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Violence in Schools: a re-emerging issue for Australian educators

Violence in schools has been an issue of concern to varying degrees over the past decade or longer. In more recent times the emphasis has shifted to bullying as the key behaviour of concern, and much academic and educational time and effort has been expended attempting to devise and apply appropriate interventions for management. Violence per se, in the form of physical and personal assaults has again been in the news recently as reports emerged of yet another massacre in an American education institution, this time in Virginia Tech. in April 2007. Over recent years incidents such as the Columbine High School massacre in the USA in 1999, the murder of students and staff at Monash university in 2002 and the crossbow incident in a NSW high school in 2003 have been dramatic and forceful examples of the extent to which violence in education institutions can escalate. The notion that violence of this magnitude could ever occur in the Australian context had previously often been met with derision and disbelief, nevertheless recent reports of rising incidents of violence in schools, surprisingly now often including violence perpetrated by females, is once again beginning to raise awareness and concern amongst educators.

Defining school violence

Violence in schools was defined in the 1994 Commonwealth Government inquiry report titled 'Sticks and Stones', as follows:
> '*violence in schools refers to violent, assaultative or aggressive acts resulting from the interaction of teachers , students or school community members with each other, or with school property, which occur within normally accepted school hours and school boundaries and situations*'(Jenkin submission 1991).

These distinctions were seen as necessary and resulted in setting limits confining the operational definition to within –school episodes rather than incorporating all incidents occurring on schools grounds as well as community –based or invasion incidents, as had previously been the case, for example in the Commonwealth 'Schools Australia' report 1992. Under this definition, the incidents mentioned above would qualify as violence in schools, whereas, for example, the Beslan incident in Russia, whereby a terrorist gang invaded the school from outside and perpetrated mass murder within the school setting, would not.

The distinction is important as it devolves responsibility for prevention and protection beyond the school gate and requires the community to ensure that schools are safe locations. The protection of schools and their occupants from community- based violence goes well beyond the parameters of responsibility of teachers and school administrators, and this distinction may need to be more definitively articulated as incidents occur and schools become more reliant on the protective services available within the community. Schools are not capable of managing, nor can they be expected to manage, major incidents which originate outside the school. Indeed, they must also be supported in their efforts to contain incidents that do fall within the above definition, and must have a school plan for such occurrences.

Crisis management plans have been developed within schools over the past ten years, but it may well now be the time to review such plans and to incorporate a wider range of responsive and preventative measures available within the broader community to ensure student and personnel safety. These would include a review and recording of access to police (federal and state), anti-terrorist squads, negotiators and specialist defence personnel in order to upgrade protective measures. It would also require an increased expectation of responsibility on the part of community members for supervision, vigilance and reporting of suspect activities within the community which may be targeted at the school or at members of the school community. Violence between school children, bullying and victimisation, witnessed in the community, needs to be seen as a community responsibility even when students are in school uniform. Teachers are not responsible for supervising students outside school grounds and hours except in specific

Dr. Jean B. Healey

designated circumstances. Had the community taken greater measures of responsibility before the Columbine massacre, when 13 students and staff lost their lives, Klebold and Harris would not have been able to assemble an arsenal of weapons and explosive materials to use at the school.

Origins of violence in schools

The 'causes' or origins of the violence have been sought in violent video materials, lack of discipline and supervision in the home, etc. but a more pragmatic analysis would consider other factors as relevant to the management and reduction of these incidents. These would include the trend towards teacher education courses in many universities being reduced to one year and behaviour management strategies and training being excluded, diminished or disregarded in favour of more curriculum -based content. Teachers are not well enough prepared, therefore, for managing challenging behaviours in school, or for predicting behaviours in order to intervene in a timely fashion.
Student violence that does not involve weapons can be managed by schools given appropriate management training.

The violent behaviour of students towards each other and towards their teachers must now be prioritised for protective intervention approaches. The behaviours of concern represent the extreme end of the bullying continuum, and as such may be considered for the comprehensive interventions currently proposed for managing bullying in schools.
Approaches which identify specific behaviours as problematic, and which address the need for behaviour training of individuals who engage in those behaviours will be more
appropriate and ultimately more effective.

Gender as an issue

Discourse which compares an essentially masculine dominance in the perpetration of violence to the apparent increase in girls' aggression through bullying (Chesney-Lind, 2003; Espelage, 2003; Stein, 2003) indicates that although girls appear now to be more inclined towards bullying, serious violence is still the domain of the masculine gender.

Indeed, some researchers have defined gender as causal rather than correlational (Egger, 1995; Scutt, 1995).
Nevertheless, the Daily Telegraph reported recently (3/09/07) that female students 'punched and spat at' their teacher, as a response to what the school later termed 'provocation' by the teacher as she had requested they be removed from her class for disruptive behaviour. No charges were laid even though the teacher required hospital treatment. The Australian Education Union in recent research reported in the Adelaide Advertiser (03/09/07) found that 90% of teachers surveyed were struggling under the extra workload generated by having to teach children with difficult behaviours. Further, reports from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research indicate a remarkable increase in violent incidents in schools reported to police, where females students were responsible. In both government and private schools, of 1242 reported incidents, 373 or approximately 30% were perpetrated by females (Daily Telegraph, 03/09/07). However, in the final analysis it matters not whether the attacker is male or female, the concern for Australian teachers is the rise in the risk of being physically assaulted while at work.

Comprehensive Intervention for Violence in Schools

Dr. Jean B. Healey

Whole school approaches which gather data, identify issues and train all personnel and students in the required and expected behaviours have far more legitimacy in terms of intervention. Violent and abusive students, and in some cases teachers, need to be trained to exhibit appropriate behaviours in their interpersonal interactions, and consequences for failure should include intensive training and social disapproval at the very least. School systems, however are nervous about apportioning 'blame'

The Macarthur Model © (Healey,2004)for intervention in violence in schools as been developed over the period of a decade to provide a structured process for managing violence, as well as bullying in schools. The process is also widely applicable in public institutions, private organizations and workplaces as it describes a needs –and research- based intervention procedure, customised to address local issues and based on data collected at the specific location.

The *first component* of the Model involves an initial investigation of the parameters of violence or bullying in the setting using the appropriate Safety Survey adapted and developed for use in this process. The instrument yields substantive baseline data related to student and staff perceptions, experiences and attitudes in relation to violence and bullying in the school.

 The next five components of the model are initiated on the basis of the data collected in the educational setting and should be applied simultaneously and progressively to ensure efficacy.

The *second component* involves identifying and delivering staff development needs and training and a school personnel and community education program. This component provides the opportunity for the school community to examine, during in-service training, their own school data in relation to violence and bullying and to begin to develop customised intervention products and processes;

The *third component* facilitates the development and dissemination of a specific school policy based on the levels, types and locations of the violence or bullying reported in the setting. Personnel collaboratively examine the data and devise suitable policy statements to address the issues raised in the data. The policy is disseminated throughout the school after being produced with input from all key stakeholders.

The *fourth component* involves the school in determining the level, focus and types of organisational restructuring required to address the issues of student safety and supervision raised in survey responses for the particular setting. Here the parameters of responsibility the school is able to accept will be determined and, in line with current education policy, the partnership role and responsibility of community and parents in maintaining a safe environment is articulated. A commitment to protective interventions to limit or prevent access to victims is an essential element of this component.

The *fifth component* involves schools implementing generic, widely applied curricula for the general student population to provide education in regard to origins, indicators and appropriate responses to violence and bullying at the school student responsibility for advocacy and defence of peers (Healey,2003) needs to be emphasised in this component.

The *sixth component* involves assisting teachers and other school personnel to address the personal needs of individuals involved in violence and bullying. This would need to include the acquisition, through training, of personal attributes to facilitate resistance and resiliency to bullying; cognitive restructuring regarding the acceptance and use of violence and bullying and punitive and remedial interventions to ensure these behaviours are eliminated or replaced.

Other approaches.

Rigby(2003) has identified several successful programs for intervention in his meta-analysis of anti-bullying research and intervention, as has Smith et al (1999) in UK and European settings. A world-wide

Dr. Jean B. Healey

effort to address the issues of violence and peer abuse has been waged for many years with good progress made on many fronts. National and local education authorities seem to be taking the issues very seriously and accepting a measure of responsibility for protection and intervention.

A worrying development in contemporary intervention methodologies being discussed, developed and applied in school systems with regard to bullying and violence is the introduction of conflict and dispute resolution programs and to a lesser extent mediation as a legitimate means of resolving abusive relationships. This also relates to 'no blame' approaches. Some analysis of the inappropriateness of such interventions in abusive situations, and suggestions for more relevant, efficacious and protective approaches is indicated.
 While conflict and dispute resolution programs teach valuable skills for resolving differences of opinion, it is suggested here that such interventions are inappropriate and

could well be damaging when applied to abuse situations. There is no 'conflict' in violent and abusive incidents in the sense of each party having legitimate needs to be met in co-operation with the other, rather bullying and violence represents an abuse of one individual by another or others. This calls for protective intervention which supports the victim while calling the abusive individual to account for their behaviour. O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett (2005) have developed a conflict resolution program as a 'new approach to managing bullying and conflict in schools'. A central principle to the program is that 'students can and should learn about conflict, its causes and effects in a morally neutral way, which takes out the blame and focuses on the behaviour (page 3). While this may be true of conflict situations, arguably a central principle in bullying or abuse intervention must be abuser accountability. Abusers act from personal attitudes and beliefs about ways to interact with others which maintain a self -perception of power and dominance, and this belief is often tolerated and supported in various social milieus. The original 'no blame' approach introduced by Robinson and Maine (1997) was used with behaviour - disordered individuals as a means of training them in empathetic and appropriate interpersonal interactions. However in regard to most perpetrators, is obviously nonsense to suggest that no-one is to blame for violent and bullying victimization in the school. Such behaviour represents a choice and a preference which must be addressed for the functionality and ultimate survival of the individual in mainstream society.
The use of effective sanctions and consequences may be a more effective means of discouraging abusive behaviour and this needs to be considered in relation to intervention in violence and abuse in schools. This prescribes instructional interventions whereby individuals are placed in programs which provide guidance for their future behaviour and interactions.

There may well be an upsurge in violent incidents in schools, particularly student attacks on teachers. It is an urgent state and Federal responsibility to ensure that students and their parents are aware of the consequences for such behaviour, that indeed there are consequences, both punitive and instructional, and that comprehensive approaches which inform the whole school community of expectations are established and reinforced. Further , teacher education programs must incorporate instruction in behaviour management and in the recognition and intervention processes necessary to ensure a safe environment .. Future litigation may well arise from new graduates against their employers or their conferring institution if they believe they have not been prepared for the range of behaviours encountered in the classroom to-day .

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Dr. Jean B. Healey

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Dr. Jean B. Healey

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