



SCHOOL VIOLENCE: PREVENTATIVE, RESTORATIVE, AND EDUCATIVE APPROACHES

Right now, in many Canadian schools, escalated violence presents an evident threat. As I write, another heart-breaking youth-on-youth assault near a school has hit the front pages. Rates of severe youth violence are considerably lower than sensational media coverage would have us believe,¹ but at the same time, many young people, as well as adults, do not feel as safe, respected, or constructively engaged as they should be. While schools cannot independently resolve the major social problems that are embedded in communities, they can do their part by functioning as safer havens that contribute to resolution, learning, and transformation. Unfortunately, some of the security measures enacted in response to this sense of fear and urgency may actually be impeding the development of reliable, sustainable peace in schools.

SERIOUS VIOLENCE IS THE VISIBLE TIP OF A MASSIVE CONFLICT ICEBERG.

While schools are responsible for keeping all students and staff safe from violence and human rights abuse, fortresses of surveillance and control are ineffective educational institutions, in conflict with the basic mission of schools in a democracy. Harsh treatment, especially when based on insufficient understanding of students' cultures and individual contexts, burns bridges by fracturing relationships.² It is through schools' most fundamental role – the organization of learning experiences – that they can best become havens of safety, mutual respect, and inclusion.³

Both individuals and contexts are implicated in the perpetration of violence. Violence is learned individual behav-

our that is reinforced (or restricted) by norms, sanctions, and conflict management procedures in social contexts such as schools. Similarly, nonviolence is both learned by individuals and encouraged (or discouraged) by social contexts. Schools are houses of learning, in which every student should have multiple opportunities to develop capacity for nonviolent problem solving. At the same time, individual skills are not enough; people need opportunities and enabling structures to use nonviolence built into their daily patterns of activity. The complex infrastructures of schools must facilitate and sustain the equitable development of nonviolent human relationships and conflict management. Sustainably peaceful schools create continual opportunities to learn problem solving, through both individual learning (explicit lessons) and institutionalized patterns of activity (implicit lessons), in order to prevent the next tragedy long before it starts.

Punishment approaches to school violence, by contrast, confuse the perpetrators with the underlying problems that brought them to the point of violence – instituting blame and exclusion (retribution), but too rarely solving problems or preventing further harm. My research in Canadian urban school boards has shown that safe schools officials often refer student perpetrators to alternative programs and/or counseling support, albeit not until after aggressive incidents. However, that support is often thin, short-lived, disconnected from the social contexts that forged the problems, and completely irrelevant to the victims and witnesses who were harmed by the aggression.

Control-based security and punishment approaches do

not foster individual learning. Even if they did, these approaches would be inadequate because they do not provide infrastructure for resolving problems at their roots, or for building healthy, inclusive community relationships that would be resilient and actually prevent violence. As John Paul Lederach explains, “Peacebuilding requires us to work at constructing an infrastructure to support a process of desired change.”⁴ What would it take for us to construct such infrastructures for nurturing and maintaining peace in our schools?

THE ICEBERG

Serious violence is the visible tip of a massive conflict iceberg. Although of course even one violent incident is too many, it is important to note that there are very few people directly involved in such serious violence, as perpetrators or victims, relative to the huge numbers of people in our schools every day. Clearly, the reverberations from this tip of the iceberg touch us all – partly because the media give such disproportionate attention to violent events (they’re newsworthy because they’re rare). However, it’s in understanding and confronting the base of this iceberg, harder to see under water but much larger than its visible tip, where educators can do the most good.

The iceberg’s broad base represents the sources of violence: the countless acts of omission and commission that can make schools alienating, unsafe, and/or ineffective learning environments for many students. These smaller acts of exclusion, disrespect, destructive competition, and ignorance that make up the bulk of the iceberg are harder to see than the violence at the tip, but if left unchecked they can nurture violence.

Problems are easier to resolve before they develop and escalate. Schools need to reallocate some resources from the urgent and painful interventions (analogous to emergency medical care and quarantines) at the tip of this iceberg to on-going prevention (analogous to comprehensive health care, nutrition and sanitation) at its base. As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure: When sources of violence are addressed early and consistently, schools are stronger and safer. The huge resources that are now devoted to coping with harm after the fact can be reallocated to more pro-active support for inclusive, effective staff and student learning. Infrastructure for surveillance and punishment must be replaced and transformed into infrastructure for education and restoration of healthy communities.

RESTORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING PRACTICES

Discipline practices, and the climates they create in classrooms and schools, ‘teach’ by modeling, guiding students to practice, and reinforcing particular behaviours and norms for interaction. For example, in some schools competition and aggression are normalized. Steep status hierarchies divide in-groups from out-groups. Some students’ positions at the pinnacle (such as athletes or ‘good’ students) and others’ at the margins (such as newcomers, cultural minorities, or people who don’t fit gendered body ideals) are reinforced by school staff – for example by the ways teachers connect easily with certain students and ignore or blame others, or facilitate win/lose competitions. Elliot Aronson’s research shows how such competitive and

EN BREF Bien que les écoles soient responsables de protéger les élèves et le personnel contre la violence et l’atteinte aux droits humains, les forteresses de surveillance et de contrôle sont des institutions éducatives inefficaces qui se heurtent à la mission fondamentale des écoles dans une démocratie. Les cas de violence grave sont relativement rares dans les écoles canadiennes, mais ils devraient être vus comme la pointe de l’iceberg. Sa large base représente les sources de violence : les innombrables actes d’omission et de perpétration qui peuvent faire de l’école un environnement d’apprentissage aliénant, dangereux ou inefficace pour de nombreux élèves. Les écoles paisibles planifient, mettant en place des structures de résolution de problèmes pour régler constructivement les conflits entre élèves et adultes et entre pairs, de façon à en faire des occasions d’apprentissage. La plus puissante clé pour prévenir la violence, c’est d’enseigner – de favoriser chez les jeunes et leurs enseignants le développement de leurs propres compétences, de la confiance en soi et de la propension à s’engager de manière constructive dans les conflits et les questions de diversité et de justice.



dehumanizing school environments make severe violence more likely and how, by contrast, educators can build equitable and cooperative environments that discourage violence by encouraging healthy, inclusive relationships in schools and classrooms.⁵

To achieve constructive understanding, dialogue, and justice, schools need mechanisms to encourage both ‘vertical’ relationships (adults-students, up and down the hierarchy) and ‘horizontal’ relationships (student-to-student, across differences among peers). After the emergence of dangerous situations, people are more likely to resort to blame and force when they feel cornered or ill-equipped to handle problems more constructively. And so, peaceful schools plan ahead by setting up a variety of problem-solving structures to handle student-adult and peer conflicts constructively and as learning opportunities.

Canadian public schools already have a wonderful array of strategies and mechanisms (albeit too often marginal and under-funded) for addressing the many less visible causes and manifestations of harm – the tip of the iceberg – before they escalate. These strategies go to the roots of the problems and address skill-building, norms and relationships, helping to both prevent future harm and facilitate immediate problem solving. The following are examples I have seen in Canadian public schools that substitute prevention and transformation for retribution.

- Some programs teach and empower students, for example as peer mediators, to help resolve disputes. Often, teams of trained volunteer peer mediators offer their services on regular duty schedules, for example at recess and before school. Sometimes, although aggressive behaviour is punished, the re-entry process after suspension requires students to try mediated negotiation of the problem that caused the fighting. As one principal who had such a policy explained, “The conflicts will keep coming back until we take time to listen and work out a solution.” Adult administrators, teachers and counselors are sometimes trained to mediate conflicts that are too serious or complex to be handled by peers. At the same time, it is often young people who are best

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equipped to understand (and to speak frankly with) their own peers, and both the peer facilitators and the disputants learn from the process.⁶

- Some teachers use peacemaking circles, class meetings, and other dialogue processes regularly in their classrooms, to facilitate students' practice in caring, communicating, and problem solving.⁷ In other cases, joint deliberation to implement respectful, fair, and widely-understood violence prevention, discipline, and restorative justice practices is carried out at the school level.⁸
- Policies and programs may be designed to create gender-equitable environments that broaden the social acceptance for nonviolent expressions of masculinity, and/or counteract other bias and human rights violations, such as homophobia and racism. Such equity education de-normalizes dehumanization and aggression.
- School 'town hall' meetings, community activities such as issues days or peace symposia, as well as classroom lessons, provide encouragement and facilitation for students and staff to voice, understand, and handle feelings and disagreements on sensitive issues.
- Affinity groups such as gay-straight alliances or Muslim students' associations facilitate support and opportunities for voice to marginalized students.
- Liaisons to particular cultural communities and behavioural support workers, in different ways, provide person-to-person support for informed, caring problem solving. As one administrator explained, "It's really important that we have people who can go right into the schools ... and observe what's going on and work with the kids and the teachers."
- Several schools have multi-faceted intervention programs (including peer- and staff-led components) to stop child abuse, bullying, gender-based and homophobic harassment, and other violence, and to follow up by identifying support for youth who are at particular risk.



Clearly there are countless alternatives, each already implemented and tested in at least a few Canadian schools, to facilitate constructive resolution of problems before they escalate into violent situations. These are not simple, quick-fix solutions, but complex combinations of mechanisms for handling conflict and repairing or nurturing healthy relationships. Unfortunately, I have found that budgets for many such initiatives have been cut during recent years, in school boards where they are most needed.

**BUILDING PEACE CAPACITY THROUGH
THE CURRICULUM**

Schools' main mission is education, not social control, and this is what they do best. The most powerful unrecognized key to preventing escalation of violence is to teach – to facilitate young people's (and their teachers') development of their own skills, confidence, and inclinations to engage constructively with conflict, diversity, and questions of justice as citizens of their schools, their communities, and



their world. Such learning requires systematic education for peace.⁹

Such systematic education is achieved through explicit lessons, as well as through opportunities for each student to be included, and helped to learn and to take constructive action, in order to develop into an autonomous, nonviolent and empowered citizen. That is, peacebuilding

requires schools to encourage and enable students and teachers to practice understanding and conflict resolution themselves – not just at times of emergency, but routinely, in daily lessons and school activities. The paradox is that the right time to address conflict is when it is non-disruptive or even invisible – when disagreements and distrusts are small or distant and the situation is, on the surface, peaceful. When people do not feel frightened or angry, they are much more able and open to listen and to learn.

Learning expectations that comprise the ingredients for fair and nonviolent conflict management are already included in Canadian curriculum guidelines.¹⁰ One curriculum leader explained that learning to identify and respond to multiple perspectives is absolutely basic to nearly every curriculum unit: "It's pretty hard to not deal with conflicts in social studies." The same could be said for English language arts (the plot of any story involves characters' perspectives on a problem). Conflict can be found – and conflict resolution practiced – across the curriculum. Some explicit curriculum expectations encouraging nonviolence include:

- Skill development for effective listening and constructive discussion;
- Critical thinking and critical literacy skills, including learning to recognize bias and to appreciate social, cultural, and personal differences and frames of reference in relation to global and local problems;
- Processes for working cooperatively and respectfully with peers on decision-making, tasks, and projects;
- Representing sensitive and controversial issues and histories through writing, directing, performing and discussing drama, informal role-playing, and visual arts;
- Academic tools such as mathematical and scientific reasoning, applied to constructive management of 'real-life' conflicts, including questions of violence/peace, social justice, in local, national, and global contexts.

Systematic and effective education for violence prevention and positive peacebuilding requires lots of practice, repeated and reinterpreted over time in multiple learning contexts. While the necessary skills, concepts, and learning experiences are embedded in provincial curriculum expectations, these curricula are immensely detailed, full, and pressured by standardized testing. It is important that the fundamental purposes of education not be buried in piles of goals and regulations.

PREVENTION: THE OPPOSITE OF AVOIDANCE

The only way to avoid violence is to regularly and consistently address conflict, educatively and restoratively, before it escalates. Just as students need support to learn and to be included, teachers, administrators, and other school



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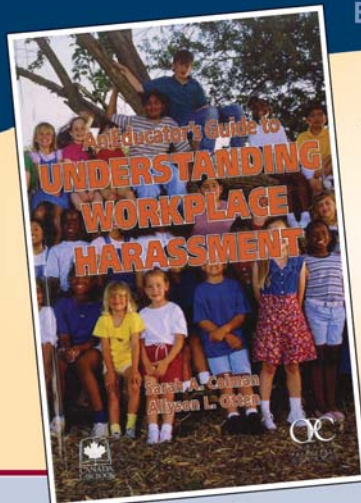
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board staff also require support – regular professional development opportunities embedded in regular work expectations (not just after school or on weekends), time to talk and work together to understand their changing communities and prepare and improve programming, opportunities for consultation with those who have successfully resolved similar problems. Even though pro-active violence prevention is likely to be less costly (as well as more effective) in the long run, it will require at least a temporary, significant infusion of resources to help Canada's public schools move from the currently typical resource-intensive approach of post-incident reaction and clean-up after the fact, toward proactive peacebuilding for sustainably safe and peaceful school communities. Clearly, to move from violence to peace, school infrastructures require more human resources – personnel with the training, support, dedicated roles and responsibilities to build capacity and to institutionalize processes for relationship rebuilding and problem solving. In many cases, the people who have this expertise already work in the schools; they just need their time reallocated to be able to facilitate peacebuilding efforts. There is no investment more worth making than this one. |

KATHY BICKMORE (Ph.D. Stanford University 1991) is Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She teaches and conducts research about education for constructive conflict management and peacebuilding, safe/inclusive schools, and democratization in public school contexts.

Notes

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