

ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ADMINISTRATORS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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Abstract

Evidence exists to support the premise that school culture affects the level of violence among students. However, "the school as a social system has not been seriously discussed as a contributor to or regulator of school violence" (Astor, William, Kimberly, and Wallace, 1997). Peterson and Deal (1998) explain a phenomenon called "toxic culture," which they use to characterize schools with staff fragmentation and hopelessness, and the mistaken goal of serving adults over students. Fragmentation is the opposite of a cohesive faculty that functions well as a team. A number of other authors have looked at school "climate" and "culture," although we still do not know how educators' perceptions of these factors influence prevention efforts.

This paper analyzes the literature about the perceptions of school violence and examines the factors, related and unrelated to school culture, that administrators and teachers perceive as influencing such violence. Because perceptions of the role of school culture in spreading violence are likely to influence prevention efforts, the paper describes the authors' study of how administrators and teachers rated 30 factors as contributing to school violence. Derived from the literature on school violence and organizational health, 15 of these factors are internal, related to school culture, and 15 are external, seemingly unrelated to school culture.

Data from a pilot survey of administrators and details of in-depth, semi-structured interviews of both administrators and teachers are presented. The purpose of the interviews was to determine administrators' and teachers' perceptions regarding student violence and whether a difference exists between these levels of educators.

Literature Review and Discussion

Incidence of School Violence

Violence within schools became an important issue in the latter half of the 21st century. Prior to the 1950s, there was little concern by school administrators, with only one known study to validate this finding. A 1949 survey of high school principals found no difficulty with either student violence or destruction of property (Warner 1999). But, in 1956, the National Educational Association found that violence was becoming more of a concern within the schools (Warner, 1999).

Nonetheless, the prevalence of youth violence, an explicit concern of the general public, is contested by some researchers. Among those finding more violence are Dennenberg, Dennenbers, and Braverman (1998), who point to an "eruption of violent crimes committed in schools throughout the country" in recent years. Schwartz (1996) cites "small-scale and regional studies [that] indicate that youth violence is increasing, at least slightly."

On the other hand, Bluestein (2001) reports that the prevalence of youth crime has been relatively flat over the decades and that the number of violent incidents is actually down. His comparison of 1998 and 1999 statistics reveals 200,000 fewer school-related crimes and 67,000 fewer serious violent crimes in 1999. The National Center for Educational Statistics finds that violent and nonviolent crimes have remained constant over the past 10 years.

It may be that youth crime is at “its lowest ebb in a generation . . . but as a result of news coverage . . . adults believe juvenile crime is increasing” (Tucker, 2002). One explanation for this controversy is the lack of conclusive, comprehensive and national surveys on youth violence.

Student Perceptions of School Violence

On student perception of school violence, the research is similarly moot. Metlife (2000) reports that, compared to the past five years, students, teachers, and law enforcement officials are not only more likely to believe that school violence has decreased but that students are more likely to report feeling “very safe” at school. And according to another study, the percentage of students who feel unsafe while at school decreased from 9 percent in 1995 to 5 percent in 1999 (Kaufman, Chen, Choy et al., 2001a).

As to the perceived threat of violence, a study that collected data from 1993 to 1999 found no change in the percentage of students who reported being threatened with a weapon on school property. (Kaufman, Chen, Choy, et al., 2001a). Furthermore, fewer children reported bringing a weapon to school over the past 10 years (Kauffman et al., 2001b).

Specificity of school violence

Assuming relatively little increase in the frequency of school violence, the question remains as to why students feel unsafe. A 1996 poll (Srebalus et. al., 1996). of American adolescents shows 47 percent believing that their schools are becoming more violent. Perhaps the level of school violence, although constant, is still at a high enough level to cause students to feel unsafe. Perhaps dramatic violence, such as mass shootings, perpetuates hypersensitivity among the nation’s students and families. Whatever the reason and whatever the research, the nature of student fears must be explored.

One area to explore is the specificity of violence. Although some researchers may claim that statistical trends represent only certain portions of the population, the fact is that school violence crosses racial, ethnic, economic, and gender lines and occurs in almost every setting. In one study a group of 1,600 youth of mixed ethnicity, 85 percent of the girls and 76 percent of the boys reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment in school (Dupper and Meyer-Adams, 2002).

Student violence is not simply limited to impoverished ghetto schools. Although the etiology of violence may vary according to a school’s unique need circumstances, such as a lack of resources or the existence of gangs, it may also reside in the eclecticism of aggressive behavior, which includes the systemic influences of the school itself. Viewing violence as latent in almost every setting can lead to problem exploration free of the typical attribution biases that filter perceptions.

Outside of schools that are located in violent communities, few direct correlations for student violence exist. However, one correlation is to the media, whose inextricable perpetuation and glamorization of graphic violence, familial turmoil, and numerous other factors are equally important (Warner, Weist, and Krulak, 1999).

Not isolated in any one community or segment of the population, violence is actually multidimensional and pervasive (Hampton et al., 1996). What used to be considered an inner-city phenomenon has now spread

across rural and suburban America. Nobody is safe from violence in the schools—not the administrators, not the teachers, and certainly not the students.

As was learned from the experience of preventing another Columbine High School, where, in 1999, two students opened fire on students and teacher, killing 15 (Cloud 2001) and taking their own lives before capture by authorities, the rapid implementation of quick-fix, homogenous prevention programs for all the schools in a given district or state neglects the subtle and overt distinctions of school culture. In one city, for instance, a school may exhibit a low level of student violence that reflects the tension of the neighborhood, the lack of adequate resources, and attitudes toward aggression in the home. In that same city, however, another school may have no day-to-day violence, relatively less gang involvement, and a wealth of resources for the students. Clearly, each of these two schools needs a different kind of violence prevention.

In addition, to speculate about urban and rural schools, urban schools may model a top-down, survivalist attitude in which administrators assume power and control. This contrasts with a rural school that may model a scapegoating and ostracizing attitude for forcing students to conform.

Indeed what post-Columbine prevention efforts should have taught is that cultural variation requires sensitivity to the school's character, including its cultural acceptance or resistance to acknowledging ownership of the problem. Put another way, Columbine should have taught that diversity in the organizational makeup of the school system-cum-community should dictate flexibility and comprehensive measures for preventing school violence.

However, it seems that what was in fact learned from Columbine is that violence within schools has a number of contributory factors that may be internalized or externalized by the school, but that most of these factors are not related to the school culture. Research supports the author's perception through a study done with school administrators. "Perceived as major etiological factors of violence were lack of parental supervision at home, lack of family involvement with school, and exposure to violence in the mass media" (Price, 1997).

To resolve this post-Columbine dilemma the author examined the belief systems of administrators and teachers and of non-school organizations and organizational health, turning first to the literature and then to empirical research.

Research on the Perceptions of Administrators and Teachers

For some reason, the literature lacks studies in this area, making the study of student violence and school culture particularly difficult. Price (1997) found that few studies have examined the perceptions of school administrators. Pietrzak, Peterson, and Speaker (1998) found the perceptions of administrators vital to developing comprehensive programs. Schwartz (1996) stated that administrators may be unwilling to acknowledge the contributory factors of school violence because of their fears of public perception, a "boycott of schools labeled as unsafe," and being "blamed for failing to keep the peace." Bill Hardy, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, supported this premise when he suggested that principals do not report the full extent of violence because they fear the negative impact it might have on their own performance (Henry, 1994). And Srebalus, Schwartz, Vaughan, and Tunick (1996) state: "If an administrator's response to violence lacks effectiveness, it may have the effect of encouraging vigilante-like behavior in students."

Turning to the literature on teachers' perceptions, the author found a similar absence of adequate research to confirm the notion that teachers do in fact perceive school culture differently from their administrative counterparts. This finding is supported in Finley (2002), who states: "The absence of studies to date that directly seek to understand how safety measures are perceived by teachers, how they effect teachers, how teachers, in turn, affects students, is a glaring omission."

However, the limited research available on teacher perceptions points to the school administration as a key determinant of school culture. A 2002 case study found administrative support a primary factor in how teachers perceive school culture (Everett and Price, 1997). Another study in Australia found that even though “particular styles of leadership in a school may not have directly touched the lives of students, it certainly had an impact on the teachers, who did indeed directly influence student performance (Silins, 2002).

Research on Non-school Organizations and Organizational Health

More evolved than literature about educational institutions, that about non-school organizations contributes insights about the different perceptions of front-line employees and their supervisors, whose positions in the hierarchy compare to those of teachers and school administrators.

A study conducted more than 10 years ago supports the idea that managers at different levels of the organization have different perspectives concerning that organization and, therefore, show different views about the organization’s culture (Keeton and Mengistu, 1992). More recent research that includes front-line employees suggests that employees’ hierarchical level within the organization is also likely to affect their perspective about the culture of the organization” (Helms and Stern, 2001).

School culture can be measured by examining the organizational health of that institution. While organizational health is not a new concept in organizational development literature, the relationship between itself and school violence has not yet been clearly defined, nor has it been adequately applied to the educational system. Organizational health can be broken down into three dimensions — adaptation, climate, and infrastructure. It is not simply the three dimensions but the interactions of these dimensions that forms the basis of organizational health.

Empirical Research

Between 2003 and 2004, to fill the research gap regarding school health, the authors engaged in two types of empirical research. First, they surveyed school administrators. Second, they conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews of administrators and teachers.

The Survey

In 2003, the author conducted a survey of 60 administrators from across the country to ascertain their perceptions of student violence, hypothesizing that administrators would rate school culture as having a low impact on student violence.

This original survey consisted of 30 factors derived from the literature on organizational culture, school culture, and school violence. In fact, many questions were part of similar or related studies, such as a national study of social worker perceptions by Astor et al. (1997) and a study on the inherent limits of predicting student violence by Mulvey and Cauffman (2001).

The 30 factors fell into two categories of 15, with one category including all the internal factors, or those purported to measure the organizational environment or culture. The 15 internal factors have been cited in this paper whereas the 15 external factors not considered to be systemically influential to the culture of the school have been given no justification.

The author asked the administrators who received this survey (or list of factors) to rate each factor as to its low, medium, or high influence on student violence.

Figure 1. School violence inventory (PSVI) survey form

Perceptions of School Violence Inventory (PSVI)

Gender: Male/ Female

Age: _____

Years in education: _____ Years in Current Position: _____

Directions: Consider each factor and its potential effect on student violence. Rate each of these factors by a score of one to three. A three represents a very high influence on student violence, and a one represents a very low influence on student violence.

| | Low Influence 1 | Medium Influence 2 | High Influence 3 |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Physiology and genetics (students) | | | |
| Leadership (faculty) | | | |
| Poverty (student's family) | | | |
| Policies and procedures (school) | | | |
| Morale (faculty) | | | |
| Familial influences (students) | | | |
| Structure (school) | | | |
| Media | | | |
| Autonomy and empowerment (faculty) | | | |
| Video games (students) | | | |
| Physical environment (school) | | | |
| Social isolation (students) | | | |
| Professional growth/development | | | |
| Wellness (students) | | | |
| Supervision (faculty) | | | |
| Community resources (students) | | | |
| Teamwork (faculty) | | | |
| Victim abuse (students) | | | |
| Integrity (school) | | | |
| Mental illness (students) | | | |
| Job satisfaction (faculty) | | | |
| Religion (students) | | | |
| Philosophical accord (faculty/school) | | | |
| Internet (students) | | | |
| Espoused values (school) | | | |
| Intelligence (students) | | | |
| Communication (faculty) | | | |
| World events | | | |
| Decision making (faculty) | | | |
| Diversity (students) | | | |

The results of the survey strongly suggest a real difference between the ratings distributions of external and internal factors. Furthermore, they suggest that the difference is due to a greater probability to rate external factors as low influence.

Table 1. Results of *Perceptions of School Violence Inventory (PSVI)*

| Internal – External Dimensions | SVI Item Number | Factor | Sum of Mean Rating (<i>n</i> = 62) range 1 to 3 |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| External | 18 | Victim abuse (students) | 2.69 |
| | 6 | Familial influences (students) | 2.69 |
| | 12 | Social isolation (students) | 2.58 |
| | 3 | Poverty (student’s family) | 2.39 |
| | 8 | Media | 2.39 |
| | 14 | Wellness (students) | 2.34 |
| | 10 | Video games (students) | 2.34 |
| | 20 | Mental illness (students) | 2.31 |
| | 16 | Community resources (students) | 2.31 |
| | 30 | Diversity (students) | 1.81 |
| | 24 | Internet (students) | 1.81 |
| | 1 | Physiology & genetics (students) | 1.79 |
| | 28 | World events | 1.74 |
| | 22 | Religion (students) | 1.66 |
| | 26 | Intelligence (students) | 1.66 |
| Internal | 5 | Morale (faculty) | 2.66 |
| | 2 | Leadership (faculty) | 2.53 |
| | 15 | Supervision (faculty) | 2.48 |
| | 17 | Teamwork (faculty) | 2.42 |
| | 4 | Policies & procedures (school) | 2.40 |
| | 27 | Communication (faculty) | 2.39 |
| | 19 | Integrity (school) | 2.33 |
| | 25 | Espoused values (school) | 2.29 |
| | 7 | Structure (school) | 2.26 |
| | 9 | Autonomy/empowerment (faculty) | 2.21 |
| | 11 | Physical environment (school) | 2.13 |
| | 29 | Decision-making (faculty) | 2.11 |
| | 21 | Job satisfaction (faculty) | 2.10 |
| 23 | Philosophical accord: teacher/school | 2.00 | |
| 13 | Professional growth/development | 1.97 | |

Analysis of the Survey from which the Interview Questions were derived

These data were consistent with the possibility that, on average, school administrators consider the internal factors to have more influence than the external factors on the occurrence of school violence. Their rating responses to the internal factors are more likely than the external factors to be in the moderate-to-high influence category. On the other hand, a majority of the external factors were also rated with comparable probability of being of moderate-to-high influence.

Based on this information, one may speculate that administrators do not externalize blame for student violence randomly, instead believing that there are specific external factors that are more highly relevant. They may view such factors as mental illness, physiology, social isolation, familial influences, and poverty as a socio-emotional data set that is a more important correlate for violence than such other external factors as world events, diversity, and religion, which may be too general and not germane.

This survey failed to support the author's hypothesis, that administrators do not recognize the role of school culture in creating a milieu for student violence. However, it did raise an important question:

If administrators recognize that student violence is more highly associated with the school culture (internal factors), then why are they not using money allocated for violence prevention in this area instead of in bullying prevention, peer mediation, character development, and other programs that do not address the overall health of the organization?

The authors used the administrators' five most highly rated internal factors—morale of faculty, Leadership of faculty, supervision of faculty, teamwork of faculty, policies & procedures (school)—and external factors—child abuse (students), familial influences, social isolation (students), poverty (student's family), media—to formulate in-depth interview questions.

The authors' purpose in doing so was to determine whether administrators and teachers do in fact perceive these specific attributes of school culture similarly or differently.

The Interviews

In planning the interviews to ascertain how administrators and teachers perceive the link between internal organizational factors with student violence, the authors formulated the following hypotheses:

- Administrators and teachers will perceive the internal and external variables differently.
- Administrators may find internal variables less influential than external variables.
- Teachers may find external variables less influential than internal variables.

Method

Ten subjects for the study—five administrators and five teachers—were recruited for the study in three different states (New Jersey, Montana, Michigan). Each of the subjects came from a middle school with an enrollment between 500 and 750 students and had experienced at least one episode of nonfatal or life-threatening on-campus violence within the past two years.

The authors secured permission from the school district in which the educators worked, requested each individual's participation, and secured signed letters of consent, indicating each person's willingness to participate in the research study.

The authors led the administrators and teachers through a semi-structured interview, which included specific open-ended questions. The questions encouraged them to share their past experiences with student violence, their perceptions of how the school handled those events, and their experiences and beliefs regarding prevention and intervention types of programs. The questions simultaneously ensured that key issues believed to support the author's hypotheses or refute them were explored during the interview. These interviews were audiotaped to facilitate data analysis.

In addition, background information was obtained from the school district and the on-line school report card regarding the characteristics of the student body, faculty, and administration; state-reported characteristics of school, violence incidents, etc.

Instruments

The instruments consisted of six in-depth semi-structured interviews of three pairs of school administrators and teachers to elicit their beliefs about the nature and origins of student violence

The questions were designed to stimulate thinking about three areas: the importance of student violence as an issue for schools across the country (and the need for better prevention efforts); their understanding of school culture and school organizational health; and their, perceptions of the relationships between the school as an organization and student violence. The interview questions follow:

Figure 2. Interview protocol

| |
|---|
| <p>Statement "As you know, this interview is being recorded."</p> <p>How long have you been an administrator/teacher? How long have you been in your current position? Are you involved in developing or implementing violence prevention programs at your school? If so, please describe. (If not, who and what are being done by others?)</p> <p>How would you define school violence?</p> <p>What type of behaviors would you label as school violence?</p> <p>Have you ever witnessed or been a part of school violence, (probe various degrees of violence) If so, how? How long ago? How was it resolved (outcome)?</p> <p>When you think about the following factors, consider how each may contribute to the potential for school violence? Please use examples from your experience to describe how these factors play a role in student violence. Other factors they would add?</p> <p>External factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Child abuse (students)• Familial influences• Social isolation (students)• Poverty (student's family)• Media <p>Internal factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Morale of faculty• Leadership of faculty |
|---|

- Supervision of faculty
- Teamwork of faculty
- Policies & procedures (school)

How would you compare your responses to what the teachers/administrators in your school might describe?

Based on which set of influences above (external or internal) are primarily focused on by the interviewee, this will be confirmed by reflecting back to them either: (present them with an index card with chart on it). As a group, you seem to place more emphasis on the (external or internal) factors as being more influential toward school violence, do you agree? What are your thoughts about this?

Is there anything else that you would like to add about why school violence occurs and how to prevent it?

The semi-structured interview situation allows for a personal touch that permits greater depth than other methods of collecting data, some of which is sensitive. The primary advantages of this method are flexibility and an opportunity for follow-up questions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This method ensures coverage of all the salient points and dimensions. And, as it also provides an opportunity for free and open discussion, it allows for spontaneity by the participants as they share their experiences, knowledge, and beliefs about the interview topics, thereby ensuring both adequate data collection and focus on the factors and dimensions related to the study hypotheses.

The subjects' confidentiality was maintained through the use of a coding system. For example, the first in-depth interview was given the pseudonym NJ1 to represent the state in which the interview took place.

Content was determined through a literature review on school culture and student violence and by assessing the responses to the author's previous survey on student violence. The five items rated as most influential in each category (internal to school culture and external to school culture) were used to formulate the specific questions on perceptions of student violence. The graph below (Figure 3) shows the thirty factors as they are divided into the two categories.

Limitations

The study has six limitations.

First and most important is methodology. Even though the subjects may rate internal or external factors higher, they may or may not have a greater awareness or an appreciation of the organization's health and how it influences violence.

Figure 3. Internal and external school factors related to perceptions of school violence

| Internal Factors | Low | | Medium | | High | | Mean |
|----------------------------------|-----|---|--------|---|------|---|------|
| | A | F | A | F | A | F | |
| • Leadership (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| • Policies & procedures (school) | | | | | | | |
| • Morale (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| • Structure (school) | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------------|----------------------------------|-----|---|--------|---|------|---|------|
| • | Autonomy/empower (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| • | Physical environment (school) | | | | | | | |
| • | Professional growth/develop | | | | | | | |
| • | Supervision (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| • | Teamwork (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| • | Integrity (school) | | | | | | | |
| • | Job satisfaction (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| • | Philos accord: teacher/school | | | | | | | |
| • | Espoused values (school) | | | | | | | |
| • | Communication (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| | Decision-making (faculty) | | | | | | | |
| External Factors | | Low | | Medium | | High | | Mean |
| | | A | F | A | F | A | F | |
| • | Physiology & genetics (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Poverty (student's family) | | | | | | | |
| • | Familial influences (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Media | | | | | | | |
| • | Video games (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Social isolation (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Wellness (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Community resources (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Victim abuse (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Mental illness (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Religion (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Internet (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | Intelligence (students) | | | | | | | |
| • | World events | | | | | | | |
| • | Diversity (students) | | | | | | | |

Second, by having one person administer the in-depth questionnaire and then interpret the results, objectivity may be compromised.

Third, the interview questions were partially based on evidential data from the original survey.

Fourth, the small sample makes it difficult to extrapolate results to a broader population.

Fifth, the 30 factors that comprise the survey had never been used before, and there is no way to validate the 15 factors that were used to represent organizational culture. Although each of the variables has been used individually to represent organizational culture, there is no evidence to support the variables as a collective measure. Furthermore, there is no evidence to support the premise that the 15 variables used to represent the external category are not in fact related to school culture.

Sixth, with the narrowing of the definitions for both organizational culture and health, other factors possibly necessary factors may have been excluded. Because the terms have been defined with purposeful ambiguity, it is appropriate to challenge the breadth and scope of these concepts to fit the specific dimensions of different institutions.

Conclusion

Results will be presented at the conference. For a copy of the results, please email the author.

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Biography

Jared Scherz is President, Integrative Training and Consulting. Jared earned his Masters in Education from Penn State University in 1992 and is completing his Ph.D. in organizational/clinical psychology. His doctoral dissertation involved violence prevention in schools. He has been working as a consultant for seven years, primarily focusing his efforts on improving the ‘health’ of school systems. Jared created Integrative Training and Consulting in response to the schools shooting in Flint, Michigan several years ago. His vision for ITC is to provide schools an opportunity for greater organizational health. Improving the school culture by helping with team building, communication, morale, policies/procedures, and other important areas will ultimately build a safer and richer learning community. Jared has authored a book called *Harnessing the Power of Resistance: A Guide for Educators* and is currently working on his second book about school violence.

Eileen Murphy, MS Ed., trains and coaches teachers and administrators around the world in areas of communication, change management, goal setting and leadership development. She received her bachelor’s degree from Aquinas College with majors in psychology and German; her degree program was augmented by studying at the Collegium Palatinum in Heidelberg, Germany. After college, Eileen moved to Sydney, Australia to work for a Pitney Bowes subsidiary. She received her master’s degree from Capella University. Eileen is currently pursuing a doctorate in education from Capella with an emphasis in teaching and training online. Eileen is proud to serve on the expert panel of the Michigan Women’s Network, is a member of the Leadership Michigan Alumni Advisory Board (class of 2000), and has been active with Saginaw/Bay Big Brothers Big Sisters for 11 years as a Big Sister and ten years as a board member (two as president).

Thomas Fanning, Psy.D., is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist currently working for Indian Health Service: Ft. Peck Service Unit in Wolf Point, MT. Dr. Fanning graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 1993 with a B.A. in Psychology. He then earned his Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from The Illinois School of Professional Psychology: Chicago Campus in 1998. His professional work has included employment with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, Federal Bureau of Prisons, and Indian Health Service. Dr. Fanning has been published in the *Journal of Correctional Best Practices* and *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* as a primary and supporting author, respectively. His professional interests include crisis management, psycho-pharmacology, and child/adolescent development.