Violence in British Columbia Schools: New Research from Simon Fraser University and the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation

Directions and Dilemmas

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by Charlie Naylor
BCTF Research
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INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews the findings of a new report on violence against teachers in British Columbia in the context of other Canadian reports on school violence, and discusses possible directions for action. The report, “Violence Against British Columbia Teachers: Report of the Simon Fraser University/British Columbia Teachers’ Federation Violence Against Teachers Survey” was written by Simon Fraser University (SFU) researchers David Lyon and Kevin Douglas and published on the B.C. Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) web site (http://www.bctf.bc.ca), in the “Health and Safety” part of the “Educational and Professional Issues” section, at http://www.bctf.bc.ca/education/health/ViolenceAgainstTeachers/.

The issue of school violence has a high profile, though it could be argued that health issues (e.g., smoking, air quality), or other safety issues (e.g., motor vehicle accidents, the leading cause of death for people aged 1-19), are more significant than violence in terms of cost and consequences.

However, school violence occurs and should be addressed. In order to develop appropriate strategies it is important to consider context and to access valid and reliable data on school violence. This paper includes:

1. The Canadian focus on violence in schools.
3. Discussion:
   a. Combining WCB requirements with “safe school” approaches.
   b. Dilemmas in addressing school violence.
4. Conclusion.
1. The Canadian Focus on Violence in Schools

The following reports of the early to mid-‘90s reflect perceptions from British Columbia sources that violence in schools was increasing.

- The 1993 BCTF “Qualitative Research Study on Violence in B.C. Schools” conducted six focus groups, in which the majority of teachers reported “a definite increase in the incidence of violence and in the gravity of violence.”

- The 1994 BCTF “Task Force on Violence in Schools” reported trends of more aggressive behaviour in younger children, more severe violence, and increased verbal threats against teachers or their families.

- A survey of B.C. teachers in 1993 (“Teaching in the ’90s”) found that teachers saw violence in schools as a moderately serious issue, with racism, sexism, and alcohol/substance abuse being significant issues in secondary schools.

- The final report of the Vancouver (1993) Safer City Task Force found increased use of alcohol, from 50% of Grade 8 students to over 80% of Grade 12 students, implying such consumption may influence safety in schools.

It should be noted that the above reports examined the issue of violence in general, rather than violence which was directed at teachers. The issue of teacher safety has been addressed in the following Canadian studies:

- A 1993 survey of Manitoba teachers reported that 47% had been subjected to physical/emotional abuse, an increase from 39% in a 1990 survey.

- A 1994 Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation study found that 40% of respondents reported increased levels of abuse when compared to responses from a survey of a year earlier.

- A 1994 Ontario “Safe Schools Task Force Report” found that 95% of respondents (teachers, principals, caretakers) felt safe in school, but only 67.8% felt as safe as they did five years previously.

- A 1992 survey conducted for the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association revealed that teachers believed there were substantial increases in verbal abuse of teachers over recent years, with lower rates of increase in physical assaults.

- A 1994 federal Solicitor-General’s Department report found that Vancouver was one of four locations which reported the highest incidence of weapon prevalence in Canadian schools.
• A 1995 Solicitor-General (Canada) report reviewed policies from 116 school boards across Canada and recommended six new approaches to school violence, including consistency of approach within districts and a recognition of causes external to schools.

• A 1997 BCTF survey of teachers working in portable classrooms identified wide-ranging safety concerns, particularly among women teachers.

Recent reports have indicated that there may be some leveling off, or declining levels, of violence in B.C. schools.

The (1999) McCreary Centre Society report, “Healthy Connections: Listening to B.C. Youth,” based on a survey of 26,000 B.C. school students, found that “there is no evidence that the lives of B.C. youth are becoming more violent” when compared to data collected in 1992. While the latest SFU/BCTF report (1999) is a benchmark study, some survey questions were based on earlier B.C. or other provincial surveys. Based on data from these questions, there were no consistent patterns of change in B.C. teachers’ responses concerning perceptions of violence from 1992 to 1998, with no evidence of perceptions that there was increased violence during this period. In comparison to data from other provinces (Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Manitoba), the rates of violence reported for B.C. also appear comparatively favourable, with B.C. having the lowest reported rates in areas of property damage, threats, and actual physical harm to teachers.

The issue of school violence is widely covered in the media. One problem with exposing research about violence to the media is the fear among educators that parents who read the media version of the research will believe that schools are unsafe places, rather than accept that unions and districts are making a serious effort to prevent violence in schools. This type of coverage might discourage engagement in and publication of research if it will become sensationalized and create a sense that schools are dangerous places. The media treatment of school violence issues was criticized by Dolmage (1999), who stated:

“the ‘legitimate’ commercial media have regularly distorted facts relating to criminal activity in general, youth crime in particular, and, even more particularly, youth crime as it relates to the safety of children in public schools.... These distortions may be represented conceptually on a continuum which ranges in severity from layout manipulation and deliberately misleading headlines, to a bias in favour of reporting and emphasizing only the most damning statistics, to deliberate misrepresentation of the facts, to a systemic focusing on stories of the most violent and sensational nature.”

Obtaining a clear picture of the issue of violence in schools depends on periodically collecting valid and reliable data, rather than relying on media reports.

The SFU/BCTF research reported here offers reliable, valid, and useful data, and provides a benchmark study for the collection of data in the future so that comparisons may be made over time.
2. Violence Against British Columbia Teachers: Report of the Simon Fraser University/British Columbia Teachers’ Federation Violence Against Teachers Survey

The scope of the study
The study, Violence Against B.C. Teachers, published by BCTF Research in October, 1999, is perhaps the most comprehensive report on this issue produced in Canada to date.

A geographically-stratified random sample of teachers provided information on their experiences of violence in the last academic year (1997–98) and during their careers. All data were collected before the tragic incidents at schools in Colorado and Alberta.

While the findings from this study do not provide insights on student-to-student violence, they do allow for a consideration of the nature and context of some of the violence which occurs in schools. By considering the findings of this report in the context of other available data on violence, we generate some tentative conclusions in this paper about the general nature, prevalence, and consequences of violence in schools.

This paper considers eight areas where findings from the report allow such conclusions to be made:

- The definition and nature of violence
- The prevalence of violence
- The perpetrators of violence
- Situational characteristics
- Sexual harassment
- Impact on victims and on the education system
- Static and dynamic risk factors
- Strategies for prevention

The definition and nature of violence
Violence was defined in the SFU/BCTF survey instrument as “any threatened, attempted, or actual harm to a person or persons.” Such a definition, encompassing a continuum of actions considered violent, appears consistent with other definitions found in the literature, including the Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) definition, which defines violence in the workplace as:

“the attempted or actual exercise by a person, other than a worker, of any physical force so as to cause injury to a worker, and includes any threatening statement or behaviour which gives a worker reasonable cause to believe that the worker is at risk.”¹

The key finding from the report concerning the nature of violence was that violence against teachers appears to be predominantly reactive rather than instrumental. In other words, the perpetrators of violence usually react to an incident on the spur of the moment rather than planning violent acts and entering schools with the intention of carrying them out.

**The prevalence of violence**

The survey instrument listed 13 types of violence, on a continuum of seriousness from name-calling to physical attack with a weapon. Respondents were asked to report whether or not they had been subjected to each type of violence, and how frequently. 50% of respondents experienced some form of violence in the 1997–98 school year, and 81% reported having experienced some form of violence during their careers\(^2\). Prevalence and violence were inversely related: the less serious the violence, the more common its occurrence. While 43% of respondents reported covert violence (insidious, non-physical behaviour intended to harm) during the 1997–98 school year, fewer than 5% of respondents reported being the victim of actual physical violence during the same period.

**The perpetrators of violence**

96% of incidents of violence involved a single perpetrator, most of whom were males. 75% of perpetrators were students. While the age of perpetrators ranged from 5 to 60, the peak level of violence from students involved 15-year-old males. Compared to other perpetrators, students who committed acts of violence were more likely to be male (87%), and tended to have a known history of behavioural problems (73%) and past physical/verbal aggression (56%). While the number of students who committed overt violence was small, students were more likely to use a weapon than other perpetrators.

The second largest group of perpetrators, though much smaller (16%), was made up of parents or guardians of students. 66% of this category were female, and few had a known history of past aggression. The violence was predominantly covert, with parents/guardians who committed violence far less likely than student perpetrators to be overtly violent or to use weapons.

The third and smallest group of perpetrators (6%) was composed of other educators, mostly teachers (5%). There were no incidents of overt violence, but insults, comments intended to damage reputation, and intimidation were reported, as were incidents considered to be sexual harassment (see below).

**Situational characteristics**

93% of violent incidents occurred in school, and most (60%) occurred during regular classroom activities or when the teacher was managing classroom behaviour. 4% of the total violence took place in portable classrooms, and 8% of incidents occurred during a parent/guardian interview. Poor lighting conditions, uncontrolled building access, and isolated working conditions (e.g., portable classrooms) were associated with higher risks of violence.

**Sexual harassment**

12% of respondents reported they had been subjected to sexual harassment. 93% of perpetrators were male and most victims were female. 40% of perpetrators were reported to be school-based.

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\(^2\) These findings were reported in *The Province* under the headline “80% of teachers attacked,” thereby lending support to Dolmage’s perspective.
administrators, 35% teachers, and 18% students. 61% of incidents involved crude or suggestive remarks, with staring/leering/ogling (37%) and unwanted touching (35%) also mentioned.

These numbers appear consistent with the wider literature on sexual harassment research, as identified in the SFU report.

**Impact on victims and on the education system**
There exists compelling evidence that the impact of violence on teachers is both more complex and more severe than might be expected. 63% of respondents indicated career impacts, notably decreased job satisfaction. 61% reported physical symptoms, and 84% indicated emotional symptoms after experiencing incidences of violence.

There are indications that teachers are more likely to miss work after covert violence from a colleague than from an attack by a student, and that stress is a major factor in absences rather than physical injury.

Even though the number of days missed appears small in percentage terms, the totals, when extrapolated to BCTF membership as a whole, indicate that costs of violence-related absence probably amount to between $2 million and $5 million per year across the province. Many such absences appear to be taken as sick days, with little reporting of the violence-related and stress-inducing reasons for absence that respondents described in their responses to this survey. Such data provide a strong financial inducement for districts to reduce violence in schools.

**Static and dynamic risk factors**
The report indicates a number of factors associated with both increased and decreased risks of violence. Some of these were static, and could not be changed, while others were dynamic. In general, working in certain geographic areas, being male, working in a lower SES (socio-economic status) catchment area, being a teacher-on-call, teaching middle-grade students, and working in inner-city or rural locations, were associated with higher risks of violence.

Of particular interest in the areas of dynamic factors are policies which directly address and deal with violence. The authors conclude that where such policies exist, the incidence of violence is reduced.

One finding from this study which appears to contradict the general research is an increased risk associated with both small schools and rural locations. As yet there are no explanations for this, but continual contact between perpetrator and victim, both within the school and in the community, could be a factor.

**Strategies for prevention**
The report suggests that focusing on prevention by conducting risk assessments, and by developing policies which are actively followed, appear to be effective strategies. But the report also indicates that by addressing facility issues such as lighting, uncontrolled access, and isolation, incidences of violence can also be reduced. By providing access to data about the nature of violence, perpetrators, and the situations in which violence takes place, the report paves the way for a variety of strategies to be developed. These range from the legal and the regulatory to professional development and behaviour management.
3. Discussion

a. Combining WCB requirements with “safe school” approaches

The findings from the SFU/BCTF study provide data which may encourage educators, managers, and regulators to consider specific approaches to reducing violence in schools. Such approaches could be based in part on the new WCB regulations, which provide structures for addressing violence, with a focus on workplace health and safety committees. The regulations also provide processes such as the requirement that risk assessments be carried out in schools. But such structures and processes have to date been utilized in more industrial settings, are generally unfamiliar to educators, and are somewhat alien to the culture of schools. How they will be utilized in schools is yet to be seen, as the WCB, school district management, and employee unions plan for the implementation of these new legal requirements.

While complying with WCB requirements, districts also need to maintain the range of policy and program development which is familiar to school staffs. These include a focus on areas such as the eight key components for developing a safe school identified in the Safe School Planning Guide (B.C. Safe Schools Centre, 1999):

- Climate of respect
- Violence prevention policies and procedures
- Curriculum and school-based programs
- Training and professional development
- Support for students and staff
- Safe physical environment
- Community involvement
- Effective communication.

Approaching the issue of reducing violence in schools may best be done using a variety of methods, processes, and structures. There is a wide literature on such approaches, but little consideration to date of some of the dilemmas inherent in addressing violence in schools. A number of these dilemmas are considered below.

b. Dilemmas in addressing school violence

1. Time constraints pervade school systems.

In spite of Bill 14’s requirement that eight hours per year be provided for workplace health and safety committee members, some employers appear to indicate that such time be utilized after school. The BCTF believes that such time should be provided during instructional hours. Similarly, section 134 of the Act states that committee members be entitled to “time off from work.” If participating in committees to address safety issues becomes an additional job on top of full-time teaching, the chances of teacher participation are reduced.
2. Many employers currently ignore WCB regulations related to risk assessments in schools.
Data from this and other studies show a startling lack of compliance with WCB regulations related to risk assessments, and few consequences for employers who fail to comply. The whole nature of a regulatory approach to safety in schools requires far more than a drafting of policies. Greater levels of monitoring to enforce compliance are required, but few are visible at this time.

3. Legal and governmental initiatives may not impact on school sites.
If current WCB regulations are ignored, and if many school staffs are unaware of safe school initiatives, one can argue that legal and regulatory frameworks have limited impact on the places where violence occurs. Just as the argument is made to combine professional and industrial models, so might one consider how to increase the impact of statutes and regulations on school sites, either through improved communication or targeted enforcement. This is a different concept to the issue of employer compliance, focusing on involving those at school sites to actively participate in safety issues.

4. Blending “professional” and “industrial” approaches to health and safety often appears problematic in schools.
The professional model provides in-service of a kind familiar to teachers, where workshops may promote anti-bullying or consider approaches to managing problematic behaviour. An industrial model focuses on regulations and demands compliance. Both have considerable utility, but there is little communication and arguably minimal respect between proponents of the two models. The professional model may appear esoteric and the industrial model blunt, depending on your point of view. Essentially, the argument should not be whether “professional” or “industrial” is best, but how to use both. Finding effective ways to combine these models could have a significant impact on improving safety in schools.

5. A level of mutual distrust exists between employers and unions on the issue of safety in schools.
Mistrust is not universal, but hardly uncommon. If safety in schools is ever to be successfully addressed, there needs to be a reduction in the levels of mistrust between unions and management, and more genuinely collaborative approaches to reducing violence. Finding districts where positive and collaborative projects exist, and sharing their strategies and skills, could be one way to address this issue.

6. Violence is a societal issue, but schools are expected to deal with it.
Schools cannot successfully address every issue which has its roots in the wider society. Violence does not occur only in schools, and so the ability of school staffs to successfully contain violence must be matched by other efforts outside of schools.

7. Serious attempts to address the issue of school violence are undermined by the media.
We should not over-react to media misrepresentation, or assume such misrepresentation is universal. This dilemma can be addressed by initiating discussion about media misrepresentation such as that found in *The Province* newspaper (mentioned above), and by putting pressure on media to report responsibly, stressing ethical concerns that currently appear to be absent from some editorial thinking.
4. Conclusion

The new B.C. research provides much useful data, and also poses troubling questions. Why do 15-year-old males appear to be more violent than other young people? Why are male teachers more likely to be victims of violence? How can we reduce harassment by administrators and teachers? Are smaller rural schools more dangerous places than was thought? We need to pursue some of these areas with follow-up research. Repeating this study at five-year intervals might also be useful for providing comparative longitudinal data.

We also need to act on the data we have, to devise and develop solutions in a more collaborative way than has been the case to date, combining regulatory and legislative frameworks with district-wide and school-based approaches which create positive climates, while enforcing fair and consistent policies. We also need to reflect, as a profession of teachers, on why patterns of harassment exist and how we can reduce them, so that the demands are not merely placed on others but also on ourselves to correct patterns of aggression and violence against peers.

Charlie Naylor
BCTF Research
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