

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

These results represent teacher perception of student behaviours and difficulties, and not actual student diagnoses, but they are nevertheless a formidable indication of a number of problems. In terms of survey items identifying elements of violence, teachers reported that 77% of their students produced work with violent themes and images, 77% of girls engaged in physical aggression, 75% in relational aggression; and 85% of students used menacing verbal or body language. These numbers represent “a few” to “many” incidences, but even taking the negative numbers which are more definitive (i.e., *no* students), only 20% of teachers reported no experience of students producing work with violent themes and images, only 17% reported no evidence of physical aggression in girls, just 10% reported no relational aggression in girls and only 17% reported that students did not use menacing verbal or body language. Obviously indications of seriously violent imagery or behaviour require a professional assessment without delay.

Current cultural conditions no doubt play a part in children’s aggressive or disruptive behaviour. Sidney Poitier, writing in *The Measure of a Man*, sums this up: “We put our kids to 15 years of quick-cut advertising, passive television watching, and sadistic video games, and we expect to see emerge a new generation of calm, compassionate and engaged human beings.” The debate on whether children are adversely affected by media violence is a non-starter; the evidence has been clear for a decade or more that media violence does not contribute to children’s well being. There is compelling evidence, in fact, of the negative influence of television violence, video game violence and pornography on the web. Studies of long-term exposure support a correlation between viewing TV violence and contact with the criminal justice system even after controlling for the effects of socioeconomic class, education and race. In males, a strong correlation was found between being convicted of a crime and two of the following: physical abuse by the mother, physical abuse by the father, and exposure to TV violence. A Canadian study in which TV was first introduced to a town in 1973, showed a 160 percent increase in aggression, hitting, shoving and biting in first and second grade students after exposure to television programming, with no change in behaviour to children in two control communities (Heath et al., 1989; Hearold, 1986; Joy et al., 1986; Bloom, 1997).

The Larger Picture of Violence and Trauma

There is however, a larger, more pervasive, and more troubling picture of violence which involves child maltreatment, and domestic violence in the home. While some of the figures below represent American statistics, they are not unlike the Canadian experience. Canada has recently initiated large-scale data collection in this area and the first published results are now available (Health Canada, 2001). The following snapshot provides a disturbing picture.

- ☐ Hitting children is virtually universal: 25% of infants one to six months are hit, and this rises to 50% of all infants by six months to a year. At the same time over 90% of American parents have assaulted their children. While this may be called spanking or slapping, the same

behaviour between adults would be grounds for criminal proceedings. By parents' own reports, 5% punish their children by punching, kicking or throwing the children down, or hitting the child with a hard object on some part of the body other than the bottom.

- ☐ According to a U.S. Department of Justice study, for every violent and sexual offence committed by a youth under 18, there are three such crimes committed by adults against children and teens.
- ☐ In 1998, there were an estimated 21.52 investigations of child maltreatment per 1,000 children in Canada. Forty-five percent of these investigations were substantiated, 22% remained suspected, and 33% were found to be unsubstantiated. Child maltreatment investigations were divided into four primary categories: physical abuse (31% of all investigations), sexual abuse (10% of all investigations), neglect (40% of all investigations), and emotional maltreatment (19% of all investigations). (Health Canada, 2001).

The children in classrooms who are the most disruptive and those with conduct disorder are likely to have problems which have originated in abuse, neglect and exposure to violence in their families. These children are difficult to manage and their poor behaviour can be quite disruptive in classrooms and dangerous for other students. Often, however, they are the most traumatized children and can be understood and best managed from a cognitive frame that addresses the deficit issues in their lives. Research clearly supports the need for early intervention in grade or grade two to prevent problem escalation. A balanced approach would combine Nurture, compassion, and care with a strong emphasis on self-discipline, personal accountability and social responsibility. It is not a hard versus a soft approach, but an integrated approach that makes the difference (Bloom, 1994, 232). Nurture Groups provide such an approach. *Investments to support teachers in the early identification and timely remediation of behavioural and emotional difficulties (particularly grades one and two) can preempt chronic learning difficulties, educational failure and the resultant slide into delinquency.* Prevention experiments featuring early childhood interventions with socially disruptive behavior, cognitive deficits, or parenting as an outcome have shown positive effects (Tremblay et al., 1996, Wasserman, et al., 2000).

Two elements of conduct disorder (1) students who regularly tell outright lies to obtain things, con others, or evade responsibility and (2) students who appear to enjoy their power to exert control over others with aggressive behaviour) yielded teacher perceptions that only 6% of students did not engage in the former and only 13% did not engage in the latter. The incidence of DSM IV diagnoses of Conduct Disorder in the general population is, as previously cited, 5.5%. This seems a relatively small number, but since 50 to 70% of criminal offending is committed by five to ten percent of offenders, there is a significant magnifier effect. A deeper understanding of the etiology of this disorder and its origins in infant insecure-attachment and noxious family environments make it possible to design appropriate early interventions which revisit critical developmental markers to prevent problems from becoming more serious.

Emotional and Learning Problems

It would appear that there are substantial numbers of children exhibiting symptoms of learning difficulties. Survey questions coded for 1st, Learning Disabilities; 2nd Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; 3rd, Internalizing Disorders; and 4th Oppositional Defiant Disorder can be grouped to provide a composite picture of how children either act out or withdraw with anxiousness or tension when they cannot handle challenge or stress, and when they fail to succeed in their school work. The most stunning finding was that 100% of teachers responded that they had “students who have difficulty attaining prescribed levels of effectiveness because they are easily distracted, careless or forgetful.” On the flip side, not a single teacher responded that there were no students with this difficulty. Likewise, in section D which solicited teacher opinions, 98% of teachers rated disruptive behaviour problems as problematic; only 2% said they had no students with learning disabilities who required special attention; and teachers rated learning disabilities as the item which most impacted student progress and achievement. As seen in the body of the report, from 30 to 50 percent of adjudicated juveniles and adults have been found to have learning disabilities, while the prevalence among the general population is 5-10 percent (Brier, 1994).

In terms of the focus of this report (i.e., emotional and behavioural problems which predispose to antisocial behaviour), both Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities are especially important variables. Given the tie-in of these two areas with the development of delinquency, it is suggested that resource allocation and teacher assistance be considered. Nurture groups have the potential to prevent difficulties in the later grades, and there are many other initiatives and programs as well. For example, a state-wide initiative in Florida is helping to address epidemic proportions of student behaviour problems through the use Functional Behaviour Assessment and Positive Behaviour Support. This approach has a strong behavioural (Skinnerian) element with impetus from positive reinforcement for good behaviour and sanctions (loss of privilege or token) for bad. It appears to be producing good results although it is fairly labour-intensive. See *Positive Behavior Support Strategies* - overview, procedures, resources, forms, and checklists at <<http://www.outreach.utk.edu/lre/full/sugguide.htm>> and a *Functional Assessment Interview Tool* - <<ftp://web.ce.utk.edu/lre/faitcomp.doc>> for an introduction to the theory.

It should be mentioned that school counselling, grouping high-risk students together, and punishment are less effective strategies for behavioural problems. Personal counselling via guidance counsellors has been found to be the least effective strategy as disruptive and disordered children require a more fundamental and concrete approach at school (Lipsey, 1992; Mayer & Sulzer-Azeroff (1991). Whether children have actual ADHD or pseudo-ADHD, they will likely exhibit some impaired functioning and be more apt to manifest disruptive, disorganized or agitated behaviour unless there is intervention. The first of these has a genetic basis and the second a psychological (and perhaps bio-neurological) basis as a result of insecure attachment or life trauma, such as abuse, neglect and threat. The symptoms of pseudo-ADHD can also look like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Warm and supportive relationships, a secure and calm environment, structure, small bites, scheduled transitions, continuing feedback, positive reinforcement and responsibility and accountability are the

combinations which seem to work with most high risk children.

As every teacher knows, early reading difficulties can disadvantage children in terms of subject mastery in particular and psychosocial functioning at school in general. Researchers (Willcutt & Pennington, 2000) found associations among reading problems, symptoms of anxiety and depression, disruptive behaviour and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Children with reading difficulties were significantly lower in IQ and socio-economic status than children without reading difficulties. They demonstrated significantly more disruptive behaviour problems and more emotional problems even with the effects of IQ and SES were accounted for. Boys with reading difficulties were more likely to have ADHD and aggressive behaviour than were girls. Girls with reading difficulties were more likely to suffer from depression and various somatic complaints (headache and stomach ache than boys. In both boys and girls, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder was the diagnostic category most associated with reading problems. Such children were significantly lower in IQ and socio-economic status than children without reading difficulties. Early language development is dependent on home environment and the amount and kind of interaction with caregivers, as well as other factors. That significant numbers of children arrive at school not school-ready, is a serious concern and is has a direct connection with reading problems and emotional and behavioural difficulties seen in children. It has been seen that up to 15% of Canadian children enter the school system not school-ready and that one quarter of preschoolers have delays in vocabulary development, with at least 10 percent at critically low levels (HRDC, 2002). It would appear that additional resource support for schools in this area could prevent numerous other problems down the line. Individualized instruction has been shown as the most effective avenue to best address language and reading deficits.

Ethics, Self-Discipline and Social Skill Development

Ninety-four percent of teachers responded in the affirmative to the statement that they had “Students who regularly tell outright lies; e.g. to obtain things, con others, or evade responsibility.” Only 6% responded that they had no students like this. Sixty-six percent had some students who were aggressively reactive (made a mess, scattered, threw or broke things, kicked furniture, slammed things on desks, or banged a wall). Thirty percent reported they had no students like this. Twenty-six percent of teachers responded in the negative to the statement that students showed respect for each other and exhibited sensitivity and compassion in their interpersonal relationships. About half responded that students had problems with general social competence and interpersonal relationships, although 91% agreed that once students are identified as losers by peers, it is not easy for them to change that status. This would seem to suggest that additional curriculum work in the area of social skills training, emotional intelligence and ethical responsibility might be advantageous, particularly given research findings which intricately tie these characteristics in with career and life success. Children can be helped to develop an internal code of morality, to distinguish gray areas, to stop and consider in advance the consequences of acting, and to grasp the golden rule. {An excellent resource which teaches the seven essential virtues (empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness and is entitled “Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues that

Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing,” by Michele Borba, Jossey-Bass, 2001. The resource section, arranged by age grouping and topic, is worth the cost of the book alone. Children from secure and happy homes learn moral intelligence and emotional intelligence almost through osmosis in the home environment, but increasing numbers of children do not get these basics at home and could benefit from a focussed approach at school.

Investigations have found that ongoing offending in adolescence and adulthood, as well as persistent patterns of aggression and peer rejection during the early and middle school years, have their roots in disruptive behaviour in evidence as early as age 3 (Olson and Hoza, 1993; Rutter et al, 1998). Antisocial behaviour which begins at an early age is more likely to persist into adolescence and adulthood (Maughan and Rutter, 1998; Moffitt, 1997). Researchers examined peer relationships among preschool children in an attempt to discover any possible connection with the development of aggressive behaviour. Findings revealed that pre-school aggressive children had difficulty in establishing close and stable relationships with non-aggressive children. They tended to develop strong relationships with other aggressive children which remained relatively stable, and in turn, had a powerful incremental effect on the further development of social aggression (Snyder, Horch, & Childs, 1997) .

Given the high incidence of relational aggression among girls, it appears that many girls intentionally or unintentionally hurt others through exclusion, isolation and rumours. Rejected, isolated and excluded children may respond with either withdrawal or aggression, but either way, they are likely to be pretty unhappy kids. These children may hit back later with a vengeance, as has been seen in many incidents of extreme school violence. They may also suffer quietly and in drastic situations, take their own lives. Student rejection and aggression can be helped by the teaching of positive interaction skills, anger management, and problem solving. Children with severe behavioural problems usually require intensive individualized interventions. See <<http://cecp.air.org/guide/annotated.htm>>.

Unskilled Disciplining of Children in the Home

Recent research shows that antisocial behaviour and conduct problems result from unskilled disciplining of children in terms not only of abuse, but from the opposite parenting approach, which is overly permissive. It can be seen as a form of neglect because these parents neither have a parental relationship in terms of closeness nor do they set limits or standards of behaviour for their offspring.

Such children have difficulty adapting to standards in schools and classrooms and produce a different kind of management problem for teachers. Parental efficacy has been found to result from a combination of control and support and has been shown to limit delinquent involvement initially and to continue to reduce it over a two-year period for younger and well as older youths (Wright & Cullen, 2001).

DeVito and Hopkins (2001) found that: 1) coercive attachment (where there is a constant

struggle between the child and the attachment figure which leads to a stressed relationship), 2) lower levels of marital satisfaction and 3) permissive parenting practices are significantly associated with disruptive behaviour in preschool children. Their study supports results from other studies that suggest that permissive parenting (where a child is noncompliant and there is a lack of structure, consistency and involvement) can lead to disruptive behaviour in preschool children. Permissive and uncaring parenting is therefore as damaging as authoritarian parenting in preschool children. The efforts of teachers can be assisted and supported by parent-management training, which is often made available through a Board's Continuing Education services.

General Aggression

Only 16% of teachers had no students who regularly exhibited negative, hostile or defiant attitudes; only 17% had no students who used taunting, ridiculing or threatening behaviour. Thirty-three per cent of teachers felt problem behaviour was becoming more complex with increasing use of weapons, and 87% reported they had students who appeared to enjoy their power to exert control over others with aggressive behaviour. In addition, 52% of teachers reported having some students who engaged in sexually aggressive behaviour such as staring, touching, fondling, indecent language/gesturing, or intentional bumping) which offended another student. Forty-eight percent responded that there were no students showing sexually aggressive behaviour. Some of these elements are early warning signs of possible serious difficulties.

Two comments are offered in this regard:

- 1) There is a positive value to providing training and support to staff, students and families on the factors that can either set off or exacerbate, explosive, aggressive outbursts. Community-based services are often helpful in this regard. Both schools and teachers should be prepared for dealing with suspicious school visitors and out-of-control students. When there is a serious threat, police should be involved as soon as possible, and students who are out-of-control need to be dealt with through immediate service, rather than placed in a cue on a long waiting list for central board services.
- 2) Short-term and fragmented interventions are generally not effective with adolescents in this category; they require sustained, multimodal and coordinated efforts involving themselves, their family and the school. Multisystemic therapy has proven to be an effective intervention for young offenders. It is an intensive family-and-communitybased treatment which addresses multiple factors across the key systems within which youths are embedded (e.g., family, peers, school, neighbourhood). MST strives to promote behaviour change in the youth's natural environment, using the strengths of each system to facilitate change. It has had excellent results in the United States and has been piloted in a number of Canadian regions over the past few years (LFCC, 2002).

Resources/Training /Support

As seen above, teachers reported that there were a considerable number of students with difficulties. At the same time, it appears that schools are doing a pretty good job of covering the basics in terms of curriculum, which involves mediation, problem solving, conflict resolution, morality and basic values. Also over 80% of teachers reported their schools had behaviour codes and a standardized gradation of consequences for offences. It is also very positive that only 5% of teachers felt it was *not* necessary to intervene in bullying and 76% replied that their school had a policy on bullying supported by classroom activities and parental involvement. Seventy-seven percent of teachers reported being supported by parents in their work with a child's academic or behavioural problems. At the same time, only 29% of respondents reported receiving instruction in the identification and management of learning and behavioural disorders with their university training.

It is interesting to see that teacher responses in section D on the relative importance of several influences closely reflect the findings of scientific investigations. Teachers seem to have a clear understanding of the impact of dysfunctional family systems versus good home environments, and they are clear about the serious impact of disruptive behaviour and the difficulties of managing classrooms with various levels of student ability. All in all, given the results of the survey, it would be difficult to say that the high incidence of apparent student emotional and behavioural difficulties is related to problematic ecological health in schools. On the contrary, schools appear to have knowledgeable teachers, good programs, and administrative and resource support.

Picture of Distressed Students

It is proposed that the considerable report of student emotional and behavioural difficulties is related to something more fundamental - difficulties in the lives of the youngsters arriving in classrooms. This will not come as a surprise to educators or researchers. It is worthwhile recalling at this point, however, that the survey showed a significant correlation (.747) between reports of learning difficulties and report of the overall incidence of violence. It is suggested that school readiness is one important factor, which may play a role in the high incidence of student difficulties. This report earlier detailed that large numbers of children are arriving at school without *school readiness* in terms of physical well-being, age-appropriate fine and gross-motor skills, emotional health, social knowledge, language skill and general knowledge. In fact, up to 15 percent of Canadian children were not school-ready when they entered the educational system. In addition, one quarter of preschoolers have some delays in the development of vocabulary skills and at least 10 percent are at critically low levels (HRDC, 2002). These are indeed troubling findings because without special catch-up programs, these children will very likely fall behind, experiencing growing frustration, anger or despair, and the consequent risk of emotional or behavioural problems.

Some of these readiness issues and resultant adjustment difficulties may be related to changing family environments in dual-career families (or conversely, unemployed families at survival levels on social assistance) as well as the general stresses of adapting to life in the 21st century. Suicide, for example, is the second largest killer of young people in Canada. It is frequently linked with depression, anxiety and low self-esteem and is known to be influenced by family conflict. Adolescents reporting a difficult relationship with one or both parents were more than five times more likely to have considered suicide in the previous year, according to NLSCY (National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth) data (CAMH, 2001). As reported previously the relationship between family troubles and internalizing and externalizing behaviour disorders is established as early as two to four years. This relationship is exponential and especially strong for aggression and conduct-type behavioural problems, but also for anxiety and depression (Kelley et al., 1997).

It is further suggested that many of these children, because of changing socioeconomic and cultural conditions as well as factors inherent in their specific families, will have experienced some form of insecure attachment. Studies are necessary to ascertain the extent of this problem. This report presented a fairly extensive overview of attachment and its close connection with emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as with severe conduct disorder. Nurture groups were suggested as an example of an early intervention, which addresses the attachment problem in concert with academic skill development. Warm and caring relationships are the essential building blocks for children - especially those exposed to developmental trauma which may have done damage to critical physical and psychological systems. When we fail to prevent the damage in the first place, we must do all that is possible to help children beyond the vulnerability bestowed by their early beginnings. Smaller learning communities are one avenue, which enables relationship building within a kinder, gentler environment.

Small Learning Communities and Relationships

In the U.S. and elsewhere, research also supports the value of smaller learning communities. Evidence continues to mount that smaller high schools get better results than larger ones. In small settings, children who have been underperforming learn more, behave better, and are less likely to drop out. Pilot programs in Harlem, Boston, Chicago and other cities consistently show superior results. The pilot high schools consistently have among the highest attendance rates and the lowest student-transfer rates two of the best predictors of graduation rates. Student behaviour has dramatically improved: two of the pilot high schools haven't had to suspend a single student in two out of the past three years; another hasn't suspended a single student in the past four. Harlem's Central Park East, a freestanding school with upward of 300 students in grades 7 through 12, graduates over 90 percent of its students who have poor home backgrounds, and sends a large majority on to four-year colleges.

Large urban schools are physically reconfigured into smaller units, but can still retain the

benefits of size by sharing specialized elective courses, extracurricular activities and sports programs. Splitting up big-city public schools has helped to re-create the intimacy and personal interaction needed especially for at-risk students and it may be this factor that is responsible for boosting both graduation rates and achievement. The authors note: “Small schools appear to work not because classes are smaller but because teachers get to know students as individuals and take an ongoing interest in their success” (McKinney et al, 2000; Hamre and Pianta, 2001). Here again is the evidence of the power of supportive relationships for high-risk children.