

The Impact of Violence on Learning for Youth: What Can We Do?

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To read further materials from this research study, give feedback, or access information on violence and learning more broadly, go to:
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Introduction

How do experiences of violence affect learning? How can educators support those who have been through violence to learn successfully? After many years looking at these questions as they apply to women in adult literacy programs¹, in 2002 I began research to focus on youth². I wanted to deepen my understanding of the complex picture of how violence affects learning, and to examine how school responses played a part in creating this picture. Most importantly I wanted to look for ways to strengthen the possibilities of supporting learning for youth in high schools and in youth literacy and training programs. With the help of several colleagues³ I interviewed youth in the high school system, those who had left school, and teachers and other professionals in the school system individually and in groups. You can read the full story in *The Challenge to Create Safer Learning Environments for Youth* posted at www.jennyhorsman.com.

Here the focus is on the words of the interviewees, particularly the youth—both in school and out of school—and what they tell educators and others working in educational programs about what we can do to support learning.

¹For information on these studies check: www.jennyhorsman.com or *Too Scared to Learn* (Horsman, 1999/2000).

²The research was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and sponsored by Parkdale Project Read, Toronto.

³Nicole Ysabet, Nadine Sookermany and Jo Petite carried out individual interviews and led one focus group. I interviewed the remainder and led discussions in many classrooms. Interviews and focus groups were carried out in Toronto high schools, a training program for youth, an after-school leadership program and a community college program. I was not aiming to study particular schools or organizations, but rather to understand possibilities for supporting learning through interviewing in a limited number of sites in Toronto.

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Create a safer environment

Violence at home: ask what's wrong

During my research, students who had experienced violence repeatedly said that even though bruises, absences, and misbehaviour must have told observers that something was wrong, they were rarely asked directly. Even those who said they would not have answered also said that asking was essential to show someone cared. One student was adamant that this question was the most important thing that could have been done to support her learning:

I think that people in the schools, if you see a kid in that kind of situation... like the way I was, missing school and that stuff—if the child doesn't answer you, then you should at least ask them "Do you need food? Do you need any bus tickets?" Start off like that. That could make them tell you something, I'm telling you... When I was going through my grade school, I just had them buy me stuff... clothes and stuff, but no one specifically asked me "Natalie, what's wrong at your house?" Which they should have... Of course I would have said something, because I would have believed that they wanted to help me. That's what teachers need to do, I'm telling you. You have to sit down, and—even if they don't say nothing. You could ask them specifically, straight up, "okay do you have a problem at home?" If they say no, you ask them why are they missing school. If they still say nothing, then ask them what they need... I think counsellors should ask these kids, because I'm telling you, it's important. Believe me, they'll learn more, they'll do something, if somebody else will pay attention. If somebody else pays attention to them, they'll learn better.

Like, if somebody had paid attention to me, in school... I don't think that teachers should just think "Okay, their parents are supposed to do that for them." You can't be so ignorant, sometimes at home that's what they're getting, ignorance. So they're thinking at least if they go to school, if somebody's more open with them and more helpful towards them, trust me, it's a lot better for that person to do something with their life.

This is my first time, okay? Actually getting help with my learning. Not just in this program, but people now, I didn't have the help back then. That's wrong, as an adult now, I should have got it a long time [ago], because I didn't have that stable thing. They didn't ask me questions. That's why I didn't end up telling them anything. Sometimes kids don't even know how to approach them...

*You're supposed to focus on not just one student in the class who's doing something, who's getting their work done. You guys have to focus on the ones who are not doing what they're supposed to.
(Natalie Jones)⁴*

Teachers and other professionals based in the school attempt to negotiate conflicting demands. In spite of students' judgement that most don't care, teachers and others talked about how hard it is to feel unable to do enough to help, and to feel that they are criticized from all sides:

*It's really hard for teachers, because you're the kid's lifeline. You are. And even when you're talking about truancy, even that. Again, a communication breakdown. You call the parents, and a lot of parents have this attitude like "You spend more time with my kids than I do... you don't know them at all, you should know them more," or "Why is this happening, how could you have let this happen?" And on their behalf, they're stressed out. They're probably both working, they're probably getting home... lots of the kids are latchkey kids, you know, and they're not spending nearly enough time as a family unit. And so the teacher becomes this intimate lifeline for a lot of kids. And kids just naturally do that, are looking... you spend all this time with them so they're looking to bond with you. But we're not allowed. And at the same time we have all of these legal responsibilities. And at the same time, you're a human being who cares. And we define your future, and we're supposed to teach you kind of superficial knowledge, and we're human beings so we care and go home feeling like crap about it all the time. And we get paid like crap. And you get no gratitude, because—you listen to the radio, like today when I was driving the car, and the PC party is like "There's teachers who want to go on strike. Maybe we should remind them that the students are the most important people." ...And there's this huge issue, and all you want to do is do something, and you can't. You're one person.
(Art teachers)*

Reporting policies intended to create safety may instead exacerbate silences. When young people fear they will lose control if they disclose their experience,

⁴ Most students said they were proud that they could help address this issue and wanted to be named. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate some of these students at the completion of the project. When I was unable to reach students to secure their approval for the quotes I wanted to include, and to review how I was using their words in the paper, I used pseudonyms instead of attributing the quote. I have also used pseudonyms when students requested anonymity.

many will “choose” not to tell. But with this choice they lose connection and have little opportunity to think through the meaning of their experience, see how it is affecting their learning, and assess their options. When teachers and other professionals “choose” not to open up talk about violence, not to ask students why they are arriving late, skipping school, or misbehaving—fearing disclosures and the consequences of asking—they, too, preserve the silences. Students, teachers, and others all need opportunities to explore meanings further.

While the current reporting system remains in place, one possible way to break the silence may be for schools to seek to create more “spaces” which support students’ critical reflection about their lives and the opportunity to consider the level of violence they experience, and provide information about the variety of resources they might be able to access. Students suggested that schools should explore creating more assemblies. In this forum the issues of violence could be introduced and different resource people such as Children’s Aid workers, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists could speak about how they address issues of violence, its legacy for the self and its impact on learning. Posters advertising resources such as the Kids’ Help Line would help students to know how to contact places where they can speak confidentially about their experience. Where counselling and information on resources is widely and easily available there are more possibilities for students to access needed resources even if they feel unable to break silence about their own experience. Teachers who are concerned about students will be more able to ask them directly whether anything is wrong if they know that students who disclose understand that teachers must make a report to Children’s Aid. Teachers are then able to give a clear message that they care and are concerned about students’ wellbeing, rather than seeming to be simply judging their misdemeanours.

Violence at school: move from confrontation to collaboration

Many of the students who are the perpetrators of violence in school will be those who are experiencing violence at home. Students who have been violent are only too aware of the way violence can quickly become part of their identity, and explained how hard it is to be seen or even to see themselves in a different light:

Don’t think about the person who committed the violence as a perpetrator, think of them as a person. Because what I’ve seen in schools is that when you did something really bad, you get punished for it, and that cloud hangs over your head. It’s like a shroud of shame that you have to walk with. So a lot of the kids end up going with a life of walking on that road for the rest of their lives... They don’t take time to look at them as a person and wonder—why did you do this? (Zane Holder)

Several students explained that violence can be a way of seeking control in some area of their lives:

We don't get control over anything in school except... whether or not we go. So technically, we don't get any control in school. When you've got no control at school, you've got no control at home, you're basically—you know what I mean? [You] feel like, what the hell, why not get some control. [Hitting other students] was a way that people listened to me. In a way, that would be control. But in return, I ended up growing up with no friends. (Andrew)

This student went on to explain that even though he got only negative attention from the bullying he engaged in, it still fed his need for attention.

*There wasn't anyone at home paying attention. Either way you look at it, I was looking for attention and I got what I wanted... It might not have been the attention that I wanted to get, but it's still attention. I wasn't really looking for a certain type of attention, I was looking for **someone** to pay attention to me. And when you're in the principal's office... you get more attention.*

Staff in an after school leadership program which works with both perpetrators and victims of violence described the value of asking why a student is misbehaving, rather than only instituting punishments:

One of the kids was acting out in one of the programs, you know, sort of swearing, being a bit aggressive, and I pulled that kid out and just said "I've noticed that you're acting this way today, is there something that's going on with you?" ...without judgment, just you know, I've noticed you've been a bit more direct today, a little more outspoken, something like that with, again, no judgment, and trying to get behind that... my initial feeling around it was like, excuse my French, but "Why is he acting like such a — —?" You know, like it's really hard for the lesson to go on, and he's really disruptive. I was feeling kind of angry, because as a staff member you feel responsible for the kids really taking in the lesson... So instead I pulled him aside at break, and I was just like "You know, what's up with you today?" and as it turned out, there was stuff going on. So it's a much more empathic way to communicate. (LOVE staff)

Ken Klonsky, an experienced teacher, also gave a vivid description of how to move from confrontation to collaboration:

One of the most important things was not to be oppositional. So even when you told them something or you made a request, you don't do it in front of them, you do it alongside them. Because the problem is not the kid or you, the problem should be the work or the situation. So if you go alongside them, you kind of point and say "Well, look. Here's

the problem we're having. You're not learning this and neither is anybody else, so how can we—how can we together solve this problem?" (Ken Klonsky)

In his final years teaching, Ken was no longer able to work with small groups of students. Instead he was back in the general classroom, clear that the government had made a choice not to expend the resources necessary to support the students he used to work with. Without the resources to explore what is going on, build strong connections with students who will not easily trust, and ask what is leading to student violence, students are suspended or expelled:

There was a time where I thought schools were making some headway with these kids, and then all the supports were taken away. So now, at this stage, they simply have decided to go back to getting rid of the kids. They're not in the building any more.

It was hard, but [in the program we ran] I thought that we really got the hang of it after a while. We decided that we were going to leave the control in the hands of kids, we weren't going to use the holding method—we just looked at each other one day and said "No more of this." And when the kids understood that, they knew they had to control themselves. I think that was a real turning point in our dealings with them, because they were relying on us for physical control, and that's not a healthy situation, for you or them. Because we were getting hurt, on occasion... we just decided if they want to wreck the room, go ahead, as long as they don't hurt somebody. There are very few people who can't apply the control to themselves in that situation... But then you're talking about a system with the luxury of having those types of classes. Where you had two people, and very small numbers, and it was very expensive. So I believe that when they looked at the expense of it, and they looked at the cutbacks, they just decided "who are the first kids we're going to sacrifice?"

If there's a student that's being violent to other students, I totally agree, you have to remove that person from the school until such time that they understand they can't do that type of thing. I don't believe in total expulsion. I think that's a horrible rejection, and that's going to come back and hurt society sometime later. You can't just do that to a young person.

At the same time, they're suspending students for swearing and things of that nature, and that's completely unnecessary. That's not to say you shouldn't deal with it, it's just that it's not a reason to say to a kid "You can't come back to school anymore." I don't know, safe schools, what they really mean is "Making schools safe for kids who don't have problems." Any excuse—first of all, they know they don't have the money to deal with behavioural problems

that exist because it's an expensive proposition to do it properly... and so the policy, all it does it say we know you can't deal with these kids, so we're going to give you an out. (Ken Klonsky)

One student said that suspending and expelling students for misbehaviour felt like telling them they were bad—abandoning them. I wondered also whether moving these students out does make the school safer even for those who don't have problems.

Make it possible to create connections

If schools create more opportunities for connection, students may be able to talk about their problems rather than seeking attention through disruption and violence. As one student explained:

A lot of students would need to feel a little bit closer to a teacher, but didn't they just pass something that said "students can't email teachers, students can't do anything with teachers out of school" so I don't know how anybody's ever going to get close. You're not going to tell a stranger. You know, if you see them once a day or whatever, you're not going to tell a stranger about all your problems that you've been through. Now that they're making it even harder, I don't know what you would do...

The whole point is, you're not allowed to cross that line anymore... And I know a lot of people—even last year, I was moving out on my own, and one of my teachers, they were selling their cottage. They brought a whole bunch of things from their cottage, and they told another teacher, and they got me some things. And I was so happy, and she gave me her email address, she said "Just let me know how you're doing," 'cause she retired. And then it was really weird, I actually found it and I was about to email her just to let her know I was okay, and how I was doing, and then I heard that thing on the radio, and then I was like "That's really ridiculous." Because that teacher helped me. She never—it was never anything but helping a student. And she sat there and talked to me about what was going on, and she was a lot of help. And to say that—I would never have told any other teacher, but she knew something, and she'd been my teacher for a while. I think it's ridiculous to say that they're going to be that strict... A lot of teachers, if you can get closer with them they're just human beings like everybody else. (SOLE English class)

Many students spoke of the importance of being able to get to know a teacher enough to get a sense of who they were, to see if they were trustworthy, to see them as human. Teachers were clear that they were discouraged from having conversations alone with students in order to protect themselves from charges of harassment:

Shut 'em down if they do [begin to disclose to you].

After being criticised for being too informal when a student disclosed, this teacher felt she had to behave differently:

...I felt that I needed to be extra-aware of my behaviour, and was very formal with the kid, and it made me feel terrible. I just felt like I needed things like witnesses, if this kid was going to talk to me further... teachers aren't allowed to be intimate, human or warm with students any more on an individual level. You safeguard yourself. You never find yourself alone in a classroom with a student any more because it can be used against you.

In spite of the limitations and cautions, finding ways to create honest connections with students is a crucial support for learning.

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Create a learning environment

Recognize why attendance may be difficult

It was really hard for me, because I was staying in a shelter at the time, and there's a three month limit at each shelter. So I used up my three months at the one close to my school, so I had to go all the way up to North York and then I couldn't travel because they wouldn't give me the bus fare. So I missed like, a month, but then I finally got my place and when I came back it was, like, November, and I tried to say I was here all September, but most of October I couldn't come. If I could just finish November to January and do my exam—if I do good on my exam—but they wouldn't even give me the chance to do that because they said—

Interviewer: You already missed too much?

Yeah. So I lost four credits there. It's always been like that.

I was involved with CAS for a while, so I used to move around to different foster parents. When I'd go to a new school, I'd have two months left before the year was done and it was just like I couldn't catch up on all the work, because not every school is at the same position... [Later, in high school, there was violence at home.] It was hard because I'd want to do the work and stuff, I'd want to reach school on time or make certain classes, but because of my living situation I wouldn't get enough sleep. I'd be out on the street till all hours of the morning, I'd finally find somewhere I could go to sleep and then I wouldn't be able to wake up to go to school in the morning. For school you have to have clean clothes every day, you can't wear the same clothes you wore the night before, so if I had nowhere to go to change my clothes or get clothes, I couldn't go to school... if I went to school I wouldn't have anything to eat at school... Sometimes I would get the work in advance, or if I missed a lot, I would get the work from the teacher and I'd do it when I was away, but I wouldn't be able to hand it in because I missed too many days. They say you have to have certain hours actually in school...

I still had the work with me. I still walked around with my school bag. It was like my one possession. So it was kinda hard. It's not really accessible to people that don't really have that stability in their life. (Sarah)

It is tempting for teachers to believe students don't care—why else are they not paying attention, not doing the work, or not bothering to attend? But students talked about not attending because they wanted to avoid lashing out at a bully, to avoid being beaten up, because they had no lunch money, no bus money, or nowhere to go to change clothes. Some students were not in school because they felt worthless or got mad at themselves:

I'm trying—it's too hard. When you get frustrated, you're like—I beat myself up inside so much... I don't let no one know I'm doing it but I am doing it, and I notice I'm doing it, and I get really angry, and then I get fed up, and I'm like "You know what? Forget you all, I'm leaving, I'm not going to talk to you. I'm just gonna go walk." And it hurts, and I know I shouldn't do that, but I do it. (Karen)

Even when students are in the classroom, it may be hard for those who have been through violence to stay "present" enough to learn:

I could sit in class and write the notes and pay attention and participate in class, and all of a sudden, I'm not even here. I don't even want to be here. I don't want people to look at me. I don't want to have to look at the teacher—I don't want to have to listen to the teacher. I don't want to have anything to do with the teacher. The teacher doesn't like me. ...it feels really awful, because before [the violence], you know, you were so good at school and all of a sudden you're failing class after class. It hurts so badly. You go home with your report card, and your parents—they're confused, they're like: "I thought you were smart, what are you doing failing?" (Anna)

I'm not safe if I see him [violent ex-boyfriend and father of her child]. I'm not safe, and that's what scares me the most. That's why I can't—like now, if I see him? I couldn't even stay in this program. 'Cause I can't be focussed. I'm telling you, when something's on my mind and I'm bothered, I can't be focused... I couldn't, I wouldn't be able to focus on my work. I'd be crying too much, into myself. I'm a person, I can't keep my crying in. Like, I'd be feeling my heart overbeating all the time. You'll be talking, I'll be talking to you and all of a sudden something will, I'll think of something with him and then I won't be able to even remember what you told me... I'd be so distracted. I would be really shaken up. I would want to be by myself. I have to be around somebody who could talk to me to make me feel better and it wouldn't just take a couple minutes. I would actually need them for a couple hours, believe me. (Natalie Jones)

...I was in school, and this is when I was very young, and it [violence at home] made me feel like I was not worth the time to be there, not worth the time to go to school. Because then if I did something wrong, I would come home with a bad mark on a school paper, my mom would just start beating me. It was not good at all. If I didn't get an 'A' or anything like that, she wasn't proud of me. That affected me the most... No one ever asked me about nothing. (Karen)

These three students all dropped out of school early. Students say they want to be taken notice of, but if the notice is only criticism then it makes it harder to go to class the next time:

A lot of teachers do that [take students' skipping class personally rather than thinking about what might be going on for the student]. When you skip their class the day before, and you come in the following day and they're berating you for being absent, it makes you that much less motivated to come the next day. So then it becomes a pattern of skipping. If I didn't have a note, or a reason for why I wasn't there, I was afraid to go. (Clara Locey)

Dale R. Callender, a counsellor in a large Toronto school, also spoke of the problems of a system where students who arrive late or skip school are given detentions and suspensions:

*...our school system focuses [on] consequences... so you have a kid that's skipping for instance, they end up getting a detention. What do they learn in detention? To a certain point the belief is that it forces them to be on time. When you have someone that's late forty times, and had forty detentions, it's not working. But they don't do anything else... a kid that skips, or is late, three times, they suspend them. Well a kid that's late or already skipping, you would think in terms of—their academic performance has gone down, their self-concept has gone down, because they go into a room and they have no idea what the hell's happening, and then they suspend them for three days. It just compounds the problem. Then they come back and it's like, I've been suspended for three days, now I'm out **four** days of work! Again, the system doesn't support [them].*

This description reveals the need for a new approach that increases students' engagement with school, helping them connect with school and catch up on the classes they missed.

Don't just label, ask why

I want to draw attention to students who felt that labels were another way that they were silenced and made to feel different, without diminishing in any way the importance of recognizing learning disabilities and mental health conditions that can get in the way of learning. It is possible that labelling a learning disability or a disorder can become a way of deepening the silence about the impact of violence on learning by diverting attention from the origin of the behaviour and steering attention instead to diagnosis and treatment. One student described his experience:

[When violence started at home is] about when I was first diagnosed with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]. I was hyper a lot, bullying others and not paying attention in class... you know. I don't believe I have ADHD. I don't believe I ever did...

Interviewer: Did you feel it was a reaction to what was happening at home?

Yes.

If I get bored enough, I just get really fidgety and agitated. 'Cause I'm so bored... [I was stuck in my room at home] You sit there doing nothing. There was no books, no TV, no computer. I didn't have anything in my room—just my bed and four walls. I slept. It's like being in jail with no TV. To be honest with you, maximum security prison would probably be nothing for me. I'd get a TV!

My teacher would give us work, and I wouldn't want to do it. I would basically sit there fiddling around, and basically that's when my teacher would tell me to go on the computer. And then when I started beating people up, that's when I actually got diagnosed. It wasn't actually when I started fidgeting, it was more when I started fighting. (Andrew)

In spite of his diagnosis, fighting still led to him being moved from school to school as each new school expelled him for violent, disruptive behaviour—one after only three days. Would a different response—rather than drugs and expulsion—have had more effect on changing his behaviour? Perhaps if he had felt less silenced about his home experience, been offered more constructive ways to get attention and to escape from boredom, been helped to build the sense of self-worth so badly eroded in the home, he might have been able to attend and learn.

Remember that teaching includes supporting learners to learn

In Ontario over the last few years we have repeatedly heard the argument that cutbacks are not affecting the classroom. During this research I began to fully understand that this assertion can be made only if teaching is narrowly understood as imparting information. When teaching is not understood to include attention to the whole student, to why they are skipping school, or acting out, or sitting silently in the back of the room, then students' problems are seen as irrelevant to teaching. Several teachers said they were told that they should ignore issues of violence in students' lives:

They basically say "Your job is to teach. [Violence] is not your responsibility. Don't try and be the social worker, you have no background in that. You can make the situation worse. Be open, and let the person come to you, but take them to the guidance counsellor." (art teachers)

Hearing disclosures of violence is not the most important goal for teachers, however, recognizing the impact of violence is an important aid to effective learning. This is possible when teachers can work in concert with supportive people in a broad range of different roles who can establish strong connections with each student. When those other people are not present in the school, then teaching is effectively curtailed.

Students spoke about the impact of teachers' responses to their problems and the inadequacy of these approaches to support their learning:

Some teachers would tell you they didn't care. "Those are your problems, and you're in school, and you really need to deal with being in school right now." And others would just be like "There, there, everything will be okay, why don't you try this, why don't you do that," and it would just be like one of those—"This is my job, I'm getting paid thirty thousand a year, you're really kind of interrupting it by not learning at the same pace." The math teacher was my one, in high school. I dropped out so much I had to go back and do grade ten math in grade eleven, and she used me as an example for the other students not to drop out. "You're too old to be in the class." (Jennifer Hogan)

If teaching is simply imparting information, students who don't progress at the same pace, for whatever reason, are seen as a problem.

Focus on students, not “accountability”

Accountability seems in theory like a good thing to ensure that teaching is happening. But if this is tied to a narrow definition of teaching, then stress on accountability may in itself limit the possibilities of supportive and caring connections with students. Professionals expressed concern that increased bureaucracy and complex record-keeping systems were limiting the possibilities for connection with students. And I heard from students that lack of access to concerned and caring professionals told them that they were not valued. Just as I was hearing from students that it was essential that someone follows up and tries to draw students back in at the point when they begin to skip school, I also learned that attendance counsellors were being cut. When I asked a guidance counsellor what the process is for following up on students who are skipping, she sounded frustrated:

*Well, with things like the attendance—we used to have an attendance counsellor but now we don't. And I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen, because of downsizing—as a matter of fact, I have one student, I got a note from a teacher that he has not been attending, and I think the principal actually called home to talk with the family, but the student is still not coming to school. And usually then we would have had the attendance counsellor try to negotiate something with the family and at least get the student connected back to the school and look at alternatives. Now we don't have that, and we have to now make referrals to the head of the social work department. That person then has to decide whether or not it is worthy of having our social worker take this case on. But I think that he would have to in this case because this student is under the age of sixteen. But it's now becoming very, very bureaucratic before we can access any help.
(K. Silke)*

The shift away from attendance counsellors is more acute because it is happening when other supports have already been cut back: there are already fewer social workers, guidance counsellors and vice-principals in most schools.

Similarly, guidance counsellors spoke about being so tied up with record-keeping that they were less able to run programs for “at-risk” students or even be out in the halls engaging with students:

...And then we ran smaller groups for students that were creating a problem in a class. And you know, all of those things I think were helpful in the sense that the student felt that—I don't want to say they were special, but they were being addressed in a positive way, and we were trying to work with them to help them so that they can function better in school.

At one time, I could be focussed and say this is my priority. But then all of a sudden, we're swept with all this other—the data, the paperwork,

the computer. And if you don't stay on top of that it's—you're then also accountable to people for having this other stuff done... This year has not been fun.

*I always feel so bad when I'm too busy, it's like the classic—parents are too busy, we're too busy, "doesn't anybody have any time for me?" It's not that people don't care, it's that there isn't time.
(K.Silke)*

With cutbacks prevalent in so many areas, it is more than likely that students will experience everyone as too busy to make the connections necessary to build trust, support reflection and strengthen understanding so that students have opportunities to rebuild self-esteem and self-worth damaged by violence and achieve success in learning. Although most professionals clearly want to help, the processes of accountability tie them up with paperwork. When they are unable to respond to students' needs, students conclude that nobody cares.

4

Take on the impact of violence

Attempts to remove violence and focus on teaching don't create safety or an environment that supports learning. The challenge is to identify what might make a difference. I asked every group of students and each individual student I spoke to what they thought might support learning.

Build community and talk about violence

As raised earlier, one essential challenge seems to be to find ways to break the silence about violence and its impact on learning without asking students to speak about their own experiences. They may not want to disclose and to focus directly on memories of violence may increase their pain. Many students suggested that assemblies, classes and courses on issues of violence would be extremely valuable, but some cautioned that if information was given on the impacts of violence on learning then some students would have "ammunition" to taunt others. For instance, if a student is having trouble listening, others could accuse him or her of having experienced violence. Although I would hope that as silences are broken the power of such taunts might be decreased, it is important to recognize this danger. Student advisory groups would be invaluable in helping schools to explore the fine line of programming that would support and not endanger students experiencing violence.

Alongside the work of naming violence as "ordinary but not okay," community building work is essential if the school is to become a place where there is less victimization of others and more possibilities for supportive interactions. While some educational programs give this a lower priority and stress the narrow concept of teaching the curriculum, others do believe in the importance of building community. In times of shortages this may be harder, though more vital, to keep in view.

Make it “normal” to need help

One student said that schools should announce every week that there are counsellors available to discuss personal issues such as violence. But as I write this I wonder how many schools do have counsellors available. Students also suggested that counsellors employed by the school board may not be the best to address students’ personal concerns. During my first focus group session at an alternative school I asked what might support learning for students who have been through violence. All the students who had spent time in one school that has a full-time counsellor employed by a youth services organization said we had to talk to that counsellor because he was what every school needs.

When we interviewed this counsellor we learned a lot about why this model was judged so valuable by students:

...you’ll find that they like the program that we offer here because it’s full-time. It’s very high-profile, very high-accessible, and the relationship the other programs or services have with the other schools seem much more fragmented... (Dale R. Callender)

A full-time counsellor in each school would make an enormous difference to students. The counsellor spoke about some of the specifics of how he works:

...[in] the traditional model of service you wait for the kids to come to you, and you get out your paper and pad and “what’s the problem, how can I best help you?” And I don’t think it’s [necessarily the best place to start] because before they actually get here, you have to create an environment... the feeling that it’s okay to go there. And I think that was the main push of myself is taking that stigmatization away from a counsellor or the role of seeking support. So part of the things that I do is I involve myself in the school culture. I think that’s critical. Because I think when you’re a counsellor but also play the other roles that you’re involved in, in terms of school, it also [puts] you in your natural environment, where kids see you being non-judgmental, and being—not yelling at them, you’re not part of the school system. And so as I’m involving myself in other activities they can also see that because I’m the same person I am as a counsellor here as I am in one of those things as the football coach. So they can see that and say... I feel like this is going to be a safe place. (Dale R. Callender)

Students had a chance to get to know Dale Callender before they needed to go to him as a counsellor. That he was already known and trusted seemed very important to the students who spoke to me.

Just as students need supports, teachers also need counselling and other supports. We must recognize that violence doesn’t only happen to students and may still be a present reality for teachers. The experience of violence may shape how teachers respond. It is also important for teachers to have the opportunity

to learn more about the strategies students use and the ways students have learned to act through surviving violence. For example, one student talked about how she had learned to lie instantly when she feels she is in trouble:

I learned to lie at a very young age. I think it's one of the things I've never been able to lose. We talk about this a lot. I lie for any reason. I lie all the time. I know now not to lie, but if I still feel like I'm in trouble, I'll lie... As a kid, it was such a coping mechanism. "I have a bladder problem, I hurt my foot, my dog died, my grandmother died, my father blew up," I don't even have a father but I used him a lot. Because you learn to really use that as—okay, no one's listening to me, but if I lie, someone will care. (Jennifer Hogan)

It is tempting to judge students as not serious about their learning, particularly when they lie about their absences or failure to complete assignments. Knowing more about survival strategies students have learned may support teachers to understand students' choices and avoid deciding that students simply don't care when they continue to use these survival strategies in school.

Counselling supports need to be easily, and confidentially, accessible for students and teachers alike. Where there is access to supports and everyone is familiar with and able to trust available resource people, students and teachers will be more likely to be able to understand their own and each other's struggles, and to focus on respectful connection to support learning.

Build hope

[Teachers] took the time to get to know who I was. They didn't see me as some girl that needed to be pitied. They saw that I had so much potential and so much to offer, and they tried to harvest that potential. They encouraged me to be the best that I could be despite my circumstances.

Everybody comes from different walks of life. Sure, you may have a couple of people who are being bullied in your classroom; you can't treat them as one person. Everybody has individual circumstances and histories, and so you should try to cater to those people. To work one-on-one with them, and not to—it's not about solving their problems, but to continually encourage them. Treat them as an individual, and not as "somebody who's being bullied." (Susan)

Over and over again, students described occasions where a teacher had helped them hold onto hope, build their confidence and believe they could learn.

Showing people small things, telling them “good job” when they do something. Not telling somebody “you can’t do that.”...keep up that type of confidence in them so that they can do it, if they set their mind to it. (Marcus)

Like the student quoted above, many argued that encouragement was the most important single factor in supporting students’ ability to learn.

Focus on respect

The teacher-student relationship should be all about respect. A student will, I mean, not to sound cheesy, but just absolutely blossom and grow if they feel like their teacher will respect them even when they fail. Because everyone fails, and only through failure, and through darkness and desert do we learn and grow. (Clara Locey)

Many students spoke about the enormous difference that receiving respect can make for each student. Every respectful interaction can make a difference to any student, but for those whose self-worth has been damaged through violence, respect may be vital for survival. Pat Capponi explained what it meant to her that her English teacher treated her with respect:

Before that man, whose name is Stan Asher, no one had ever looked at me or spoken to me as though I had value. For that’s the key. Otherwise, I probably would have gone on believing that I was intrinsically bad, with nothing to offer. (1992:207) (Quoted in Horsman, 1999/2000 chapter 6)

Clarissa Chandler describes how she envisages the positive interaction:

So I want to also project what I think of as a positive presence, because that is the thing that they are most likely to have not have had, so I want to be providing and contextualizing this warm experience that the trauma is most likely to have limited or constricted in some way in their lives. I want to be able to acknowledge, contextualize, neutralize and not get connected or attached to the shame or humiliation and disrespect associated with the trauma and be able to build and connect to the part of them that is alive and able to go on. (Interview, Toronto, November, 1996) (Quoted in Horsman, 1999/2000 chapter 6)

The idea of teachers and others involved in working with youth holding firm to the idea that they must be a positive presence to build and connect to the part of a student “that is alive and able to go on” is a powerful image that could guide us all.

Support students to value themselves

[School] should be a place where kids can go, even if their home life is bad. The teachers are there to boost their self-esteem, to make them feel good. To tell each and every child how worthy they are. To teach them values like sharing, like peace, how to resolve conflicts. Right from the time when you're in kindergarten to grade 12. (Clara Locey)

Helping students to feel they have worth may be the most crucial factor in supporting learning. As well as schools taking on that role in every way possible, after-school and out-of-school programs can make an enormous difference in students' lives. Students I interviewed through the LOVE after-school leadership program were inspiring. Although they told horrendous stories of their experiences of violence, they had hope, they believed in their ability to complete their schooling, they were clear about career dreams, and felt confident of their ability to make a difference in the world.

Students spoke of leaving violence, gangs, drugs, and shame behind as they discovered new identities as leaders. One student made it clear why such a program can make such a huge difference:

They [LOVE] made me feel like I had worth. They always treated me with so much respect—they were always so happy to see me and so excited with the work that I did, even the few pieces that I handed in. And they started me on outreaches in September... so I've been doing outreaches now for a year and a half. They were so impressed with the way that I spoke, and presented myself, that it made me feel like I had a real purpose, that I was helping mankind in some way. And that drove me on. I found something that made me as happy as drugs had. And now I don't need drugs anymore. I've got this instead. (Clara Locey)

School activities and after- and out-of-school programs which help students who have experienced violence and mistreatment to value themselves may be fundamental in helping students to develop their own sense of worth and to avoid some of the more dangerous routes they might otherwise take to try to feel better about themselves.

Explore ways to teach that acknowledge the presence of violence and its impact on learning

Many new approaches for teaching remain to be explored in practice with youth. Exciting and creative ways forward could emerge from a school or youth literacy program taking on the challenge to work collaboratively with a team of students to identify what might make a difference. One key challenge will be to find ways to avoid confrontations around control, while still maintaining clear structure and boundaries. Appealing to students' sense of justice or fairness may be fundamental in developing systems that work creatively to support learning without leading to conflict around issues of control.

Creating diverse opportunities for connections among students and between youth and adults is widely known as crucial to support learning (eg. Grobe et al. 2001, Lewis, 2003). Focussing on how to build this connectedness in an era of cutbacks and policies which limit connections is a challenging goal. A crucial element of new approaches will be to create opportunities to challenge the meanings which students make of their own worth and potential when they are mistreated at home or at school. Similarly, there must be space in schools and literacy programs to challenge the meanings that personnel make of students' misbehaviour, inattention and absences, all of which can easily be misinterpreted as lack of interest in learning.

A starting point for innovative programming will take into account that many students have a lot going on in their lives. These students need school and educational programs to become a place they want to be, where staff can help them understand their issues and offer safe spaces where they can retreat. Schools need to develop new responses to the learning needs of students who have experienced violence. A variety of holistic approaches might support learning. If school personnel and a team of students interested in developing approaches that can work in the school setting had opportunities to collaborate, creative and effective approaches could be developed.

What we must do

Create a safer environment

Seeking to remove students from violent homes, removing violent students from schools and avoiding the possibility of abuse by restricting one-on-one connections between students and professionals all look as if they would increase student safety. Instead, these approaches tend to restrict important talk about experiences of violence. This silence decreases safety, and decreases learning, for many students who are denied any possibility of exploring the meaning of their experience. For these students, connections to build trust with adults become limited, and if they act out or become violent themselves, they are likely to experience repeated confrontations and continually decreasing control over their learning environment.

Opening up talk about violence can create a safer environment. In the long term, policies with regard to child welfare and safe schools should be opened up to extensive research and reviewed. In the meantime, student isolation can be reduced by adopting approaches that normalize experiences of violence and provide information on actions and supports that can be accessed following disclosures of violence. Schools and youth programs need to acknowledge the complexity of students' lives and recognize that families may not be supportive of student learning. Schools need to be cautious about how and when to engage families in students' education, and always recognize that this may increase violence in the home. When school personnel are careful to make the policies visible, to engage students in identifying "consequences," and to clearly separate the behaviour from the person, they decrease the chance that students may feel they are being judged as bad and punished unfairly. Exploring possibilities of reframing students' "bad" behaviour and enabling students to test out alternate identities might prevent escalations of bad behaviour and violence. After-school programs such as LOVE offer an exciting model for addressing violence issues in the lives of youth and for supporting students to reframe their identity. They learn to see themselves as leaders with a role to play in reducing youth violence rather than as trouble-makers or victims of violence.

Community-building work and anti-violence work are both essential to creating a safer learning environment. To reduce interruptions in learning and increases in violence when students move schools, schools need to explore creating programs with older students acting as mentors for younger students and a range of supports to help new students adjust to all aspects of the new school community. When students are engaged in a process that addresses problems in the school—attendance, misbehaviour and complaints—their sense of justice and fairness can become an asset to their own learning and that of other students. “Space” is important. It is a tool to reduce tensions and violence. Possibilities for creating both psychological and physical spaces need to be explored.

Create a learning environment

A focus on teaching or accountability does not create an effective learning environment. This research reveals that the focus on attendance and narrow concepts of what count as teaching do not serve students who have experienced violence well, but limit possibilities for creating a viable learning environment. Students who have experienced violence need a range of supports. Easily accessible, trustworthy counselling, such as that offered by the Delisle Youth Services pilot project, is needed in every school and youth program. Supports are needed not only for students, but also for teachers, to enable them to understand and respond well to the range of challenging behaviours they may experience from students who have been through violence.

Helping students to hold onto hope, treating them with respect, and supporting them to value themselves are crucial elements in a successful learning environment. To create this environment, teachers and youth workers need supports themselves. They, too, must be able to hold onto hope, be treated with respect, and provided with the supports necessary to do their work and to show it is truly valued in society. It is crucial that students who have been through violence are not simply labelled as having learning disabilities or medicated because of diagnoses of “disorders” without recognition of the role played by violence in creating learning difficulties. Students with learning disabilities need a range of supports to help them learn, otherwise labels of disability become simply another way that students are dismissed and given the message they cannot learn.

Students need careful, supportive attention around absence and lateness. Rather than “consequences,” they need help so they can reduce the consequences of missing or coming late. Responses must show that professionals notice and care that the student has a problem. Successful responses will help the student re-engage with learning wherever possible, rather than increasing their disengagement. It is enormously important that students are offered a range of supports *before* they lose connection with school and the possibility of successful learning. Students might be much more likely to be able to stay in school and focus on learning if they knew that their

teachers were familiar with the effects of violence on learning and understood the difficulties they were having, if they had access to retreat spaces in the school where they could go when they needed to be alone or to feel safe, if they could get support to fill in the gaps in their knowledge caused when they were unable to pay attention, and if they were offered help to see that their reactions were ordinary responses to violence. If they were unable to stay in the class, an approach that focuses on how to help them catch up when they return—whether two days or two years later—would be crucial to avoid having them feel ashamed at their failure and to support their future learning.

Stop the downward spiral

Students who appear not to be learning in schools are still learning something. Are they going to learn that they are stupid, bad, don't belong in schools and can't ever learn, or can we make the changes needed in schools so that teachers have a clear "teaching" task, even when students are temporarily unable to learn the curriculum as it is designed? This research clearly indicates that instead of a downward spiral of failure and confrontation, students who have experienced violence can be learning that their learning difficulties are "normal" reactions to violence and that they are struggling "normally" to survive violence. They can be learning approaches that help them to learn, they can be learning about themselves as learners and what works for them, and that the doors will be open for them to learn later if they are unable to learn the curriculum now. If schools and youth programs acknowledge the widespread presence of violence, make it possible for students to move away from believing they are bad, support them to create connections with trustworthy adults, and to take control of whether they will disclose the violence they experience, they will create safer environments where this learning can take place. If they offer a wide range of accessible supports and approaches to help students feel valued and respected they will create learning environments where students can learn that they can learn.

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INTERVIEW LIST

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