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School Violence Prevention: The Youth Development Perspective

Eleni Andreou[1*]

[1]*Department of Primary Education, University of Thessaly, Volos, 38221, Greece.*

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Negative behaviors among youth, such as violence and bullying, continue to be notable public health concerns. Positive youth development provides a useful framework for reducing these behaviors by focusing on social competencies that can overcome risk factors by providing support and opportunities to build social capital, engender civic identity and situate oneself in the broader institutional community. This paper presents recent findings about school violence, briefly reviews school-based violence prevention strategies, describes the philosophies which underline the youth development perspective and examines the implications for practice that this perspective provides for approaching and reducing anti-social behaviors and school violence.

Keywords: School; violence prevention; youth development perspective.

**Corresponding author: E-mail: elandr@uth.gr, elandr@pre.uth.gr;*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, there has been considerable research on the topic of youth violence [1,2]. Youth violence is perceived as a major problem in many countries which has increased social control measures (e.g. punitative sentencing, curfews, adult trial of juveniles at younger ages, etc.) in an endeavor to reduce crime and violence [3,4]. However, these approaches are often ineffective and reflect the failure of the community to prevent violence and address the risk factors associated with future anti-social and delinquent behavior by intervening at school level early in the children's and youth's life [5].

A substantial body of research supports that schools have a key role to play in addressing youth violence by focusing on positive youth development [6-11]. Positive youth development is a strengths-based model that recognizes the importance of creating opportunities and supporting youth to respond effectively to developmental challenges.

The youth development emphasis on giving young people decision-making power and incorporating ideas of youth in planning may not be well received by school systems. However, schools are more than instruments of social control and some aspects of youth development are compatible with schooling and the school's role in helping students learn. Moreover, the emphasis on character development and self-esteem building is a very promising approach to tackling school aggression and violence [12].

The aims of the present paper are fourfold: to present recent findings about school violence, briefly review school-based violence prevention strategies, analyze critical components of youth development and examine the implications for practice that youth development provides in curbing school violence by strengthening social competencies that reduce related youth risk behaviors.

2. FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL VIOLENCE

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the phenomenon of school violence, which has been associated with academic problems and school failure, as well as physical, emotional and psychological health problems [13]. Although violent victimization in schools has declined over the past decade [14], self-reported rates of bullying which is considered as "low-level violence" -which also includes peer sexual harassment, *victimization based on sexual orientation, and the psychological maltreatment of students by teachers* [15]- have remained stable [16]. Although bullying is not as overt as weapons offences and fatal shootings, bullying occurs with greater frequency and may have more profound and lasting effects on students' mental health and school performance [17,18]. The findings of studies on this subject are consistent with earlier works in Europe and the United States: serious bullying (e.g intentional harmful actions such as physical attacks, verbal harassment, damaging of personal property, malevolent rumorspreading, social exclusion happening every day) affects about 5% of all students, less serious bullying (attacks happening less than once a week), between 15% and 30% [19,20]. Bullies are five times more likely than are their classmates to end up in juvenile court, to be convicted of crimes and when they become parents to have highly aggressive children [21].

A complex interaction of factors, including the individual, family, socio-economic and cultural influences, school and community may play an important role in youth violence. Research on risk factors for youth violence has shown that one of the strongest predictive factors is the community in which schools are located [13, 22]. Schools in disadvantaged areas and disorganized communities with easy access to weapons, drugs and alcohol have high rates of violence [23]. This provides an empirical basis for "screening" to identify high- and low-risk schools. One aspect of the foundation for this approach is the link between accumulated risk and lack of developmental assets and most forms of violence. When positive, prosocial experiences with adults, peers and institutions are not encouraged by social organization of the community, the ability of schools to transmit proper rules and values may be impaired [24].

Moreover, specific aspects of school can put students at risk above and beyond their individual, familiar and societal risk features. Examples of school disorderliness include, but are not limited to the following: exclusionary practices, weak leadership, unclear or punitative discipline policies, overcompetative learning environments, toleration of abuse, discriminatory guidance policies, lack of social support and the like. Negative school climate, school and class size and lack of school bonding were also found to be associated with school violence, students'

feelings of unsafety and fears of victimization [25].

3. VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN CONTEXT

Dramatic changes in public schools during the past decade have affected the ways in which schools respond to violence and disruption. Among these changes are an increased focus on accountability, information technology and achievement in the public schools [26]. The increase of academic accountability, in many cases has led to a decrease in school tolerance for inappropriate and deviant behavior. In this high-stakes climate, disruptive students, particularly those who score poorly on tests that measure the performance of the classroom, school or school district are at risk for being excluded from the education community. Zero-tolerance policies nominally have been created to provide better opportunities for other students to achieve academic milestones by removing so-called troublemakers from the school. By removing low-achieving disruptive students from the schools, these policies may increase the likelihood that average levels of student achievement will rise in order to meet particular standards [27].

Zero-tolerance school policies have led to a more punitive approach to student behavior, focusing on a limited number of reactive and punitive responses to problem behavior, including office discipline referrals, in- and out-of-school suspension and expulsion [22]. Although these approaches may be perceived as providing immediate and short-term relief to teachers and administrators, they fail to address the school structures and processes necessary for effective prevention of serious misconduct.

Fortunately, researchers and practitioners have identified and assessed the efficacy of more positive approaches to violence prevention. These interventions are divided into three categories: a) school wide interventions which attempt to create school and classroom climates for all children that promote social and academic growth and a sense of community, b) student-centered approaches that seek to change the behavior and school experiences for students who have engaged in specific acts of misconduct or those most at risk for engaging in antisocial, disruptive or violent behavior and c) school security measures designed to detect and deter potential perpetrators of school violence before they harm themselves or others. Evidence suggests that strategies incorporated in these interventions –such as conflict resolution and social skills instruction, systemic classroom management, parent involvement, early warning and screening etc. are very effective in reducing and preventing school violence [28-30].

All three categories of intervention are based on the premises that school violence prevention is embedded in a community effort, addresses risk and protective factors, draws on previous research supporting interventions and that organizational change is essential as embodied in the development of cross agency coordinated services that involve a wide variety of community partners. Youth development and developmental ecological models, which have greatly influenced violence prevention programs, emphasize the role that “fit” between environmental affordances and developmental needs play in influencing behavior and life outcomes. The means to this end is providing support and opportunities to build social capital, engender civic identity and situate oneself in the broader institutional community [31].

4. YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Although a single definition of youth development does not exist, critical components have been identified [32,33]. Theseinclude:

- safetyandstructure
- belongingandmembership
- self-worth and ability to contribute
- independence and control over one’s life
- closenessandseveralgoodrelationships
- Competenceandmastery.

The youth development model is based on identifying and fostering the assets that young people need to respond effectively to developmental challenges. It emphasizes the relationship between the person and the environment and the role that the community plays in creating contexts and settings that suit young people’s developmental needs [34].

Building on young people’s strengths, rather than emphasizing their problems and deficiencies is also a key element of the youth development approach. When provided with suitable opportunities and support, youth can overcome risk factors and gain the competencies they need to meet the increasing challenges they will face as they mature [35]. Supportive relationships with both peers and adults play a crucial role in that direction. Stable emotional relationships offer social support which makes the individual feel

connected to others and also promote prosocial development (e.g. encourage appropriate and respectful behavior).

Youth development programs include activities to promote healthy development to thrive positive adolescents' growth. This growth includes internal factors such as self-esteem and competence and external supports such as family and peer support. In the process of positive youth development, individuals have an active role in the selection, design, implementation and evaluation of activities in which they participate [36]. The basic principle of all activities is that the more assets children acquire in their lives the more likely it is that they will avoid negative behaviors. The findings of research that has put forth a way of looking at the entire social and psychological environment of children in terms of the presence or absence of series of assets has shown that the more assets children or teenagers have, the less likely they are to be plagued with problems of violence, substance abuse and problem alcohol use [8, 37]. Moreover, for academic success, valuing diversity, maintaining good health and delaying gratification, the picture is a mirror image of the problem behaviors: the more assets children have, the more positive they are. Schools, therefore, should encourage positive youth development programs.

The inclusion of younger adolescents in youth development programs is strongly encouraged but rarely occurs. Involving high-risk youth in asset-focused programs and activities during childhood may prevent problem behaviors [38]. Once children have developed chronic problem behaviors, efforts to modify their behavior only modestly reduce the likelihood of future offending. For example, a meta-analysis of commonly used intensive interventions for adolescents with serious offenses results in a modest 12% reduction in offending [39]. This finding illustrates the importance of an early intervention, before youth persist down a road toward serious violent offending. Because few children under the age of 10 are involved with the juvenile justice system, the onus typically falls on mental health providers and school counselors to support and coordinate preventive or early intervention programs for younger children.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Because school violence reflects the violence in our communities and neighborhoods, schools are more effective in confronting school violence when the community around them provides support [40]. Many communities have been able to reduce school violence by developing comprehensive, integrated plans involving schools, social services, mental health providers and law enforcement and juvenile justice authorities [41]. An effective school violence prevention plan must include three tiers:

a) Schools must build a caring environment that supports goal setting and high expectations for both students and staff. This involves the development of a clear and comprehensive discipline plan, curricular intervention programs for preventing violence based on students' strengths and developmental needs, and emphasis on academic success supported by appropriate pedagogical techniques.
b) Schools should identify and try to eliminate risk factors and promote the development of protective factors that can contribute to positive youth growth. Addressing both risk and protective factors will enable schools to have more positive outcomes. At risk students should be early detected and systematically follow interventions aiming at enhancing schooling and socialization outcomes.
c) Schools should establish collaborations with all the services needed to meet the developmental needs of children and adolescents with antisocial behavior and emotional and academic difficulties.

Programs designed to address individual and group youth development and well-being in addition to conditions that impact them (e.g., poverty, education, substance use, delinquency, etc.) should not solely focus on risk reduction. Youth needs skills to experience success, and need the opportunities to establish resilience both to counter the risk factors and to be able to become productive, healthy adults. These needs involve more than risk reduction and require the recognition of building strengths and competencies along with healthier and safer environments in which youth may grow.

6. CONCLUSION

As the rate of school violence remains unacceptably high, the examination of intervention initiatives must remain a research priority. Positive youth development provide an evidence-based alternative in curbing school

violence by strengthening social competencies that reduce related youth risk behaviors.

Although many of the causes of violence are external to schools, schools can either exacerbate or buffer risk factors [42]. Schools can reduce risk factors and support resilience by connecting children with caring adults, teaching them social/emotional skills, providing positive behavioral supports, providing them with appropriate instruction, as well as by early and intensive interventions. Many of the same interventions that prevent violence are likely to help children experience joy, have high self-esteem, develop prosocial skills, and acquire a sense of efficacy and hope.

Schools need to recognize, engage, and sustain existing and potential resources in their own school environment and surrounding communities, in developing adolescents' competence, confidence, connections, characters, empathy, and contribution to society. In order to succeed, there is a need for a real and professional support of the School Board and all professionals who work at the school for the construction and maintenance of a positive and healthy school climate as a way to minimize and prevent school violence. The key in making successful positive youth development in schools is to view efforts and outcomes through a system-wide approach and to enter into strategic partnerships with important stakeholders in the community that share a common vision of promoting both psychological and societal well-being.

Future research should focus on discovering effective violence prevention strategies to create safer environments for youth in high-risk communities and developing comprehensive, multi-component preventive interventions that target not only cases of school violence, but also developmentally, ecologically, culturally and contextually appropriate factors within a community environment.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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