

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THWARTED ACTS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE [5221]

Jeffrey A. Daniels
Mary C. Bradley
Indiana University, Bloomington³

Introduction

The decade between 1990 and 2000 was the most violent in the history of America's schools. The National Center for Education Statistics surveys school principals throughout the United States each year to assess violence, among other topics (Kaufman et al. 2000). In 1997, Principals reported the following violent acts against students: about 4,000 rapes or sexual assaults; 7,000 robberies; and 11,000 physical attacks with a weapon. Throughout one school year (1997), adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 were the victims of about 2.7 million nonfatal crimes while they were at school (Kaufman et al.).

The violence does not only involve students, but it also includes violence against teachers. Alarming, as reported by Daniels (2002b, p. 6), "between 1993 and 1997, 1.8 million teachers were the victims of nonfatal crimes at school, including 1,114,000 thefts and 657,000 violent crimes (rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault) (Kaufman et al.)"

Although there are indications that school violence is waning, targeted school violence continues to be a problem in need of resolution (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski 2002). Targeted school violence has been defined as acts of violence in schools or at school functions, in which the perpetrator and/or victim(s) are known or are identifiable prior to the intended act (Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekuil, Fein, and Modzeleski 2001). To this definition, Daniels (2002a) has added nonlethal violence, such as armed hostage situations.. Much has been learned about lethal school violence, yet little is known about acts of targeted school violence that never happened—near misses. Moore, Petrie, Braga, and McLaughlin (2003) have argued that research must be conducted that examines potentially lethal school violence that was thwarted.

Numerous agencies of the United States government (e.g., Dwyer Osher, and Warger 1998; Koplan, Autry, and Hyman 2001; O'Toole 2000; Vossekuil et al. 2002) have been studying school violence, with most attention given to the perpetrators of the violence. Moreover, various researchers have been engaged in identifying common characteristics of aggressive and violent youth (e.g., Loeber and Loeber 1998; Moffitt 1993).

Despite what has been learned about school shooters and other children and adolescents who are violent and aggressive at school, little is known about acts of targeted school violence that never happened – near misses. School shootings attract much attention, but numerous incidents are thwarted before they become violent. These incidents include both armed hostage events wherein no injuries or deaths occurred and plotted rampages that were uncovered and averted. Although foiled rampages tend to make the national headlines, school hostage events that are resolved successfully rarely make national news.

Targeted school violence that has been stymied has not yet been systematically studied to date. The purpose of this paper is to describe preliminary results of a qualitative investigation of school hostage situations that

³ This research was supported by an Indiana University School of Education Proffitt Grant, Bloomington, Indiana. All data collection procedures were approved by the Indiana University Human Subjects Committee, Study #02-7843.

were resolved successfully after school personnel and school-based police officers intervened with the perpetrator so that no one was harmed. Such systematic research on thwarted school violence will serve to establish what school and law enforcement personnel did that worked.

Methods

Targeted school violence entails the deliberate harming of specific individuals at school or at school related functions (Reddy et al. 2001). We included armed hostage events at school in the definition of targeted school violence. Because of the infrequent occurrence of targeted acts of school violence, Moore, Petrie, Braga, and McLaughlin (2003) indicated that qualitative analyses are the best way to study this phenomenon. Hill Thompson and Williams (1997) argued that qualitative research is the method of choice for studying such phenomena as psychotherapy process, infrequently occurring events, or inner experiences. Hill and her colleagues believed that many qualitative methods lack the rigor that has come to be expected of quantitative methods.

Consensual qualitative research

Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) introduced Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) as a rigorous method of scientific inquiry. CQR highlights the use of multiple researchers, the process of reaching consensus, and a systematic way of examining the representativeness of data across cases.

Steps of CQR

Responses to open ended interview questions for each case are divided into domains or topic areas. Core ideas are constructed for all the material within each domain for each individual case. A cross analysis is conducted to develop categories to describe consistencies in core ideas within domains across cases.

The consensus process is central to the CQR method. First, each researcher examines the data independently, then all work together to reach consensus as to the best possible representation of the data. Multiple perspectives increase the approximation of the “truth” and reduce the amount of researcher bias (Marshall and Rossman 1999).

Participants

Schools that experienced an armed hostage event were identified through a search of the Lexus-Nexus Academic database. A total of nine school hostage events were located that had taken place between April, 2001, and March, 2003. Participants were from three schools at which approval was given to conduct the study. They included three teachers, three school resource officers/police officers, two principals, two assistant principals, one school psychologist, and one school counselor.

Interview questions

Please describe your specific roles that helped to prevent the act of violence from escalating.
Can you describe any specific systemic conditions (e.g., school atmosphere or community) that you believe prevented this act from becoming more violent?
To what do you attribute the successful outcome of this situation?
What advice would you give to other school professionals who may find themselves in a similar situation or who may need help developing a violence prevention program for their school?

Procedures

The principal investigator (PI), the first author conducted on-site interviews with consenting adults who were directly involved with each event. After discussing and signing the informed consent form, the PI turned on the tape recorder and began the interview. Participants were interviewed individually and asked the questions

presented above in the same order. The PI also asked follow-up questions to clarify or seek additional details.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The interviewer checked the transcription against the taped interview: inconsistencies were discussed until consensus was reached. The researchers then deleted all proper names, places, or materials that identified participants in any way and assigned code numbers to each transcript to ensure confidentiality of participants.

Team members independently read each transcript and identified relevant *blocks of data*. Blocks represent significant responses that answer each of the original research questions, and they can range from a single phrase to several sentences about the same topic. Team members discussed their individual blocks of data until consensus was attained and a “master block” was developed. The team then developed *domains* or topic areas. As domains are used to group or cluster data about similar topics, we started with a list of domains that seemed relevant from the literature and the interview protocol. According to Hill et al. (1997), domains may change over time to more accurately fit the specific data set, to become more precise, or to be deleted. As unexpected data emerge, new domains are often added or data is placed into more than one domain. If multiple blocks of data are being double coded, domains are not adequately defined. If a lot of material is double coded into the same two domains, the domains may need to be combined or collapsed. All blocks of data need to be placed into at least one domain. An “Other” domain is usually created in order to place data that can not be assigned to any other domain (Hill et al.). Team members individually assigned each block of data from each transcript to a domain. The team then met to discuss their chosen domains for each block of data. When discrepancies were found among members’ domain choices, the team discussed those choices until consensus was reached.

Working independently, team members read all the raw data in one domain and summarized the data into *core ideas*. Core ideas should capture the essence of what the interviewee said, but in fewer words and with more clarity, and should make as few inferences as possible, stick very close to the explicit meaning of the data, and summarize the focus of the domain (Hill et al. 1997). Team members then met to discuss their core ideas and obtain group consensus for the core ideas.

Once consensus has been obtained for the core ideas of each domain of each case, an auditor checks the team’s work. The auditor is someone who is very involved in the project but not a part of the consensus process. The auditor must determine whether the raw data have been assigned to the correct domain, all the important material in the domain has been captured by the core idea, and the core ideas are concise and reflective of all the raw data. The auditor must suggest changes to the domains and core ideas as he or she sees necessary. Team members review the auditor’s feedback and either accept or reject each suggestion. The team once again sends its work back to the auditor, along with the auditor’s original feedback, and the review process continues until consensus is agreed upon.

Cross-case analysis

The team next examines the data across cases, looking for similarities across the core ideas. Team members examine core ideas for every domain across every case, and determine how these core ideas can be clustered into categories. Team members brainstorm together about various possible categories. Determination of categories is discovery-oriented. The auditing process again takes place, after all categories have been determined by the team, until final agreement has been reached.

Results

Data domains

The following is a description of the nine domains that emerged from the data.

Relationships

This domain represents efforts to build and establish a personal relationship and sense of trust with the students. This can include descriptions of the quality of the relationship with students, descriptions of the ways of establishing those relationships or relationships among students; awareness of students' temperament; or actively seeking to know students within their holistic context.

School conditions

This domain refers to conditions that have been set up in the school with students, staff, and faculty to ensure safety and promote the best learning environment possible. It also includes the school culture or climate (e.g., "code of silence" or breaking the code of silence). These conditions may include knowledge and awareness of who is and is not supposed to be at the school; if anything is unusual or out of place; rules and regulations; boundaries; having monitors throughout the school (physical presence and cameras); size of the school (that adds to the awareness, etc.).

Active intervention

This domain refers to an action/intervention taken by someone directly involved with (or having direct knowledge of) the event with the intention of immediately resolving the situation or protecting others from harm as a direct result of the situation. By definition, these interventions are situation-specific. This domain also includes interventions after the incident that are designed to help students, faculty, and families cope.

Training

This domain refers to descriptions of training experiences that the staff member has had or to ways in which this training came into play or helped in the situation.

Communicating with the perpetrator

This domain addresses efforts to communicate purposefully with the perpetrator with the intention of connecting with him or her or of trying to find out what he or she wants. It may include negotiation with the offender, both verbal and nonverbal communication, or efforts to establish rapport with the offender.

Communicating with professionals

This domain refers to descriptions of communications with other professionals, internal or external, that take place before, during, or after the incident. Possible intentions are to (1) consult with others about the offender prior to the incident; (2) resolve the incident effectively, efficiently, and safely, and (3) contact and coordinate with other professionals about services following the incident.

Escalation prevention

This domain refers to any act with the intention of preventing self, others, and/or the perpetrator from panicking or escalating.

Compliance

This domain refers to following the perpetrator's directions or orders and getting others to do the same.

Community

This domain represents a sense of cohesion with, or belonging in the community. This may entail descriptions of outreach activities of the school into the community, efforts to be a part of the larger community, or efforts to invite the community into the school. It may also include statements about community characteristics or ways in which the community impacts the school.

Other

This domain is reserved for information that is provided but that does not fit into any of the other categories

or for important information that does not answer any of the questions.

Results of the cross-case analyses

We now present results of the cross case analyses of the core ideas for each of the identified domains. Please note that throughout this presentation, we use the word “staff” to represent teachers, administrators, school resource officers, and other school personnel. Specific suggestions for educators are presented in the discussion section to follow.

Relationships

There are three emergent core ideas for the Relationships domain. These include (1) the personal knowledge that school staff have of students and their families; (2) students coming to staff and administrators with difficulties because of the relationships that these adults have established with the students; and (3) students and staff using, during the hostage events, their pre-existing relationships with the perpetrator in an effort to resolve the event.

School conditions

Four core ideas were drawn from the data relating to school conditions. These are (1) the development of a safe, respectful culture within the school through the establishment of trusting relationships among staff and students; (2) school staff who are aware of people and activities on campus and who recognize when something is out of place; (3) staff who establish and enforce clear rules, boundaries, and expectations for students; and (4) staff and security officers who visibly monitor the school.

Active interventions

Specific interventions designed to resolve the hostage events nonviolently are idiosyncratic to the school, the personnel, and the events. However, one common core idea relates to protecting people. For example, some staff described responding quickly to the event, calling 911, and placing the school in lockdown. Other examples of active interventions included a school resource officer strategically positioning himself in relation to the perpetrator so he could respond if the perpetrator raised the gun.

Training

Two core ideas emerged from the data regarding participant training. These are (1) the importance of having a crisis plan; and (2) the importance of practicing for different types of crises. Related to this second core idea, one participant indicated that most mock lockdowns omit the follow-up details, such as what to do with students who need to go to the bathroom when the “real” crisis necessitates a three-hour lockdown.

Communicating with the perpetrator

One core idea related to communicating with the emerged from the cross case analysis. Participants described efforts to make a connection and establish rapport with the perpetrator in an effort to de-escalate or resolve the situation nonviolently. Such efforts to communicate coincide with the established strategies for hostage negotiation, in which the purpose is “to utilize verbal strategies to buy time and intervene so that the emotions of the perpetrator can decrease and rationality can increase” (Hatcher, Mohandie, Turner, and Gelles 1998, pg. 455).

Communicating with professionals

Our cross case analysis yielded two core ideas with respect to communicating with other professionals. These are (1) having mechanisms in place to call for help, both within the school and out to the police; and (2) coordinating outside professionals before, during, and after the event.

Escalation prevention

Two core ideas emerged related to escalation prevention: (1) remaining calm during the event (which was

frequently attributed to prior crisis response training); and (2) being nonconfrontational toward the perpetrator during the hostage event.

Compliance

One common core idea related to compliance is that staff and students did what the perpetrator told them to do.

Community

We uncovered one core idea and several additional examples of efforts to integrate the school and the community. Participants expressed the importance of parental involvement with the school. Other examples of community integration include opening the high school gym to community members during the evening and the school nurse's efforts to go into the community to give immunization shots.

Discussion

The importance of creating safe schools cannot be overstated. Although significant research that has focused on the increasing levels of violence in America's schools, serious attention has yet to be given to potentially lethal acts of violence that has been averted (Moore et al. 2003).

This project examined targeted acts of school violence that never occurred. Such systematic research on thwarted school violence is crucial in understanding specific actions and procedures taken by school and law enforcement personnel that prevented the act from escalating to further violence. This knowledge may then be applied to help make schools safer.

As part of a larger project, we have been examining the successful resolution of violent school hostage events and the plotted rampages, which have been documented by others, through a qualitative analysis of a semi-structured interview. School staff, administrators, and police/school resource officers involved in the plotted rampages and hostage events responded to questions regarding their specific roles, the systemic conditions, and specific attributes they believed led to successful resolution of these targeted acts of school violence. Finally, all participants were asked to offer advice to school personnel and law enforcement officers who might be faced with such a situation in the future. For purposes of this paper, we have described only one component of this larger study, namely, the findings from our investigations of school hostage events.

We present the following discussion in response to each of the questions asked of the participants. To reiterate, the following questions will form the basis of this discussion:

1. Please describe your specific (salient) roles that helped to prevent the act of violence from escalating.
2. Can you describe any specific systemic conditions (e.g., school atmosphere or community) that you believe prevented this act from becoming more violent?
3. To what do you attribute the successful outcome of this situation?
4. What advice would you give to other school professionals who may find themselves in a similar situation or who may need help in developing a violence prevention program for their school?

Salient roles

The results of this study suggest that the roles through which school administrators engage all students in the school is critical to the successful resolution of a targeted act of school violence. Participants consistently acknowledged that developing a trusting, open relationship with every student in the school was essential. The personal, caring relationship with all students and their families, including the perpetrator(s), was seen as one of, if not the most essential component in facilitating a peaceful resolution.

School and law enforcement personnel reported that capitalizing on the pre-existing relationship with the perpetrator was essential in efforts to gain his or her trust in order to work together to resolve the situation. Spending time with and getting to know students outside of the classroom was seen as the most effective way of developing these meaningful relationships. Participants suggested hanging out and talking with students in the hallways between classes, coaching students on a team, and eating lunch with students in the cafeteria. Participants also reported that these trusting relationships allowed for and even encouraged students to confide in and report to teachers, staff, and/or administrators regarding any problems or rumors circulating throughout the school. This knowledge allowed administrators to assess the validity of all rumors and to deal with problems early, before they escalated. One participant highlighted this point by saying; “Just being open to them, letting them come talk to us, whatever it is. You know your kids. . . . If they feel comfortable enough to come talk to you, there it is.”

Participants also reported that their roles after the incident occurred were equally important and should not be overlooked. Many school personnel indicated that their role was to assist and support both parents and students after the event occurred in order for the school to feel like and remain a safe, comfortable environment. *Communicating with other Professionals* then became extremely important. The roles assumed by professionals after the incident included such things as providing follow-up meetings for parents; working with outside professionals to ensure continued safety for students and administrators; and coordinating other professionals to provide necessary services, such as counseling, to students and their families.

Systemic conditions

Systemic conditions that influenced the school culture and climate were also seen as a critically important component to nonviolently resolving hostage events. The systemic condition most frequently mentioned by all participants was efforts by the school administration/staff to create this safe environment for students and school staff that facilitates trusting and open communication between students and staff/police. Again, the development of meaningful relationships with students was viewed as important for creating this type of environment.

School Conditions were equally important in constructing a safe school environment. All participants reported the importance of having school personnel present in the hallways and throughout the rest of the school. The physical presence of school administrators serves multiple important functions, such as assessing whether anything or anyone is out of place, and allowing students to feel safe and protected. For example, one participant noted: “If you stand in the hallways, like during breaks, you’ll see that there are staff members present . . . so there’s that sense that there are people here who are going to intervene, and I think students know that.”

There was also consensus among participants regarding the importance of creating and enforcing strict rules and boundaries, both for students and administrators. This includes rules for when students are allowed in the hallways, restricted times for them to be at their lockers, designated lunch-hour times, and acceptable behavior. These strict rules allow students to clearly understand what is expected of them, and the enforcement of these rules makes it easier to identify any anomalies on campus. One participant explained, “We see a parked car and . . . it’s like, ‘Who’s car is that? I don’t know. . .’. So we start unlocking and checking the perimeters because you know, you think, who else is going to be out there?”

Attributions for successful resolution

Participants’ descriptions of the attributes of a successful outcome highlight yet again the importance of *Relationships*. They noted the importance of a pre-existing quality relationship with the perpetrator in order to create a connection with him or her during the event. And they utilized this pre-existing relationship when *communicating with the perpetrator* in efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution. In addition, some participants attributed the preparedness, or the *training* for targeted acts of school violence as a reason for the

successful outcome. Specific, advanced training allowed each person to know exactly what to do and when to do it and, therefore, significantly diminished additional chaos or unexpected problems.

Participants also stressed the importance of communicating with each other and other professionals before, during, and after the event. This involved meeting with external resources, such as the fire and police departments, to design and practice specific intervention plans. This also meant having and utilizing resources for *communicating with professionals* during the event—resources, such as panic buttons installed in each classroom, a direct line with the police department, and remote radios for key administrators and law enforcement officers in the building. In addition, participants attributed communicating with the perpetrator in a calm, nonconfrontational manner as essential for negotiating a peaceful resolution. They explained that, by remaining calm and behaving in a nonthreatening manner, hostage students remained calm because of the calmness of the hostage teachers, and the perpetrator felt more comfortable with and willing to cooperate with professionals. This finding is supported by the hostage negotiation literature, which stresses that the hostage negotiator must remain calm and establish rapport with the hostage taker(s) (Hatcher et al. 1998).

Advice

The most frequently reported advice for other school professionals was to develop open, trusting relationships with every student in one's school. School professionals believed that not only was this essential for de-escalating a violent situation, but it was also the most important factor for deterring these types of incidents. Participants also strongly urged all school employees to obtain training in crisis response, from lockdown drills to more advanced training in working with people in crisis. Several participants discussed the importance of their prior training in remaining calm and handling the hostage event well.

Summary and Recommendations

The purpose of this paper was to describe results of a qualitative investigation of three armed hostage events at schools. In all of these events, the hostages (students and teachers) were released without harm, and the perpetrator was taken into custody nonviolently. We described salient findings from the school staff, administrators, and school resource/police officers. Based on these findings, we make the following five recommendations:

Schools need to be prepared for many different types of crises and to be able to work with the many police agencies that are willing to train people to handle hostage events. As one participant from this study noted: "It happens just like we said, in a place you thought it would never happen. Everybody says, 'Well, I don't think it will happen here.' And we said the same thing but, in turn, saying 'Well, that's what everybody says. It could happen anywhere.'"

School personnel need to guard against taking any actions that may lead to the escalation of a hostage taking situation. Teachers or other personnel who first encounter the hostage taker must remain calm. Said one participant, "When they come up to a situation that, if you completely panic, the situation will expand".

Schools should consider safety as the primary concern when faced with a hostage event. If at all possible, negotiate for the release of the hostages. In each of the schools that we studied, the release of hostages was a primary goal of the negotiator. In all cases, this was accomplished successfully.

School personnel should deliberately work to develop relationships with every student at the school. This may entail having lunch with the students and interacting with them in the hallways before and between classes. During hostage negotiations, having a trusting relationship is of utmost importance (Hatcher et al. 1998). In two schools, the participants attributed the successful resolution of the situation largely to relationship building.

School personnel should be aware of conditions within and around the school. In all cases, early intervention was possible because somebody noticed that something was out of the ordinary.

References

- Daniels, J. A. (2002a). Assessing threats of school violence: Implications for counselors. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 80*, 215-218.
- Daniels, J. A. (2002b). *Targeted school violence: Issues and interventions*. Unpublished manuscript, Indiana University.
- Dwyer, K., Osher, D., and Warger, C. (1998). *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safe schools*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education.
- Hatcher, C., Mohandie, K., Turner, J., and Gelles, M. G. (1998). The role of the psychologist in crisis/hostage negotiations. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law, 16*, 455-472.
- Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., and Williams, E. N. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 25*, 517-572.
- Kaufman, P. Chen, X., Choy, S. P., Ruddy, S. A., Miller, A. K., Fleury, J. K., Chandler, K. A., Rand, M. R., Klaus, P., and Planty, M. G. (2000). *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2000*. Retrieved July 23, 2001, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001017>
- Koplan, J. P., Autry, J. H., and Hyman, S. E. (2001). *Surgeon General's report on youth violence*. Pittsburgh, PA: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Loeber, R. and Loeber, M. S. (1998). Development of juvenile aggression and violence: Some common misconceptions and controversies. *American Psychologist, 53*, 242-259.
- Marshall, C., and Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moffitt, T. E. (1993). Adolescence-limited and life-course persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review, 100*, 674-701.
- Moore, M. H., Petrie, C. V., Braga, A. A., and McLaughlin, B. L. (Eds.). (2003). *Deadly lessons: Understanding lethal school violence*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- O'Toole, M. E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Quantico, VA: Federal Bureau of Investigation.
- Reddy, M., Borum, R., Berglund, J., Vossekui, B., Fein, R., and Modzeleski, W. (2001). Evaluating risk for targeted violence in schools: Comparing risk assessment, threat assessment, and other approaches. *Psychology in the Schools, 38*, 157-172.
- Vossekui, B., Fein, R., Reddy, M., Borum, R., and Modzeleski, W. (2002). *The final report and findings of the safe school initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. Washington, DC: U. S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center.

[This page is blank.]