battistich, Solomon, Watson and Schaps (1994), Goodenow (1993a, 1993b), Bryk and Driscoll (1988), Battistich and Solomon (1995), among others, has provided considerable evidence that the sense of belonging or sense of community in schools and classrooms characterized by caring, respect, involvement and the perception that each person makes significant and valued contributions, is positively correlated with several student outcomes. Sense of community for students has been measured using items representing two elements of community: (a) students’ perceptions that they and their classmates cared about and were supportive of one another; and (b) that they had an active and important role in classroom norm setting and decision making (Battistich et al., 1994). Goodenow (1993b) measured belonging using items involving perceived liking by other students and teachers, personal acceptance and inclusion, respect and encouragement for participation, and a sense of being a part of the school in general.

Sense of community has been associated with student trust in and respect for teachers, better academic performance, and more positive social attitudes and prosocial behavior (Battistich et al., 1994), as well as conflict resolution skills, empathy, and self-esteem (Solomon, Watson, Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1990). Belonging is significantly correlated with academic grades, valuing of schoolwork, and school achievement and negatively correlated with absences and tardiness (Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b). And Maslow (1970) in his discussion of a hierarchy of human needs, pointed out that belonging was a prerequisite human need that had to be satisfied before one could achieve sense of self-worth.

Teacher practices of showing warmth and supportiveness, promoting

cooperation, eliciting student thinking and discussion, emphasizing prosocial values, and limiting the use of extrinsic control were all significantly related to positive behavior among students, student active participation in learning (on task behavior), and student influence defined as students being provided choices of activities and participating in planning. These student behaviors were in turn significantly associated with sense of community, including among other factors, liking of school, enjoyment of class, learning motivation, and altruistic behavior.

Goodenow's work (1993b) suggests that student sense of belonging can be influenced by interventions at the student, classroom, and school levels. At the student level, individuals can be trained in social skills so others will not alienate them, and individual students can be targeted for increased supportive contact. This second recommendation comes from findings that teacher support explained over one-third of students' assessment of the interest, importance, and value of the academic work of a class (Goodenow, 1993a). At the school and classroom level, she suggests cooperative learning tasks, smaller interdisciplinary teaching teams, peer tutoring, and school projects involving the participation of many students working together (Goodenow, 1993b).

All these teacher behaviors, which together help create a caring, respectful, democratic classroom, can result in students being integral parts of a caring community where trusting, close relationships exist. Teachers must model what they want their students to emulate. Teachers must provide and encourage interpersonal support and cooperation, and must emphasize and encourage student autonomy and self-direction (Kim, Solomon, & Roberts, 1995) if the social as well as academic benefits of belonging, of feeling a sense of community, are to be realized by students and schools.

Character Education

The goals of character education programs are to develop basic ethical values such as fairness, respect, responsibility, caring, and citizenship in students. The underlying premises of such programs include: good character is not formed automatically, but developed over time through teaching, example, and practice; and effective K-12 character education helps make schools more caring communities, reduces negative student behavior, and prepares students to be responsible citizens (Character Education Partnership, 1996).

There is substantial support for teaching ethical values in schools. A recent Gallup poll showed 84% of parents with school-age children wanted public schools to provide instruction concerning moral behavior (Geiger, 1994). In addition, more and more people believe universal moral values

do exist. Rushworth Kidder of the Institute for Global Ethics interviewed “moral exemplars” around the world. The moral values they held in common were truth, unity (loyalty), compassion (love, caring), justice (fairness), respect for life, tolerance, responsibility, and freedom (Kidder, 1994). Community groups regularly create a similar list to those Kidder found (P. Born, personal communication, July 24, 1998). The question “whose values will be taught?” will not be asked if parents and community reach consensus about the moral values to be taught in local schools.

Research is beginning to show that a comprehensive character education program is effective in promoting ethical values and decreasing negative behavior (Elliot, 1993). Teacher and school practices common to effective programs include:

- involving democratic processes in the development of class norms,
- fostering mutual respect and teaching good listening skills and civil discourse,
- building in parent and community support,
- using cooperative learning and teaching the social skills necessary to learn cooperatively,
- discussion of moral dilemmas,
- incorporating role modeling,
- encompassing the entire school (cafeteria, school buses, etc.) in the program, and,
- incorporating service learning, linking students to needs in the community (Lemming, 1993).

The teacher practices of showing warmth, promoting cooperation, eliciting student thinking, and emphasizing prosocial values cited earlier as precursors to building a caring community also help build student character. DeVries and Zan (1994) state that children construct their moral understanding from their day-to-day social interactions. If children receive warmth and supportiveness from teachers, are encouraged to cooperate and act prosocially, those behaviors become part of their experience that in turn encourages them to model the behaviors. Damon (1985) has found that children, when given responsibility and a say in classroom activities, are more likely to behave in a caring, moral manner. Also, adult modeling of altruism, adult explaining positive effects of altruistic behavior, and direct instruction as to how to behave in a prosocial manner (Eisenberg, 1992) promote ethical behavior.

Since children learn in a variety of ways any program designed to teach ethical values and to enhance moral development must engage students in many ways. Educators should consider engaging students’ ethical reasoning (the head) and feelings of care and empathy (the heart) and

teaching and modeling prosocial conduct (the habit) (Perry, 1996).

In a school where students are respected and valued, where a sense of community (of belonging) exists, the teaching and modeling of ethical values fits easily and enhances the school community.

Conflict Resolution

Even in an atmosphere of respect where ethical values are taught and practiced, conflicts will arise. Conflict may be defined as a state of incompatible behaviors (Johnson, 1970). Typically school conflicts are conflicts of interest where the actions of one person to reach his or her goal prevents or blocks or interferes with the actions of another person attempting to reach his or her goal (Deutsch, 1973, as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1996). When conflicts are not settled in a mutually agreed upon manner, they may escalate to dominance and/or aggression. Often conflicts, which are a natural part of life and may well be necessary for growth and development, are not resolved or not resolved in constructive ways (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Then, they can fester and escalate. Frequently resolving a conflict is viewed as “gains for one can only be at the expense of the other,” which is called a distributive approach solution. However a more constructive way to resolve conflicts is the integrative approach where the goal is to maximize the gains of both in conflict.

The ability to resolve conflicts constructively tends to increase psychological health, self-esteem, self-regulation, and resilience. Students can learn to resolve conflicts constructively. “The existing research indicates that untrained students of all ages rely on withdrawal and suppression of conflicts or use aggression for coercive purposes. Untrained students almost never use integrative negotiation procedures or strive to solve the problem on which a conflict is based” (DeCecco & Richards, 1974). After constructive (integrative) training in conflict resolution and peer mediation more than 25% of conflicts were resolved through integrative agreements, and more than 20% were resolved by creating new agreements (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward & Magnuson, 1995). Other students note that peers after training were more likely to resolve their conflicts by “talking it out” and teachers noticed changes in their students’ spontaneous use of conflict resolution skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

Although there are numerous conflict resolution programs, many are not based on theories of conflict. When conflict is looked upon as natural, both positive and negative, and the resolution skills that are taught are constructive, students are able to successfully mediate schoolmates’ conflicts regardless of age or socio-economic status. In addition, students trained in conflict resolution skills can transfer these skills to other school and non-school situations. Training is crucial and may need to be regularly repeated,

ever increasing the complexity of learning as students mature (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

Conclusion

The mission of schools must be expanded to address young people's social, emotional, and moral lives. To prevent violence in schools we must help our children be responsible, respected and respectful, tolerant of differences, and able to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner.

The American Psychological Association's (APA) Commission on Violence and Youth states:

We overwhelmingly conclude, on the basis of a body of psychological research on violence, that violence is not a random, uncontrollable or inevitable occurrence... Although we acknowledge that the problem of violence involving youth is staggering...there is overwhelming evidence that we can intervene effectively in the lives of young people to reduce and prevent their involvement in violence (A.P.A., 1993 cited in Lantieri & Patti, 1996, p.14).

Metal detectors and surveillance cameras are only marginally helpful in most settings (Halford, 1998). Building community where students are appreciated and belong, and teaching and modeling ethical values, allow students to contribute in a positive manner within a trusting, caring setting. Equipping students with conflict resolution skills within a respectful, caring school community will allow our students to use the social/civic/ethical skills necessary for their success and safety. Every student in school needs a positive, caring relationship accompanied by the knowledge and skills to be responsible, caring, and ethical and to resolve conflicts in a constructive manner. If we can work together to create such school environments and teach such skills and knowledge, then we will be on our way to a long-term solution to violence in the schools. The resources are available. The programs can be infused into the regular academic subjects and activities of the schools. Schools and communities need to look at what works and begin.

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Constance M. Perry is a professor in the College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine. She teaches in educational foundations and pedagogy and studies moral development, character education, and school belonging.

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