

Disturbances Outside the Public Library: Need for Collaborative Community Intervention

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Abstract

Trudy Fletcher goes to her town's public library during the noon hour and is faced with an angry group of teenagers crowding the entryway. She enters the library and learns that the library staff members are sheltering a student from a rival school who is being threatened with assault by local students over a previous violent incident. Joyce Miller, principal of the local high school, who has been experiencing difficulty with on-campus student behaviour, is faced with having to determine the best course of action in dealing with the situation. This case raises questions about the extent to which various community stakeholders, including school personnel, have authority and responsibility to respond to and prevent these types of incidents, as well as the additional workload and stress placed on an administrator for an event occurring off school property. The suggested teaching activities allow graduate classes to examine and discuss this case thoroughly, and include attention given to adolescent decision-making, legal and policy factors, proactive and preventive intervention options for schools and communities, and work intensification of principals.

Keywords: adolescent decision-making, student discipline, school laws and policies, school-community collaboration, work intensification.

Case Narrative

The charming town of Coventry, minutes away from a large Canadian city, offers a unique perspective to life in Canada. It was constructed in the early 1950s with revolutionary land planning and infrastructure. Housing one of Canada's military bases, a First Nations community, as well as many francophone residents, Coventry's population exemplifies the multiculturalism for which Canada is known. Home to five elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and minutes away from two universities and an assortment of other post-secondary training programs, Coventry offers a variety of educational opportunities. In the heart of this community lies Coventry's public library. Although most of the townspeople live peaceful and positive lives, there has been a tarnishing pattern of occurrences at the public library that came to light over the 2017–2018 school year. The concerning behaviours involve high school students utilizing the library as a meeting place for premeditated acts of harassment and violence. To truly appreciate the severity of the troubling behaviour carried out by the youth in this situation, a clear understanding of the library's nearby facilities is necessary.

As an active member of Coventry's community and a local childcare facility owner and operator, Trudy Fletcher often utilizes Coventry's public library and its associated programs to augment the learning happening at her centre. On the first day of March, excited and eager to access new resources for the children in her centre, Trudy heads to the public library. Reflecting on the learning facilities surrounding the library, Trudy starts her day with a great feeling of pride in her community's proximal educational network. On her short drive to the library, she imagines herself standing outside, looking out from the

front doors, and, to her right atop a hill, seeing one of the local middle schools. Closer still (in the same building), she reflects on the town's community centre and another newly opened daycare centre, and behind the building in which the library is located, on an adjoining street, she smiles to herself about the proximity of one of the local elementary schools. Knowing that many of the children at her centre will find themselves in this area during their impressionable years of public schooling, she also takes pride in that if she turns and walks left from the doors of the library to the sidewalk she would pass the town's fire department, and that, later in their schooling, many of the children in her centre could find themselves approximately 200 m from the fire department at Coventry High School (CHS). As the library's website suggests, "There's more to a library than books! We have activities for everyone." Trudy is grateful for the role such a facility plays in the enrichment of the youth and all members in her local community. Unfortunately, upon her arrival at the library, Trudy's optimism is deflated by what she witnesses. She reflects on the lengthy list of library-offered programs, on which nowhere did she find bullying, intimidation, or fighting; however, she soon learns that the entryway to the library appears to be a hotspot for all three.

One may reasonably assume that a town's public library would be a safe place for students to congregate, but this ideal is currently being challenged in Coventry. Students from CHS have been engaging in aggressive, mob-like behaviour outside the public library. This behaviour first gained attention near the beginning of the 2017–2018 school year, when a CHS student, who had gone to the library after school, was physically assaulted immediately after leaving by a group of students who had been waiting for him outside. Following this initial incident, a pattern appeared to develop, making the area during the noon hour and after school a common spot for premeditated acts of harassment and violence. This disturbing behaviour was noted by the administration at the neighbouring middle school, resulting in a notice being sent home to parents warning both them and the students of the potential threat surrounding the library and ultimately recommending that they stay away. A facility that was previously used to enhance learning through class and personal visits had now become an area students and teachers were asked to avoid for fear of witnessing or becoming involved in the unacceptable actions occurring outside the building.

As Trudy subsequently recounted in a post on Facebook, around noon hour on March 1st, the day after *Pink Shirt Day* (an anti-bullying initiative), she went to the library to sign out books for the children at her daycare. Upon arriving at the library, she was surprised to find a group of 10 to 15 teenagers crowded around the entryway. Intrigued and confused by the congregation of youth sporting backpacks and peering into the library through the glass doors at the entrance, she took a picture. The picture she took depicted the group circling around the entrance to the library, directly beside the library's no loitering sign. When she proceeded to enter the library, intimidated by the visibly angry crowd, she asked the students what was going on, to which she was told that they were waiting for someone inside. This inquiry was also met with attitude and several comments that she had a hard time discerning but perceived as being confrontational in nature. After entering the library, she witnessed two librarians. The one at the doorway was asking the students to leave the premises and the other librarian was stationed behind the sign-out counter. Trudy then asked the librarian behind the counter what was going on and was told that they were sheltering a student who was fearful of leaving because of the verbal threats that the student had received about being assaulted once he left the library. Trudy and the librarian both then called the police. When the police arrived at the scene, Trudy noted that the presumed leader of the group stood outside of the library with his arms crossed in defiance. At this point, she left the premises, disgusted and outraged at what she had witnessed.

As a concerned member of the community, Trudy then posted the picture she took on Facebook and gave a brief statement of her shock and disappointment in regard to the behaviour she had witnessed. It is important to note that this picture did *not* reveal the faces or names of anyone involved. Her post stirred a tumultuous discussion surrounding the issue and was initially posted as sharable, but was later restricted to contributions from friends due to the overwhelming discussion that ensued. She received a plethora of responses on her post, such as those stating that parents were fearful for their children, accounts of previous occurrences, the need for more effective action from parents and the police, suggestions on what they felt should be done, and general statements of how society has "gone to hell." During this online exchange, there was also clarification as to what had transpired leading up to the situation. It became apparent that on the day of this particular occurrence, a group of students from Plymouth High School (PHS), located in a neighbouring city, came to CHS to engage in a fight. It was not uncommon for there to be rivalries

between these two schools, but the behaviour of visiting one another's school during the school day was rare. The cause and specific location of the initial altercation were not reported; however, recounts specified that during this initial altercation, a female CHS student became involved and was struck by a male student from PHS. Given that the situation witnessed by Trudy occurred at noon, the initial altercation presumably took place in the morning while students should have been in class. At some point, all but one of the PHS students left Coventry, while the remaining PHS student went to the library to visit his girlfriend who was a CHS student. Upon hearing of the female student being struck, and that one of the PHS students remained in Coventry, a group of CHS students converged on the library with the intention of beating up the PHS student inside who was believed to have been involved in the initial altercation. Whether or not the remaining PHS student was the one who had struck the female student was not clarified. What Trudy witnessed and reported via Facebook was the convergence of these CHS students on the library.

On her drive to work the morning of March 1st, Joyce Miller, the newly appointed principal of CHS, reflects on the efforts made by her staff and student body in supporting the previous day's *Pink Shirt Day* anti-bullying initiatives. In the weeks leading up to those activities, Joyce and her administration team had been working on curtailing some of the aggressive behaviours surfacing at CHS. Lately, Joyce has been feeling more stress associated with the varying demands of her new role. Joyce was a veteran member of Coventry's educational community when she took the position of principal at CHS, and she felt she was well prepared to deal with the demands, both contextual and institutional, involved in being the principal. Shortly after the year began, Joyce learned that there was much more to her role as principal than she had anticipated and that many of the improvement plans she had for the school were being derailed almost daily due to immediately pressing issues. Following the previous day's successful events addressing acts of bullying and its many associated factors, including support for both victims and perpetrators, Joyce is optimistic that the associated behaviours at CHS will show an immediate reduction.

Following her typical morning routine, Joyce enters the school parking lot from a direction that deliberately avoids the adopted "smoking" section near the school just outside of the school's property. She has found this route to be the most effective in eliminating the unwanted anxiety of witnessing the youth at CHS partaking in less than favourable activities. Student smoking was one issue Joyce had planned on addressing with her team that she simply has not had the opportunity to broach in light of everything else she has been contending with. To avoid the personal guilt and feelings of inadequacy she has started to develop, Joyce has made this new route to school a part of her daily routine so that she can start with a positive outlook. After parking her car and walking to the entrance of the school, Joyce notices that someone has spray-painted a slanderous phrase across the newly painted rainbow sidewalk entering the school. Joyce's immediate reaction is outrage, but she quickly reminds herself that the actions of a few individuals should not detract from the productivity of the previous day's events. To address this action, Joyce announces along with the morning messages that such behaviour is not tolerated and will be investigated, that she is optimistic that the general student body is beyond such behaviour, and that she is proud of everyone's involvement in *Pink Shirt Day*.

Approximately two hours into morning classes, following her inquiry to engage a cleaning specialist to remove the slanderous graffiti and while she is in the middle of reviewing the surveillance footage from the previous night, Joyce is interrupted by a teacher claiming to have overheard students discussing a student altercation that occurred outside within the last half hour or so. Joyce gathers as much information as possible from the teacher making the report, which is minimal. In order to take further action, Joyce requires more information, so she sends a quick and discreet email to the remainder of the staff asking them to report any related information they may know. Joyce then goes back to reviewing the surveillance video, attempting to view what occurred outside, but has a hard time focusing on the task at hand. As lunch approaches, Joyce decides to try to clear her head for a couple of minutes and to sit down to eat her lunch, something she rarely gets to do anymore. This relaxation is quickly halted when she hears sirens passing the school. Joyce immediately hopes that the sirens have nothing to do with the youth at CHS. This fleeting thought is quickly gone when her phone rings; the local police are calling to inform her of a potential harassment situation occurring at the public library involving CHS students. After speaking with the police, Joyce then ventures out to the lobby to take further action when her administrative assistant informs her that they have been getting calls from upset parents in regard to a post that was made on Facebook about the occurrences at the library. Not knowing where to begin, Joyce asks the secretary to cover

for her as she heads to the library to meet with the police. As she gets in her car a flood of overwhelming emotion sweeps over Joyce causing her to contemplate and question her capacity for such a demanding position.

Acknowledging that this event warrants investigation and intervention, Joyce then ponders if this situation is considered a school matter, including what laws and policies may be involved and whose responsibility it is to intervene. She has discovered that the students themselves attend CHS and PHS, but considering that their actions were carried out off school property, she wonders if this then becomes the responsibility of the parents of those involved. Furthermore, the library is operated in partnership between the provincial government and the municipality of Coventry—the facility is operated by the province, while the land is owned by the town. Should these stakeholders then play a role in the intervention? Or is it the police called to the scene in response to a disturbance who are responsible for its ongoing supervision and mediation? Although she feels a duty to become involved, Joyce hopes that the events at the library may fall outside of the school’s jurisdiction, allowing her to better focus her efforts on the overwhelming demand of other matters happening directly at CHS.

Teaching Notes

This case raises questions and encourages discussion about adolescent decision-making, legal and policy considerations, and reasonable proactive and preventive interventions. The case also illustrates the potential scope of responsibility and work intensification for teachers and school administrators for student misconduct occurring beyond school property. The teaching activities that follow encourage collaborative efforts of teachers, principals, parents, and other community stakeholders to deal with situations like this one.

Activity 1: Adolescent Decision-Making

Albert, Chein, and Steinberg (2013) conducted a study on how peers can influence risky decision-making in adolescents. They found that, due to the heightened value and priority adolescents place on peer relationships, adolescents are subconsciously influenced into making risky decisions in an effort to receive an immediate reward from their peers rather than safer long-term alternatives. These immediate rewards are largely influenced by the groups with which adolescents choose to associate. Albert et al. also note that “risk-taking adolescents naturally gravitate towards one another” (p. 115), which only serves to exacerbate the situation. Their study, contrasting different ages and their decision-making both with and without the presence of peers, startlingly found early adolescents, with a mean age of 14, make twice as many risky decisions when in the presence of peers as opposed to when alone. These findings emphasize the notion that adolescents are apt to go along with a pack mentality, consciously or otherwise.

Discussion Questions

1. To what extent do you see the findings of Albert et al. (2013) reflected in this case?
2. The explosion of social media influence, especially among adolescents, is also relevant to the findings of Albert et al. (2013). How does the desire for social media validation—followers, likes, and retweets—encourage the pack mentality thinking that occurred in this case?
3. To what extent is it the role of teachers, parents, and other responsible adults to guide adolescent decision-making, particularly in situations beyond school grounds? In particular, what are reasonable expectations to place on school leaders and staff for providing such guidance?
4. Create a plan for a school-based activity designed to promote positive decision-making by adolescents. Share this plan with classmates or colleagues and lead a discussion to evaluate key elements of it.

Activity 2: Legal and Policy Considerations

This story raises questions about the relevant laws and policies that apply to the students in this case, including the active participants and the bystanders. The case also tests the extent of legal responsibilities of school staff, especially principals and vice-principals, for student conduct occurring off school property, as well as the responsibilities of parents and the local community. The following activities are intended for individual and group study and discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. Consult the education legislation, regulations, or policies for your district, province, or state. (The website www.canlii.org is a good starting point for locating federal and provincial legislation, including provincial education legislation and regulations.) Locate any relevant provisions that specify the duties of students to comply with school rules and the extent to which they are subject to the disciplinary authority of their schools when they are off school property. How would these apply if this case had occurred in your district, province, or state?
2. Often high schools will publish a school code of conduct in a student handbook. Examine a selection of school handbooks and codes of conduct to compare and contrast the language used in these documents about topics such as fighting, bullying, and harassment, including the responsibilities of bystanders and participants in such incidents and the application of school rules to off-campus settings. Comment on how these codes would apply in a case like this. Evaluate the clarity, effectiveness, and reasonableness of the language used in these codes in relation to the purpose of schooling and the expectations placed on schools.
3. In this case, it is reasonable to consider the responsibility of parents for this behaviour, particularly since it occurred off school property. Consult the laws and policies in your province or state to identify the legal responsibilities of parents with respect to the behaviour of their children, both on and off school property. Consider both education and child welfare legislation. How can school staff and parents work together effectively in cases such as this? To what extent are parents expected to supervise their adolescent children?
4. In this case, the town of Coventry had a municipal bylaw that addressed audible and fighting disturbances and included fines beginning at \$50. Consult your local community bylaws to see if such bylaws exist there. Discuss the implications and effectiveness of such bylaws for this or similar cases in your context. How would such bylaws affect the workload and decision-making of school principals in cases like this?

Activity 3: Reasonable Proactive and Preventive Interventions

Violence in the local community has widespread effects on children. In their investigation of the negative impact of community violence on children, Guerra and Dierkhising (2011) found that “exposure to community violence is among the most detrimental experiences children can have” (p. 1). Their research suggests that violence, including community violence, promotes future violence. Considering the prevalence of youth in the facilities surrounding the library, as well as the individuals visiting the facility, it is important for these acts of violence to receive proactive and preventive intervention from schools and the community in an effort to prevent this cycle from continuing. Moreover, children in the public school system are a part of a community and, as the traditional African proverb suggests, “it takes a village to raise a child.” In this case, the village is the town of Coventry, where the most effective interventions could occur through multifaceted approaches involving both the school and the community.

In the province where this incident occurred, it is the responsibility of the school principal to ensure the establishment of the school’s Positive Learning and Working Environment Plan (PLWEP) with contributions from the school community. In targeting the specific behaviour in this case, the PLWEP could include sections on prevention and on support and rehabilitation. These sections could focus on educating the youth at CHS about the factors that influence negative behaviour and its immediate and long-term consequences. Ultimately, school principals cannot be solely responsible for developing and carrying out the PLWEP, particularly for cases like this.

Discussion Activities

1. *Proactive Yearly Planning:* Brainstorm with your fellow graduate students to consider all available information for deciding on the initial plan of action in targeting the focused behaviours in a proactive manner. Once a clear goal is established, as a group decide which stakeholders should be involved in the process and contacted to seek their input and cooperation. Once cooperative groups are established, set a tentative schedule for related proactive assemblies and activities to be held throughout the school year. Make sure to consider that the schedule may be subject to change in consideration of unanticipated priorities. Construct a series of feedback forms related

to these assemblies and activities to help all those involved in reflecting on the effectiveness of each event. As a group, establish how best to track behaviour-related data as well as the feedback from each activity, so that future activities and interventions are informed and improvement can also be tracked. (See attached planning templates.)

2. *Community Supervision Schedule Role Play*: Another preventive action to include in the PLWEP is the establishment of a shared community supervision schedule. This schedule should involve areas of concern beyond school property, such as the public library, and seek to include support from community stakeholders. Consider the following role play activity. As a group, pretend that you are about to engage in a staff meeting focused on making changes to the supervision schedule aimed at targeting the behaviours of concern. Prior to engaging in the role play activity, establish whose points of view will be represented (e.g., the principal(s), guidance counsellors, classroom teachers, and others). Have the principal propose the need for additional noon-hour supervision off school property. As a contributing member to this activity, make sure to cooperate in offering your opinions and insight from a critical lens. This activity is intended to highlight the realistic barriers to such an initiative in hopes of finding acceptable solutions.

Have someone track the barriers expressed by each member of the group. Once all characters have voiced their concerns, look at the barriers and brainstorm possible solutions. It may be helpful to categorize the barriers as either “quick fixes” or “in need of further support” to help with the next steps. Once all barriers have been discussed, resume the staff meeting and repeat the above role-playing activity, this time having the principal reply with the suggested solutions. Should there be further barriers established in the second run through of the activity, reconvene as a group and brainstorm possible solutions to the new barriers. If throughout this process there are barriers that appear to have no solutions, brainstorm, as a group, what or who would be a valuable resource for professional development in that particular area in working towards achieving a solution.

3. *The context of work intensification*: The issue of work intensification of school personnel, especially principals, is widely reported in Canadian and international literature. Oplatka (2017) described the heavy workload of principals in Israeli schools and its effect on their family life. Pollock (2016) similarly found that Ontario principals reported increased work demands, notably expectations resulting from increased use of communication technology by students, parents, teachers, and district officials. Writing in the Scottish context, Forde and Torrance (2016) described the tensions between the policy expectations contained in a professional standard with the operational and administrative demands that dominate the daily work of principals. Particularly relevant to this case is the finding by Hauseman, Pollock, and Wang (2017) that promoting school-community involvement increases the workload of principals. On the specific topic of dealing with off-campus student misconduct, Brien (2004) found, in a study of Canadian high school vice-principals and their responsibility for student discipline, that many respondents claimed that they had more than enough problems to deal with during school hours without taking on those arising away from school property. This concern is clear in Joyce’s reflections about this incident as she drove to the scene of the incident at the library.

Design a series of activities for Joyce and her principal colleagues to work together to support each other and enhance their individual and collective wellness and efficacy. Some topics to consider include enhancing school-family relationships (Auerbach, 2010), coping with stress (Poirel & Yvon, 2014), achieving work-life balance (Superville, 2018), and strengthening the legal literacy of educators (Findlay, 2017).

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Appendix A

Collaborative Proactive Yearly Planning Template

Focused concerning behaviour(s)/issue(s):

Specific initial goal(s):

Stakeholder 1:

Involvement:

Stakeholder 2:

Involvement:

Stakeholder 3:

Involvement:

Stakeholder 4:

Involvement:

Stakeholder 5:

Involvement:

Stakeholder 6:

Involvement:

Tentative Timeline

Initial Activities:	Approximate Date(s):
1.	
2.	
3.	
Intended Outcome(s):	

Secondary Activities:	Approximate Date(s):
4.	
5.	
6.	
Intended Outcome(s):	

Culminating Activities:	Approximate Date(s):
7.	
8.	
9.	
Intended Outcome(s):	

Resulting Activity Data:

Feedback:

Suggested Improvements: