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Introduction

THE PROBLEM OF SCHOOL SAFETY

Schools and classrooms across the country are relatively safe. Children are more likely to be involved in a violent crime at home and in their neighborhoods than in school. However, every day, students are confronted with fists, with knives, and with guns in the schoolyard and in classrooms and school hallways. According to the National Crime Survey (U.S. Department of Justice 1997), nearly 3 million violent crimes occur on or near school campuses every year. Although these statistics have changed little since 1980, student conflict has increasingly turned toward more fatal and destructive methods of resolution.

These deadly occurrences are becoming more prevalent in schools in suburban and rural communities, crossing traditional socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic boundaries. For instance, in the 1998–1999 school year, school communities in Colorado and Arkansas experienced fatal school shootings. In 1999, police in a small Kansas city discovered and successfully intervened in a plot to kill six faculty members of a local school. In a small, affluent community in Michigan, more than 150 parents volunteered to monitor a school campus during school hours after a racially motivated bomb threat. These are merely a representative sample of incidents occurring in schools across America.

Students need to perceive that their school is "safe;" in other words, the school is free environmentally and socially of any potential harm and danger. Clearly, learning cannot occur when safety issues distract students. Students often report fear of walking in certain areas of the school building, of using the restroom alone, even of the threat of violence on the school buses that take them to and from school. Hence, school leaders are becoming increasingly responsible for a new "primary" responsibility of creating safer schools for students concurrent to a "secondary" mission of developing and helping students realize cognitive goals.

The goals of creating safer schools and improving students' cognitive skills can be linked through the concept of conflict. Rather than view conflict in negative terms as a result of the increase in violence in schools, school leaders should identify conflict as an opportunity for social and

cognitive growth. Teaching constructive methods of conflict resolution provides school leaders with a student-driven mechanism for creating safer schools while improving students' problem-solving abilities. This student-driven, proactive approach to school safety is a critical component in creating quality learning environments while improving students' cognitive capabilities. Research indicates that children with more sophisticated problem-solving abilities demonstrate greater academic competence and greater ability to recover from such at-risk variables as low self-worth and poor peer relations (Johnson and Johnson 1993). Students involved in conflict resolution programming excel in cooperative learning, demonstrating greater perspective-taking skills and greater sensitivity toward student differences. In addition, teachers report fewer discipline problems with students exposed to constructive conflict resolution education.

THE ROLE OF CONFLICT

The conflict students encounter may be intrapersonal (internal), interpersonal (between two persons), or intergroup (among many). Cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget discusses the importance of intrapersonal cognitive conflict that occurs during the accommodation of new information with knowledge one has already learned (1932). The successful resolution of intrapersonal conflict results, according to Piaget, in an individual's greater understanding of a topic and sophistication of knowledge on a topic.

For instance, let's say that Student 1 consistently experiences unpleasant interactions with Student 2, particularly on the school playground as Student 2 often demands that Student 1 give up his ball, swing, or place in line. One day, Student 2 is playing with a ball and asks Student 1 to play together with the ball. Most likely Student 1 experiences an intrapersonal conflict, accustomed as he is to unpleasant interactions with Student 2. Student 1 must resolve this internal conflict resulting from the existence of both pleasant and unpleasant interactions Student 2 offers. Understanding that pleasant interactions are possible now with Student 2 may motivate Student 1 to think more closely about how and when these pleasant versus unpleasant interactions occur, and, in turn, increase Student 1's knowledge and understanding of peer relations with Student 2. These types of intrapersonal conflicts occur every day in the home and at school and often are resolved with individuals gaining greater insight into and understanding of how others behave and think during conflict situations.

Interpersonal conflict also appears as a critical social development tool as described by psychologists such as Vygotsky (1987) who believe that the constructive resolution of social conflict results in more sophisticated collaborative interactions among individuals. For example, during a cooperative learning exercise in math class, a student angrily accuses another of always dominating the activity. The accusation results in interpersonal con-

CHAPTER 1

Creating School Safety Teams

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL VIOLENCE

In general, little agreement occurs in the literature as to the correlates of school violence. Research from criminal justice experts often points to changes in the juvenile justice system and accessibility to weapons as reasons for school violence, while mental health professionals point to the dissolution of the family, increases in family violence, and the growing trend toward risk-taking behaviors among youths as factors. According to Resnick et al. (1997), adolescents living in homes with easy access to guns are more likely to be involved in violent behaviors toward others. Zuckerman et al. (1995) cite that children exposed to violence in the home may demonstrate long-term behavior effects including aggressive behaviors toward the self and others.

The factors most often cited as possible correlates (across disciplines) include (1) family factors such as poor parenting skills as demonstrated by inadequate parental monitoring, inappropriate discipline techniques, or parental modeling of aggressive behavior; (2) lack of individual social and coping skills and personality characteristics that would preclude propensity for violence; and (3) societal impact, both school society, which includes peer relations and pressure, stress surrounding need to succeed in school in the traditional capitalist–middle socioeconomic status climate, and poor school security measures, and the larger U.S. society, which includes exposure to violence in media and entertainment, an increase in accessibility and use of guns, an increase in crime in general, and a decline in the moral character of the nation.

"We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise
And then, if we are true to plan
Our statures touch the skies."
—EMILY DICKINSON

In response to larger societal issues, educational institutions now serve a different socialization role for children. Increasingly, educators perceive student deficits resulting from changes in the family and society and react by nurturing the social and physical development of students of all ages rather than merely the cognitive aspects of the student. In striving to meet the needs of the "whole child" to better prepare a student academically, schools have had to increase their accountability to the three "Rs" plus! Now schools are seen as accountable for cognitive, social, and physical competence and are caught in the crossfire of controversy if students demonstrate a lack of skill or knowledge in any area of child development.

Most people agree there isn't one single solution to school violence. Indeed, solutions might not be effective across students, schools, states, or the nation. Because changing the larger society or influencing family factors is perceived as more difficult and less immediate, a multilayer preventive education approach involving the school is currently the most realistic option for the problem of school violence (see Figure 1.1).

Clearly, the topic of school safety extends beyond the walls of educational institutions. Just as the underlying cause of school violence is not solely factors within a school, neither are the solutions for school safety the sole responsibility of school leaders. Instead, comprehensive school safety programs must include partnerships with the community. Representatives

Youth Violence as a Multilayer Problem

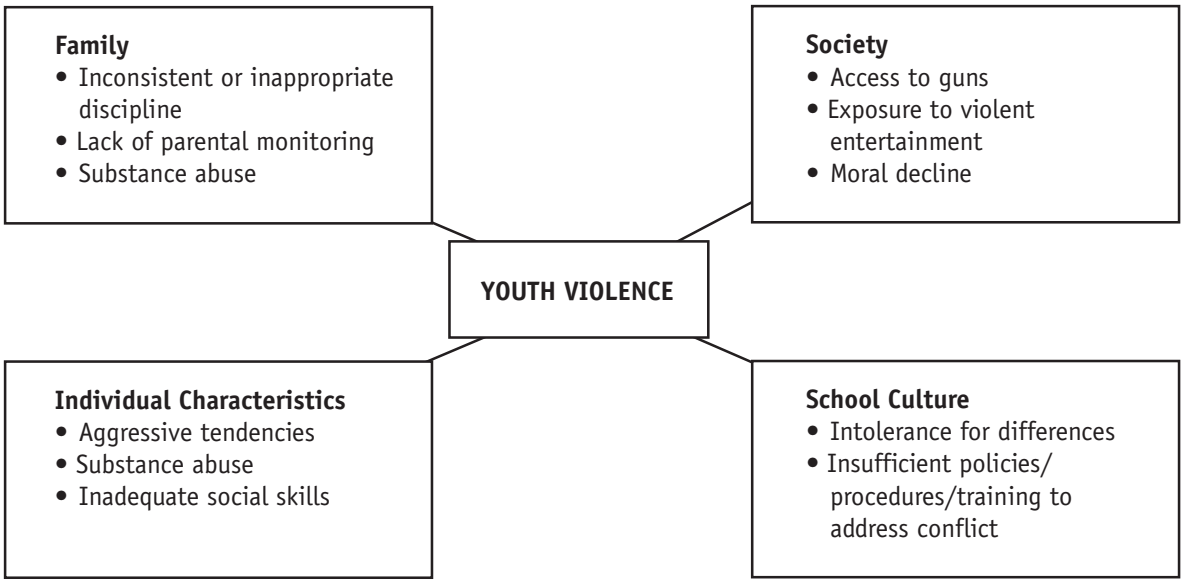

Figure 1.1