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Challenging Violence in Schools: A perspective from research and practice

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Background

Over the past decade, the phenomenon of violence in schools has entered public consciousness through both popular and academic discourse. Discussion has been fuelled by incidents which have been reported in the media that have raised international concern about escalating levels of violence and a crisis in our schools (Commission on Violence, 1995). High profile incidents such as Winnenden, Germany, where on the 11 March 2009, a former 17- year old pupil of the Albertville-Realschule walked into the school and started shooting, killing 9 students and 3 teachers. The earlier incident in 1999 at Columbine High in the USA, where two boys in trench coats walked into their high school and shot dead 12 students and a teacher and wounded 23 others before killing themselves; have shocked nations. Such events have also served to promote that schools throughout the Western world are becoming more violent. School violence therefore has emerged in our consciousness as an area for concern and debate.

In the UK the fatal stabbing of headteacher Philip Lawrence outside the school gates in 1995 and the murder of 14 year old Luke Walmsley by a peer in 2004 are rare, but have highlighted a spectrum of violence that is occurring in schools. Recent reports on behaviour from OfSTED, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Scottish Executive in 2009 have highlighted increasing concerns about levels of violence abd behaviour. OfSTED (2009) noted that schools are finding it difficult to get proper support for dealing with increasing levels of violence and sexualised behaviour of pupils. This report followed the publication of exclusion figures in 2008 that showed a 10% increase in exclusions from primary and nursery schools. At the root of the majority of exclusions was violence either towards other pupils or teachers. In reality however, as Hayden (2008) notes, making sense of exclusion figures is highly problematic. This paper draws from the research literature and research undertaken across a large city Local Authority (LA) in England in 2007, and seeks to explore a number of key issues that schools face in responding to violence.

Research Questions

Three specific areas will be considered within the body of the paper to highlight perspectives from policy, research and practice.

Methods

The paper will draw from the authors research undertaken on pupils perspectives of violence and bullying across a large LA in England with a sample of 2,132 pupils from year 5 to year 9.

Frame

Three specific areas will be considered within the body of the paper to highlight perspectives from policy, research and practice. First, the policy context for behavior in schools in the UK will be considered. Key issues will be discussed from when new Labour came into office with the promise to be 'tough on crime' to current thinking on curriculum strategies aimed at promoting wellbeing and the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL), and shifting context and confusion for schools in understanding responses to violence and bullying will be considered. Second, is the research on the importance of schools responses to violence and bullying as a form of resilience. Key literature on its effects, cultural ethos and management will be considered (Jennifer & Shaughnessy, 2005). Finally, the paper will draw from the authors research undertaken on pupils perspectives of violence and bullying across a large LA in England with a sample of 2,132 pupils from year 5 to year 9.

Consideration of key areas will be discussed and further consideration given to the kinds of school practices that support resilience to violence.

Research findings

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