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Youth Violence, Schools, and the Management Question:

A Discussion of Zero Tolerance and Equity in Public Schooling

by Stephen Jull, Mount Saint Vincent University

Locating Violence and Unwanted Aggression in Schools

Youth disengagement from school, hostility between social groupings, and violence in schools are issues of national proportions made visible through their detrimental affects on schools and the overall health of communities. A 1993 Environics poll revealed that Canadians believe school-based youth violence is the single most important issue facing public education (cited in Saskatchewan Schools Trustees Association, 1994). In a 1995 report to the Solicitor General Canada investigating youth violence and school behaviour management practices, Gabor found that 80% of survey respondents felt that violence was more prevalent in schools than it was ten years ago. Current figures from the Solicitor General Canada (2000) indicate that the present level of public concern for youth violence has not declined in the years since GaborÌs 1995 report. Teachers themselves have reported dramatic increases in the type, frequency, and severity of anti-social, aggressive, and violent behaviour in classrooms (Carney, 1999; Solicitor General Canada, 1994; Saskatchewan Schools Trustees Association, 1994).

Assuming schools are a microcosm of Canadian society and youth culture (Smith & Lusthaus, 1994), mirroring societal norms, values, and the socially constructed popular culture, one might expect that the reported increase in youth violence and unwanted aggression in schools would be consistent with Canadian statistical trends of youth violence in general. National statistics on youth crime, however, indicate that the amount of criminal activity perpetrated by youth has remained stable, and may in fact have declined in recent years (Statistics Canada, 1998). Interpretations of the statistics and data that describe trends in youth violence vary. Some support the notion that youth violence is indeed increasing, while other do not (e.g., Doob & Sprott, 1998; Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 1994; West, 1993). There are numerous possible reasons behind the apparent confusion as to whether or not youth crime, violence, and unwanted aggression have become more prevalent in recent decades, including: inconsistencies in statistical reporting methods, trends in media portrayals of violence as a serious issue, and complex changes in demographic and social factors (Bonta & Hanson, 1994). Nevertheless, the overriding perception of teachers and the Canadian public is that the number of incidents and the severity of youth crime, violence, and unwanted aggression in Canadian schools in on the rise.

Most present day school discipline problems come in the form of verbal abuse, bullying, and disorderly behaviour (Bear, 1998; Gabor, 1995). Weapons such as guns are still primarily a phenomenon of schools in the United States and are not commonly associated with incidences of violence in Canadian schools (Gabor, 1995; Walker, 1994). Even so, incidents such as the recent shootings and gang-related beatings in and around schools in major Canadian cities such as Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver, and Victoria cause a societal hyperawareness of youth violence, reinforcing the notion that youth are armed and out of out-of-control.

Growing public concern for the safety of children at school is not wholly unfounded. Canadian-based education research suggests that we do indeed have high rates of aggression among school-aged children. Charach, Pepler and ZielglerÌs 1995 study of child and youth aggression indicated that 19% of elementary school students reported that they are bullied more than twice a term, while 9% of children admitted to bullying others on a weekly basis (cited in Carney, 1999). In an associated study in which student interactions were observed in a playground setting, Craig and Pepler noted that incidents of bullying occurred as often as once every seven minutes (cited in Carney, 1999).

Studies in other provinces investigating the type, scope, and severity of violence reveal similar figures on youth violence and unwanted aggression (see Calder & Lacene, 1999; Donaldson, 1999; O'Dea & Loewen, 1999). Violence within the Canadian school context, however, is not restricted to student-student engagements. In a 1992 survey conducted by the Nova Scotia Teacher's Union, 371 school principals reported a total of 2 732 incidents of violence committed by students against teachers over the course of a school year (cited in Calder & Lacene, 1999). These figures are mirrored in Manitoba, where nearly half of all teachers in the province have identified themselves as being targets of some form of abuse by students (Calder & Lacene, 1999).

Owning School-Based Violence

Historically, teachers and school administrators have managed student misbehaviours through school-based actions, stemming from the interpretation of their provincial Education Act, school board guidelines, and school discipline policies, respectively. Guidelines in government and school board documents spell out the discretionary powers of school administrators in handling unwanted student behaviours, defined in Nova Scotia as student "disobedience" and "defiance" (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 1996, p. 31). However, in contemporary school settings managing youth violence is no longer considered the sole responsibility of the teachers and school administrators, but rather is understood to be an issue that extends beyond the boundaries of individual schools into whole communities. Consequently, school-based management plans for addressing violence and unwanted aggression have crossed the threshold of the public domain, and as such may ultimately be scrutinized as documents of social policy (Mawhinney, 1999). School administrators and teachers no longer have complete autonomy in terms of the assessment, development and implementation of school social/behavioural policies; particularly when it comes to managing such hotly debated and politically sensitive issues as school-based violence and unwanted aggression.

Currently, there is a broad base of popular support for making violent youth more accountable for their actions, and a general belief that schools have the authority and obligation to act swiftly when dealing with violence and unwanted aggression. Gabor (1995) located this sentiment within the current public discourse on youth crime and school-based violence. In his report to the Solicitor General Canada, Gabor recommended that students be made more accountable for their actions through swift and certain action. Furthermore, Gabor's report suggested that students who engage in violence and anti-social behaviours do so of their own volition and conscious choice, and not because of some internal personal conflict stemming from academic exclusion, social isolation, or other form of socially constructed discriminatory practice within the public school setting. This proposition places the blame for school-based violence and the source of unwanted aggression squarely on the shoulders of those youth that are consistently over-represented in the expulsion records of schools. Positioning the youth at the center of this debate as the sole proprietors of their successes and failures within public schooling is inconsistent with much of the current research in areas related to youth socialization and schooling (Carter, Janzen, & Paterson, 1999), severe social/emotional disorders and schooling (Murray & Myers, 1998), academic performance and student disengagement from school (Morrison & D'Incau, 1997), student psychological abuse and schooling (Hyman & Perone, 1998), and pedagogy, violence, and schooling (Epp, 1997).

It is not inconceivable that public schools operate within a framework of systemic discriminatory practice (see Kallen, 1995) if indeed the overrepresentation of marginalized individuals or groups within the school suspension and expulsion records (Morrison and D'Incau, 1997) and statistics on early school leaving (National Adult Literacy Database, 2000; Bains, 1997) are indicative of those persons and/or groups (wittingly or unwittingly) targeted by school discipline policies and administrative practices. Simply put, "who gets expelled from school involves not only issues that are related to the students themselves but also issues that are driven by the educational philosophy and policies of the public school system" (Morrison & DÌIncau, 1997, p. 319). The Canadian criminal justice system, as a system of societal regulation much like that of schools, has itself, either through direct action or merely through silence and complicity, been used to control and disadvantage underrepresented and/or marginalized groups (Cole, 1999). Gabor's analysis the of social responsibilities and personal liabilities within the youth violence debate does not account for the possibility that similar forms of systemic discrimination operate within the spheres of power, control, conflict, and violence in public education (Watkinson & Epp, 1997).

School Discipline, Zero Tolerance, and Equity

Parents of school-aged children rely on the ability of teachers to assess individual student misdemeanors on a case-by-case basis. Teachers have traditionally been expected to implement disciplinary practices that are consistent with fundamental Canadian values such as peace, order, and respect for diversity; all of which are understood by the Canadian public to be the foundational framework of safe and caring schools and a just society. However, because schools are entering an era in which youth violence and unwanted aggression are more often managed through inflexible school discipline policies such as Zero Tolerance, teachers are being asked to implement, support, and enforce school codes of conduct and disciplinary measures regardless as to whether they support the particular policy in principle or not (Heineke & Drier, 1998). As such, for many teachers it may seem that political expedience in the implementation of new policies addressing youth violence and unwanted aggression takes precedence over an on-going dialogue of the educational, social, and psychological preconditions for the development of pro-social behaviour in children and youth.

In recent years, schools throughout Canada have begun adopting 'get-tough' school policies and codes of conduct based on the principles of so-called Zero Tolerance. The essence of Zero Tolerance is that the punishment of student misdemeanors should be rapid and inexorable. The idea of Zero Tolerance has its origins in the U.S. governmentÌs domestic wars on drugs and on crime. It spread to the schools in 1994, when Bill ClintonÌs gun-free schools act required schools to suspend all students caught bringing guns on to school grounds for one full year. Zero Tolerance has been gathering momentum ever since, particularly after the killings at Columbine high school in Lyttleton, Colorado (Economist, 1999). The majority of U.S. public schools now have Zero Tolerance policies for violence, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, weapons other than firearms, and firearms (National Centre for Education Statistics, 1998). Not surprisingly, given CanadaÌs close cultural associations and the powerful influence of the US media-machine, Canadian school administrators and education bureaucrats are borrowing from the US approach to managing youth violence and unwanted aggression.

Presently, there is a lack of research in Canada and the US addressing either the short or long term implications of schools adopting discipline policies based on the concept of Zero Tolerance for violence and unwanted aggression. Nor, it seems, has there been any clear demonstration that Zero Tolerance policies effectively reduce youth violence other than by merely displacing the problem. In Scarborough, Ontario where schools reported a decline in school-based youth violence following the implementation of a Zero Tolerance policy the rates of student suspension and expulsion were correspondingly high (Scarborough Board of EducationÌs Safe Schools Policy, 2000). Although some schools may report fewer occurrences of student violence following the implementation of a Zero Tolerance policy, the violence may have merely relocated to the school periphery or to other parts of the community. It is not yet known whether the short-term reductions in school-based youth violence and unwanted aggression that result from greater numbers of students receiving suspensions and expulsions and/or serving longer suspensions and expulsions, due to a Zero Tolerance approach to managing youth behaviour, will confer a benefit to the greater community.

Violence and aggression are social acts. We reinforce various forms of socially acceptable violence and aggression on a daily basis through media, public discourse, and teaching (West, 1993). Zero Tolerance assumes (as do most 'get-tough' discipline policies) that there are only certain types of violent and aggressive behaviours, however, that are considered universally unacceptable; for certain cases of severe physical violence and for some forms of verbal abuse and hate-oriented crimes this may in indeed be the case. Nonetheless, Zero Tolerance does not afford students or teachers the opportunity to decide for themselves the terms and conditions defining acceptable social behaviour. Those students whose opinions differ from their school administrationÌs perception of pro-social behaviour will likely be subjected to the consequences of a Zero Tolerance policy more often than their socially conforming peers. Zero Tolerance is an extension of the belief that the status quo and the moral majority determines which types of behaviours are inherently good, and which are not. For example, Zero Tolerance does not address culturally acceptable violence resulting from the reinforcement of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity through sport and other social and cultural constructs (see Frank, 1987). Nor does Zero Tolerance identify the subtle and insidious elements of heterosexism most often observable in systemic gender reinforcement and homophobia in schooling. School discipline policies based on the principles of Zero Tolerance reinforce Anglo-Eurocentric sensibilities of right and wrong and the authoritative structures within public education (see Epp, 1997).

School administrations that support the tenets of Zero Tolerance claim that school discipline policies that treat all students equally regardless of their particular social context are non-discriminatory. This kind of thinking presupposes that the social contexts of interpersonal interactions are irrelevant when dealing with youth that have committed an infraction against a school code or discipline policy. It also assumes that all students are equally advantaged and have equal social and academic opportunities, and that neither a studentÌs social status or academic standing has a significant role in his/her ability to access school resources, achieve academic success, secure social status, or gain the social and academic support of school personnel. To claim that social justice can be achieved through the implementation of a so-called unbiased Zero Tolerance school discipline policy is to believe that discriminatory practice can be eradicated by implementing policies that are blind to personal or individual social and/or cultural contexts. Equal treatment is not a precondition of equality. Equal treatment in an unequal social and academic environment is discriminatory.

School Social/Behavioural Policies and the Potential for Inclusivity

Baker (1998) has suggested that youth violence and unwanted aggression in schools may simply be "the manifestation of poorness of fit" between an individual student's particular social context and the social context of his or her school (p.30). If, as is suggested in this paper, school social/behavioural policies (particularly violence management and discipline policies) contribute to the construction of a schoolÌs social environment, and that a school's social environment is inseparably connected to the learning environment then school discipline policies, as documents of social policy, have the potential to significantly affect both the social and academic lives of youth throughout the course of their public schooling. As such, schools need to adopt policies for managing student behaviour that are based on the concept of equity, and built upon the principals of social and cultural acceptance, understanding, and inclusivity. Furthermore, given that school demographics change over time, polices that address the social/behavioural aspects of schooling need to remain as 'working-documents', a functional penultimate draft so to speak, in order to meet the specific yet ever-changing needs of students and communities over time. Including all of the school-community stakeholders in this process is crucial given that the most effective school social policies and student management strategies are those that are created, maintained, and strengthened within a climate of leadership that attends to the on-going academic, social, and cultural needs of those directly affected (Pena, 1997).

The development of an inclusive yet effective school discipline policy is not a simple task. Regardless of the academic or social complexities of a given school's behavioural management dilemma, parents expect their community school to implement strategies for handling serious disruptive behaviours that 'get results'. However, schools must be careful not to adopt plans that are merely reactive to fluctuations in public opinion, such as the rising fear of youth violence (Sprague & Colvin, 2000) and the burgeoning popularity of Zero Tolerance. Policies for managing youth violence and unwanted aggression must reflect the dynamic yet specific needs of schools, their students, and communities over time. Furthermore, ongoing innovations in managing youth violence are more likely to succeed if they mesh with existing social, institutional and school political structures (Donaldson, 1999) ? and not merely grafted onto existing school administrative structures with little or no thought to the possible short and long-term consequences for the social and academic climate within a given school.

It is ironic that the recent popularity of adopting a Zero Tolerance approach to managing violence and unwanted aggression is taking hold in Canadian schools at time when many school boards are considering alternatives to suspensions and expulsions as a means of regulating student behaviours (MacDonald, 1999). Schools that choose to adopt school social/behavioural policies based on the principles of Zero Tolerance will ultimately exclude larger numbers of students through the excessive use of suspensions and expulsions. Zero Tolerance ignores the individual social contexts of conflict, and the inherent imbalances in social power relations that occur within schools. As a result, through Zero Tolerance, underrepresented and/or marginalized students will continue to be excluded at greater rates than their socially conforming peers.

O'Dea and Loewen (1999) suggest that we, educators and stakeholders in public education, need to balance our zeal for reducing youth violence with an equally strong commitment to continuously investigating and identifying the changing needs of students over time. The opinions, concerns, and protests of students will provide the on-going and necessary feedback to support the reconstruction of consistent, equitable, and inclusive school discipline and social/behavioural policies. In the rush to address public fears of escalating violence in schools, policy makers must not neglect to consider the complexities of the social contexts in which schools operate and the resultant implications for students and school-communities of adopting Zero Tolerance policies that are 'blind' to difference. Without the direct and continuous input of those students most affected by school social/behavioural policies, in combination with comprehensive site-specific examinations of violence and aggression within each school community, attempts to manage youth violence and unwanted aggression will offer results that are at best inconsistent , and at worst discriminatory.

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