

SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF
THE ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined teachers' perception of the zero tolerance policy. The goal was to identify the benefits, drawbacks, and perceived effectiveness of the zero tolerance policy as a preventative tool against school violence. The research hypothesis for the study was that the majority of public school teachers believe the zero tolerance policy is ineffective, has a negative impact on students, and does not prevent school violence; that is, it does not fulfill its intended purpose. Teachers from two schools, one in Minnesota and one in Wisconsin, were surveyed. The results of the data analysis suggest that zero tolerance policies are perceived to be an effective means of

discipline and are viewed as effective in fulfilling each schools' goals related to violence reduction. In both schools, the zero tolerance policy was seen as being beneficial. Additionally, both schools perceived a minimal likelihood for violent acts to occur in their school.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

School violence has caught the attention of nearly everyone in the United States. With the recent shootings at schools across the country, people have become increasingly concerned about the safety and well-being of their children while they attend school. In the eyes of society, school is supposed to be a safe place for children to learn and grow (Furlong & Morrison, 1994), not a place of violence and fear.

Given the regularity with which violent incidents are reported in schools across the United States, there appears to be an increase in the number of violent acts in schools. However, the statistics available through recent research indicate that the number of violent acts is not increasing (Rubel, 1978; Scherer & Stimson, 1984; Wayson, 1985), but is, in fact, declining (Grier & Chaddock, 1999).

Despite the statistical decline of violent acts in schools, the perception of school violence has significantly increased (Furlong & Chung, 1995). Furlong and Chung (1995) report that the media contributes to the perception that school violence is rampant through its extensive coverage of recent tragic incidents. Fostered by the media, violence is perceived to be an increasing and serious problem in schools across the country. Parents have reported increased fears about dropping their

children off at school and some parents are reluctant to send their children to school altogether (Weaver, 1993). Not only are students affected, but teachers have also reported fears. Reports of such violent incidents have a devastating impact on students, school personnel, and the community (Chandras, 1999).

As the fears of school violence increase, a child's education can be significantly affected. The opportunity for a successful education is seriously jeopardized when students, staff members, and the community fear both going to school and remaining after school (Mulhern, Dibble, & Berkan, 1994). The perception of school violence, in itself, has the ability to physically and psychologically harm individuals, preventing them from achieving their maximum physical, social, or academic potential (Furlong, Morrison, & Clontz, 1993).

School districts have attempted to address the problem of school violence in various ways. In many schools, crisis intervention approaches have become the treatment of choice (Wolfe, 1995; Chandras, 1999), while other school districts have found that preventative actions and plans are the key (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Despite the method of prevention or intervention a district chooses, the type of plan and the information included within it varies significantly from district to district. Some believe crisis plans should include a code of conduct containing specific rules and consequences that can accommodate student differences on a case-by-case basis (U.S.

Department of Education, 1999), while others believe there should not be any accommodations or altering of disciplinary actions. Rather, there should be a collaboration between schools, law enforcement, the courts, community agencies, parents, and the public (Mulhern, Dibble, & Berkan, 1994) with rigid guidelines for violent acts.

One particular prevention strategy of interest is the "zero tolerance policy." Since the introduction of zero tolerance policies to the schools in the 1990's (Western Governors' Association, 1999), significant controversy regarding their efficacy has been generated. A zero tolerance policy is defined as a school or district policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The purpose of a zero tolerance policy is to create a safe and secure environment for learning.

Zero tolerance policies have generated significant controversy regarding their appropriateness and effectiveness. Some believe the policy is too strict (Baldauf, 1999; Heaney & Michela, 1999), and that there should be leniency for actions that may appear to be something they are not. Additionally, the policy does not accommodate less threatening situations. Others see zero tolerance as being too broadly based (Chaddock, 1999). They feel there are not enough guidelines for disciplining violent acts and for determining which actions receive which disciplinary responses. As a result of these concerns, the zero

tolerance policy is considered inappropriate or ineffective in preventing school violence.

Despite the many concerns associated with zero tolerance policies in the schools, there are some educators who believe this is a much-needed policy (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). They recognize that there could be some flaws; they argue, however, most policies have room for improvement. Supporters of zero tolerance believe it is appropriate if it is imposed with common sense. They also contend that it is not intended to be a solution in itself (Grier & Chaddock, 1999). At the same time, supporters of the zero tolerance policy acknowledge that its effectiveness is yet to be determined. Due to a lack of much needed research, there is no evidence supporting the efficacy of the zero tolerance policy (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Conclusion

There are currently a variety of opinions about which types of preventative measures are effective and which ones are not. Studies (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Grier & Chaddock, 1999) reveal conflicting opinions about the zero tolerance policy. Zero tolerance policies in the schools have not been around long enough to be extensively researched. However, with the recent perception of increased violence in the schools, research needs to be done to determine its effectiveness and appropriateness.

Rationale, Purpose, and Significance of the Present Study

Zero tolerance policies are a popular avenue for dealing

with school violence. However, very few studies have examined the efficacy of such policies for actually reducing school violence. The purpose of this study is to examine teacher perceptions of the zero tolerance policy. With the perception that violence is increasing in the schools, the concern about the safety and well being of faculty and students is also increasing. So, it is necessary to determine whether or not policies, such as zero tolerance, are perceived to be as effective and appropriate as they were intended to be. The research hypothesis for the study was that the majority of public school teachers believe the zero tolerance policy is ineffective, has a negative impact on students, and does not prevent school violence; that is, it does not fulfill its intended purpose.

Research Questions

Based upon the preceding discussion, the following research questions have been proposed:

- R1. How do teachers perceive the overall effectiveness of the zero tolerance policy in preventing violence in their school?
- R2. In relation to their discipline policy, how do teachers perceive the number of violent acts occurring in their respective schools?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

School violence appears to be a significant concern in today's society. As people read their daily paper or listen to the news, the topic of school violence frequently appears in the headlines. Articles describing children committing major crimes, such as armed robbery, murder, and assault with a deadly weapon, are front page material. Incidents of school violence, such as a six year old who killed his classmate in Michigan or the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, horrify the public and give the impression that violence committed by children in schools is rampant. However, such headlines may be misleading. Studies have shown that school violence is not increasing (Grier & Chaddock, 1999; Rubel, 1978; Scherer & Stimson, 1984; Wayson, 1985) but is actually declining.

Current Level of Violence

Currently, research shows that the number of violent incidents occurring in schools is not increasing. In 1993, there were about 155 school-related crimes for every 1,000 students (age 12 to 18 years), but in 1997 that figure fell to 102 (Grier & Chaddock, 1999). More recent data on school crime raises questions about how frequently crime really does occur in the schools (Furlong & Morrison, 1994). Morrison and Furlong (1994) found that information on school violence is sketchy and contradictory. This problem is due to differing definitions of

violence. According to a study conducted jointly by the Justice Department and the Education Department in 1998, there was no significant change from 1989 to 1995 in the percentage of students reporting victimization of violent acts. In comparing the data, there was only a .1 percent increase from 1989 to 1995. Actual self-reported victimization in the United States has been relatively stable since 1973, peaking in 1981 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1992). In spite of the conflicting portrayals of school violence, the data shows that schools are still less violent than general society (Dear, Scott, & Marshall, 1994). However, what is important to this study is not so much the statistics, rather it is the idea that violence in the schools should not be occurring at all.

Perception of Violence

With the assistance of the media, school violence is perceived by society to be an increasing problem. Between 1982 and 1993, 49.5% of news articles containing the words "school violence" were published (Melvyl System Data Bases, 1982-1993). It is media attention that is leading today's general public and educators to perceive that school violence is increasing (Furlong & Morrison, 1994).

With the extensive media attention and the public's preoccupation with school violence, there is reason to believe that the majority of educators in public schools will perceive school violence as a growing area of concern (Furlong & Chung,

1995). This may lead some to conclude that America's schools are unsafe and even characterize them as battlegrounds or war zones (Stephens, 1997; U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 1998). It is from research such as this that the hypothesis for this study evolved.

Effects on Education

The effect of perceived school violence needs to be addressed. As these perceptions about school violence continue and the level of concern increases, children's sense of safety in school will most likely decrease. As a result, the education children receive may be negatively impacted. The opportunity for a successful education is seriously jeopardized when students, staff members, and the community fear going to school and remaining there afterward (Mulhern, Dibble, & Berkan, 1994). The concern about school violence is continuing to grow at a very rapid pace and without further research to determine effective preventative measures, public schools may no longer be the education of the future (Stevenson, 1994). Currently, no research has identified the specific cause(s) of school violence, however, it is happening and something needs to be done (Berger, 1974; Poland, 1997).

For many students, school is a key resource in their life (Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1994). It is a place of opportunity where they can explore different things without fear. However, if there is a perceived fear for their safety, the

resource no longer exists. According to Abraham Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, safety is a basic need and must be met in order for children to achieve the cognitive outcomes that we intend as a result of schooling. If school does not fulfill that need, a child's education will be negatively impacted.

Fears and concerns of school violence may lead some to believe school is no longer the ideal place to learn and grow. A study of school violence conducted in 1995 by Chandler, Chapman, Rand, and Taylor, showed that 14.6 percent of students aged 12 through 19 years reported violence or property victimization at school (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 1998). This means that almost 15 of every 100 students have experienced a violent act in school. According to Howard M. Knoff (2000), continuing issues of school safety and students' mental health needs have never been so professionally and publicly prominent as over the past two years. School is a place parents drop their loved ones off and trust that they are in a conducive learning and growing environment. A basic need children have is to be safe and secure (Furlong, Morrison, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1997).

As children fear the level of safety in a place where they are expected to thrive, (Furlong & Morrison, 1994), their level of education is going to be greatly affected. School is a place where the goal is to be educating individuals. So, anything that adversely affects an individual's ability to learn should be of

considerable concern. Teachers report that crisis-related problems, such as threats of violence, affect students' ability to concentrate (Stevenson, 1994) and are commonplace in preventing students from progressing educationally (Pitcher & Poland, 1992). As a result, these perceptions could be of significance to whether a child is receiving an optimal level of education. When a child's educational opportunities are threatened, there is a need for further research to explore the problem.

It is evident that violence in the schools does affect children, but it cannot be forgotten that it impacts the staff too. A recent example of this occurred in Florida where a student killed his teacher. Teachers, administrators, and other school personnel enter the school each morning and must face the same challenges and fears related to school violence. As Weaver (1993) stated, students cannot learn, teachers cannot teach, and parents are reluctant to send their children to schools where crime and violence are perceived as an ordinary part of the school day. The perceived violence in the schools affects everyone.

Actions taken by Schools

With the numerous effects of violence on a child's education, there is not only a need for further research, there is also a need for society to take action. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1998), violence that occurs in the community has found its way inside the schoolhouse door. Society

needs to be prepared and willing to respond to what is currently happening. One after another, school communities across the country have been forced to face the fact that violence can happen to them (King & Muhr, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Even though these experiences are troubling and unforeseen, they can not prevent society from taking the initiative to act (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

The 1997-1998 school year served as a dramatic wake-up call to the fact that guns do come to school and are used by some to kill (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Through acts such as shootings, the topic of school violence has become a "national epidemic" (Gorski & Pilotto, 1993). It appears that the attempts to make the public aware of current situations has taken on a "bandwagon characteristic" (Morrison & Furlong, 1994). As the media continued to inform society of the latest attacks in Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Colorado, society began to realize the seriousness and genuineness of the situation. Communities became aware that this could possibly happen to them, and action plans began to be developed by school districts in preparation for such acts.

School response to violence typically takes one of two forms: crisis intervention policies or prevention response plans. According to Wolfe (1995) and Chandras (1999), crisis intervention approaches are often the treatment of choice in a large number of schools experiencing violence. This is because

many schools believe it is not necessary to fix something before it is a problem. Such approaches posit that the actual crisis is not the focus situation, rather it is the individuals' perceptions and responses to the situation. Crisis intervention policies are reactive rather than preventative. In contrast, others find that preventative actions and plans are the key (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Preventative measures can reduce violence and troubling behaviors in school (Poland, 1994; Knoff, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Stevenson, 1994; Pitcher & Poland, 1994). Those who choose to use a preventative strategy believe that through education and awareness, one has the necessary knowledge to stop an act before it is fully carried out. Some of the most promising prevention and early intervention strategies involve the entire educational community - administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members - working together to form positive relationships within the school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

School Based Prevention Plans

As previously stated, prevention plans are one option school districts have chosen to initiate in response to school violence. A prevention plan can be very beneficial, however, the level of benefit it offers is limited to its effectiveness and appropriate implementation. According to Stephens (1994) of the National School Safety Center, in order for a school safety plan to be effective it must be comprehensive, continuing, and broad based.

Comprehensive means that it must build on previous plans and ideas. Continuing means that it is effective from this point forward with no exceptions. Broad based means it must cover a wide range of possible acts and provide guidelines to define them. Prevention plans appear to be a necessary tool in school districts, however, the development and implementation of them can be very tiresome and challenging.

Individual school districts have different ideas of what should be included in a prevention plan. Some include a code of conduct with specific rules and consequences that can accommodate student differences on a case-by-case basis (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Others provide for collaboration between schools, law enforcement, the courts, community agencies, parents, and the public (Mulhern, Dibble, & Berkan, 1994). To date, there is no right or wrong answer for what should be included in a prevention plan. The plan needs to be appropriate for the district and simple enough to be effectively carried out. The details need to be developed by a team of individuals that are aware of the various situations that could occur in their district.

Prevention plans should not only provide ideas pertaining to "after the fact", but they should also offer options, or ideas, relating to the cause or warning signs of problem behaviors. School personnel may fail to recognize problem situations which, left unaddressed, can precipitate crisis events or worsen an

existing crisis (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). The implementation of a prevention plan is seen to possibly eliminate, or at least reduce, the room for error. In a prevention plan, there are certain steps to follow if a particular action occurs or if signals of a violent act occur. This is important because the early warning signs allow people to act responsibly by getting help for the individual before problems escalate (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Being able to recognize the signs of an individual in trouble, or considering violence, allows educators to act appropriately through following the guidelines of the prevention plan.

Along with the use of prevention plans, other various forms of prevention have been explored. Incidents have led schools to try increasing the number of security personnel, installing two-way intercoms in every room, using identification cards, and assigning more police to arrival and dismissal times (Pitcher & Poland, 1992). However, despite these attempts, violent acts persist.

"Zero Tolerance"

As tragedies in the schools continue, school districts are called upon to impose more severe penalties for any kind of school disruption, a stance that has led to a common prevention method known as zero tolerance. A "zero tolerance policy" is defined as a school or district policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses

(U.S. Department of Education, 1998). It outlines penalties for violent or threatening behavior by students in school or at school sponsored activities (Zero Tolerance, 1999). The purpose is to create a safe and secure environment for learning.

The "zero tolerance policy" is a fairly recent addition to the array of school violence prevention techniques. According to the Western Governors' Association (1999), the zero tolerance policy was initially endorsed in the early 1990's. There are still some concerns about whether this is an appropriate resolution to the problem of violence. However, there are some that believe it is successful because the behaviors that are and are not considered acceptable are clearly outlined, as are the consequences.

Initially, the term zero tolerance "referred to policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor" (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In the 1980's, it grew out of state and federal drug enforcement policies (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). From there, in 1983, the term was used for the first time in the Lexis-Nexis national newspaper database (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In 1986, it was used by a U.S. attorney to impound seacraft carrying drugs. As a result, in 1988, the term received national attention. It was at this time that "zero tolerance" made its mark by being applied to issues such as environmental pollution, trespassing, skateboarding, racial intolerance, homelessness, sexual harassment, and boom boxes (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Since the initial application of zero tolerance policies, there has been significant controversy on its effectiveness. Some find it to be beneficial in reducing the issue at hand, while others find it detrimental and unable to fulfill its intended purpose. Considered ineffective in drug rehabilitation, many community drug programs phased it out. However, at the same time, the concept began to take hold in the public schools (Skiba & Peterson, 1999) and by 1993, zero tolerance policies were being adopted by schools across the country (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In 1994, the policy was mandated nationally by the federal government when President Clinton signed the Gun-Free Schools Act (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

According to Skiba and Peterson (1999), the initial motivation behind the adoption of zero tolerance policies was the fear that drugs and violence were spreading in our nation's schools. Concern about escalating drug use and fear of random violence led to demands to take action and implement these "get tough" (Heaney & Michela, 1999) policies such as zero tolerance. However, controversy surrounds the zero tolerance policy. Zero tolerance policies have been criticized as being too specific (Baldauf, 1999) or too broad-based (Chaddock, 1999), as well as discriminatory. According to Aleta Meyer (Baldauf, 1999, p. 2), "different situations require different strategies". She argues that there needs to be some flexibility because no two situations are exactly the same, and they should not be categorized as such.

Another argument is that the zero tolerance policy is considered by some to be too broad. As Rev. Jesse Jackson has stated (Chaddock, 1999, p. 14), "Such policies in schools are too broad based." The lack of flexibility on "look-alikes" has forced some school districts to take ridiculous actions (Heaney & Michela, 1999). These acts are the result of the entire school community having no ownership of policies or programs. Consequently, if this is the case, the district is headed towards failure (Heaney & Michela, 1999). Along with the tendency to be inflexible, the zero tolerance policy has also raised concerns related to discrimination. According to Skiba and Peterson (1999) and Marlantes (1999), a disproportionate number of students at risk for exclusionary and punitive discipline practices are poor and African American.

While researchers such as Baldauf (1999) and Skiba and Peterson (1999) suggest that the policy is not effective, there are others such as Grier and Chaddock (1999) that feel the policy has the potential to be effective. There does not appear to be a problem with the term zero tolerance. Rather, this form of rigid discipline needs to be imposed with common sense (Grier & Chaddock, 1999). As many researchers would probably agree, this policy is not a solution by itself (Grier & Chaddock, 1999). Rather, it is most beneficial as part of a multifaceted program (Grier & Chaddock, 1999). If one considers things such as these, the zero tolerance policy should continue to assist schools with

their discipline. Whether the zero tolerance policy is effective or not remains to be determined through much needed research (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Conclusion

As the country prepares to move into the 21st century, the topic of school violence and the "zero tolerance policy" will still be one of great concern. There are several questions still unanswered about its appropriateness. As more research is conducted on the topic, more opinions and perceptions are yet to be heard. However, it can not be disputed that the "zero tolerance policy" is surely a topic of necessary discussion. Due to the conflicting beliefs of what actions should be taken, there is a level of increased concern. It is for this reason that research is being done on a continual basis in this area. However, until research can define a solution, efforts need to be made in an attempt to reduce the concern of violence.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to describe teachers' perception of zero tolerance as measured by a survey of elementary, middle, and high school teachers from two separate public schools in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Participants

Participants for this research were recruited from two schools, one from Minnesota and one from Wisconsin. The two schools, Deerwood Elementary in Eagan, Minnesota, and Independence Public School in Independence, Wisconsin, were chosen because they had zero tolerance policies in place at the time of the study. Deerwood Elementary is a small school in Eagan, Minnesota. Eagan is a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The school consists of fewer than 500 students in grades Kindergarten through 5. The Independence Public School is a small K-12 school in Independence, Wisconsin. This school also consists of fewer than 500 students. Data for the research was obtained from school faculty who encounter and teach students on a daily basis. Surveys were distributed to faculty members through the schools' mail system. Along with the survey, there was a letter enclosed, which described the purpose of the study and requested

their participation. The participants made the decision to participate in the research by completing the survey and returning it to a designated mailbox. A total of 68 school staff out of approximately 85 participated.

Instrumentation/Procedures

A survey (see Appendix A) developed by the researcher was distributed to teachers at Deerwood Elementary and Independence Public Schools. The survey was two pages long and consisted of eight demographic questions and eighteen questions related to discipline, violence, and school policies. The survey utilized a 5-point Likert Scale. The points from one to five represented: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, not applicable.

Selecting the appropriate Likert Scale is very important, because it could influence the results that are obtained. The reason for selecting this particular scale was to force people to make a choice and really think about what they believe rather than select neutral responses. This particular scale eliminates the opportunity for neutral responses and results in stronger study results.

Teachers made the decision to voluntarily participate in the study. If they did choose to take part, they read the informed consent, completed the survey, and returned it to a designated mailbox.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed with respect to the research questions outlined in Chapter I. The research questions and the method of analysis are provided below.

- R1. How do teachers perceive the overall effectiveness of the zero tolerance policy in preventing violence in their school?
- R2. In relation to their current discipline policy, how do teachers perceive the number of violent acts occurring in their respective schools?

The survey data was analyzed comparing the two schools' responses to the eighteen questions. The survey questions were divided into two sections, with each section referencing one of the research questions. R1 was answered through questions 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18. These questions relate to R1, because they each request information pertaining to discipline policies and the effectiveness of the zero tolerance policy. R2 was answered through questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. These questions readily provide the necessary input to answer R2, because they address teachers' perceptions of school violence in general and also relative to their discipline policy within their own school. An Independent Samples T-test was conducted on the results of the survey to determine whether or not there were any significant differences between the two schools. A series of separate t-tests were conducted comparing the two schools for

each of the eighteen questions on the survey.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter is divided into three sections: (a) descriptive statistics; (b) statistical analysis; and (c) a summary of the statistical results in terms of the study's research questions.

Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of sixty-eight school faculty members from Deerwood Elementary in Eagan, Minnesota, and Independence Public School in Independence, Wisconsin. Thirty-four faculty members from each school participated for a total participant sample of sixty-eight individuals. Demographic data are reported in Table 1. Of the 68 participants, 54 (79.4%) were female and 14 (20.6%) were male. Participants ranged in age from twenty to sixty with each age decade fairly equally represented. Participants in the study were primarily Caucasian (98.5%). Most of the participants were employed full-time (85.3%) while 14.7% (10) were employed on a part-time basis.

Table 2 presents the item response means and standard deviations between the two schools (Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary School) on the eighteen questions of the survey, and Table 3 presents the Independent Samples T-test results.

Table 1

Demographics of Participating Subjects

Demographics	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	54	79.4
Male	14	20.6
Age		
Age 20 to 30	17	25.0
Age 31 to 40	17	25.0
Age 41 to 50	20	29.4
Age 51 to 60	14	20.6
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	67	98.5
Other	1	1.5
Employment Status		
Full-time	58	85.3
Part-time	10	14.7

Table 2

Item Response Means and Standard Deviations

Question	Means	Standard Deviation
<hr/>		
Question 1		
Independence	2.97	.92
Deerwood	3.21	.69
Question 2		
Independence	2.68	.73
Deerwood	2.97	.83
Question 3		
Independence	3.18	.63
Deerwood	3.21	.81
Question 4		
Independence	1.56	.50
Deerwood	2.03	.80
Question 5		
Independence	3.79	.41
Deerwood	3.74	.51
Question 6		
Independence	3.76	.43
Deerwood	3.65	.85

Question 7

Independence	3.68	.59
Deerwood	3.59	.70

Question 8

Independence	3.62	.49
Deerwood	3.35	.73

Question 9

Independence	3.38	.65
Deerwood	3.32	.59

Question 10

Independence	3.41	.61
Deerwood	3.56	.66

Question 11

Independence	3.47	.86
Deerwood	3.38	.74

Question 12

Independence	2.97	1.0
Deerwood	2.74	.71

Question 13

Independence	2.09	.90
Deerwood	2.09	1.08

Question 14

Independence	1.97	.80
Deerwood	1.76	.79

Question 15

Independence	3.35	.85
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Deerwood	3.15	.74
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Question 16

Independence	3.32	.77
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Deerwood	3.24	.65
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Question 17

Independence	3.18	.83
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Deerwood	3.38	.65
----------	------	-----

Question 18

Independence	3.12	.69
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Deerwood	3.27	.67
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Table 3

Independent Samples T-test Results

Question	IHS	Deerwood	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Question 1	12.97	3.21	-1.195	65	
Question 2	2.68	2.97	-1.550	66	
Question 3	3.18	3.21	-.168	66	
Question 4	1.56	2.03	-2.909	66	.005
Question 5	3.79	3.74	.523	66	
Question 6	3.76	3.65	.721	66	
Question 7	3.68	3.59	.562	66	
Question 8	3.62	3.35	1.746	66	
Question 9	3.38	3.32	.390	66	
Question 10	3.41	3.56	-.955	66	
Question 11	3.47	3.38	.453	66	
Question 12	2.97	2.74	1.119	66	
Question 13	2.09	2.09	.000	66	
Question 14	1.97	1.76	1.097	65	
Question 15	3.35	3.15	1.64	66	
Question 16	3.32	3.24	.510	66	
Question 17	3.18	3.38	-1.134	66	
Question 18	3.12	3.27	-.933	65	

Statistical Analysis

A series of Independent Samples T-test were conducted to determine whether or not there were any significant results when comparing the two schools. There were no significant differences between the responses for each question when comparing the two schools.

Summary

The statistical results will now be presented in terms of the study's research questions.

R1 - How do teachers perceive the overall effectiveness of the zero tolerance policy in preventing violence in their school?

In reference to research question one, focusing on teachers' perception of the overall effectiveness of the zero tolerance policy, staff from both Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary perceived their zero tolerance policy to be an effective asset to their discipline policy. In addition, both schools agreed equally that zero tolerance policies are effective in preventing violence in schools. Through analyzing the questions related to this research question, one would notice the lack of difference in the responses between the two schools. According to this survey, both Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary staff perceive the zero tolerance policy in their school, and in general, to be an effective means of discipline and in preventing violence.

R2 - How do teachers perceive the number of violent acts occurring in their respective schools?

In reference to the second research question, which focuses on teachers' perceptions of the number of violent acts occurring in schools, an overall discrepancy was not found between the two schools. Both schools, Independence Public School and Deerwood

Elementary, perceived that there is not much of a likelihood for a number of violent acts to occur in their school. However, a significant difference between the two schools was found in one of the four questions. Question four addresses the perception of whether or not violent acts occur often in the individual's school. Independence had a mean score of 1.56 (Strongly Disagree/Disagree) while Deerwood had a mean score of 2.03 (Disagree). This means that the two schools views were significantly different ($>.05$ difference) from one another. Independence staff strongly disagreed that violent acts often occur in their school in comparison to the perception of the staff at Deerwood Elementary who only disagreed. However, in all, both Independence and Deerwood Elementary perceive that there is not much of a likelihood for a number of violent acts to occur in their school.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a brief summary of the present investigation, followed by a discussion of the major findings and their implications. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and consideration of future research directions.

Summary of Study

The primary purpose of the research study was to describe teachers' perceptions of the zero tolerance policy. The goal was to identify teachers' perception of its overall effectiveness, and the number of violent acts likely to occur in the schools.

Teachers from two separate public schools in Wisconsin and Minnesota were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the zero tolerance policy within their school. The schools from which the data was collected included Independence Public School in Wisconsin and Deerwood Elementary in Minnesota. Data for the research was obtained from 68 school faculty who encounter and teach students on a daily basis. The survey consisted of 18 questions that were divided into three categories to address each of the research questions in this study.

Summary of Findings

The first research question focused on teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the zero tolerance policy. There was no significant difference between Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary. Both schools perceived the zero tolerance

policy to be an effective asset to their discipline policy. Despite the beliefs of some who perceive the zero tolerance policy to be too strict (Baldauf, 1999; Heaney & Michela, 1999) or too broad based (Chaddock, 1999), the faculty of Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary believe it is effective in preventing violence in their schools. As many other schools have found, preventative actions and plans are key to effective discipline policies (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The faculty of Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary are similar to other educators who perceive the zero tolerance policy to be a much-needed policy (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Finally, the second research question focused on the perception of violence occurring in the two schools being assessed. There was no overall significant difference between how Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary perceived the presence of violent acts in their respectful schools. Counter to the research of Furlong and Chung (1995), who found the perception of school violence to have significantly increased, Independence Public School and Deerwood Elementary had the perception that there were less violent acts occurring in their school. These perceptions were consistent with studies which found violence to not be increasing (Rubel, 1978; Scherer & Stimson, 1984; Wayson, 1985). When comparing Independence Public School to Deerwood Elementary on one particular question, the faculty perceptions at Deerwood Elementary were not as strong as those of Independence Public School. The faculty at Independence Public School perceived the likelihood of violent acts occurring

in their school to be less likely than did the faculty at Deerwood Elementary.

Overall, the results of the study suggest that in schools with zero tolerance policies in effect, these policies are generally perceived to be positive and beneficial to the overall discipline approach of the school. Secondly, while school personnel are not naive as to the amount of violence present in their schools, they do not perceive that violence within their respective schools has increased significantly overall.

Summary

The topic of school violence is something that affects society as a whole. To date, research has evaluated the number of violent acts taking place in schools in an attempt to determine whether the number of violent acts are increasing or decreasing (Rubel, 1978; Scherer & Stimson, 1984; Wayson, 1985; Grier & Chaddock, 1999). Research suggests violence in schools is not increasing (Rubel, 1978; Scherer & Stimson, 1984; Wayson, 1985), yet society perceives violence to be occurring in the schools and is demanding action be taken to prevent school violence. Where schools have begun to implement policies and procedures to address violence, there is currently a lack of research available to determine the most appropriate policy for schools to follow.

In past years, many districts have tried different strategies in an attempt to decrease violence in their schools. For example, many schools use the crisis intervention approach as

the treatment of choice (Wolfe, 1995; Chandras, 1999), while other school districts have found that preventative actions and plans are the key (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). There is not enough research available to determine which strategy is more effective or appropriate. There does not appear to be any consistency from one district to another; they each have their own idea of what works without research to support their decision.

Of those districts who have taken the preventative route, one particular strategy that has caught the attention of most over the past decade is that of the zero tolerance policy. Since its introduction in the schools in the 1990's, there has been considerable controversy regarding its efficacy (Western Governors' Association, 1999). Some believe the policy is too strict (Baldauf, 1999; Heaney & Michela, 1999) and that the policy is not flexible enough to accommodate less threatening situations. On the other hand, there are some who see the policy as being too broad based (Chaddock, 1999) and perceive there are not enough guidelines for making discipline decisions.

This controversy gives focus to another concern, the efficacy of the zero tolerance policy. Since this is such a recent policy, there has not been much opportunity to do research on it. So, its effectiveness is yet to be determined. Due to a lack of much needed research, there is no evidence of support leading either towards or against its effectiveness (Skiba &

Peterson, 1999).

Contributions of Current Research Investigation

To date, there have been problems with research in relation to school violence. Along with the obvious problem of a lack of research, there have also been problems with the research that is available. The major problems have been defining school violence and finding reliable sources of data. Over the years, the media has played a significant role in contributing to the perception that school violence is rampant through its coverage of recent tragic incidents (Chandras, 1999). These incidents have increased the fears of society, leading schools to take action before thoroughly researching and determining whether they are appropriate or effective.

As previously stated, due to the recent introduction of the zero tolerance policy, there is currently a lack of research available determining its effectiveness. It is for this reason that this research study is important. The intent of this study was to describe teachers' perception and appropriateness of the zero tolerance policy and offer school personnel actual data on which to base their decisions in relation to school violence.

With the fear of violence in the schools on the rise, it is important that research on prevention methods like the zero tolerance policy be carried out. Such research provides teachers the opportunity to offer their input and perceptions towards the zero tolerance policy's effect on their school. Also, the data

is most useful because it was obtained from people who are not only responsible for carrying out the policy, but are also possible victims if the policy fails.

Limitations of the Study

In retrospect, there are two limitations to the present study. First, the greatest limitation is the narrow sample. The sample was derived from two small schools in the Midwest. The results would be much more generalizable if the sample was more diverse, including schools from across the country.

A second limitation is related to the validity of the survey. To date, there is no empirical data to support the validity of the survey. As a result, there is no support to say the survey truly measures what it is intended to measure. Therefore, one can not conclude that the survey questions adequately answer the research questions.

Directions for Future Research

A more extensive survey, at the national level, would provide more applicable data as to how zero tolerance policies are actually perceived by teachers. Additionally, it might be interesting to obtain perceptions of administration, parents, and students in an effort to determine if different groups perceive the policy similarly.

The next step, then, would be to examine actual levels of violent incidents in schools with and without zero tolerance policies to determine if teachers' perception of its perceived

effectiveness are actually supported by reduced incidents of violence (i.e. perceived vs. actual effectiveness).

Conclusion

In conclusion, violence in the schools is a topic of challenge for every district. Currently, there are discipline policies in place, such as the zero tolerance policy, that are perceived by some to help decrease the frequency of violent incidents. As this research has shown, schools which currently have the zero tolerance policy in place acknowledge it as being beneficial.

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Appendix A

May 31, 2000

Dear Teacher:

I am writing to request your participation in a survey of the perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of the zero tolerance policy, in relation to school violence. The survey is designed to be completed in about ten minutes. It should be returned in the enclosed, self-addressed envelope at your earliest convenience, and no later than November 15, 2000.

While your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, I hope that you will choose to participate. If you choose not to participate, please indicate such on the survey and return it to avoid follow-up requests. All responses will be treated with confidentiality and the data will be entered so that no respondent is identifiable. Only group results will be reported.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this project. Please feel free to call me at (715) 233-1272, or my advisor at (715) 232-2229, if you have any questions regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Dana R. Konter, MS.Ed.
UW-Stout Graduate Student
School Psychology

Dr. Denise Maricle, Ph.D.
UW-Stout Professor
Dept. of School Psychology
Research Advisor

Please rate the following statements related to your perceptions of the zero tolerance policy in relation to school violence. Indicate your choice by circling a number from 1 to 5.

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly Agree 5 = Not Applicable

Section 2:

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I perceive violence in schools to be increasing. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. I believe violence in our school is an area of concern. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Violent acts in schools across the country are occurring often. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Violent acts occur in our school often. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Our school has a defined discipline policy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Our school has a clearly stated purpose behind their discipline policy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I understand our school discipline policy; it is straight-forward. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Our school discipline policy is strictly enforced. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Our discipline policy is effective. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I understand the zero tolerance policy (in relation to school violence). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Our school effectively carries out its zero tolerance policy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Our schools zero tolerance policy allows no room for error. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Zero tolerance policies are too strict. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. Zero tolerance policies are NOT effective | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Our schools zero tolerance policy fulfills the intended purpose behind the discipline policy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Our schools zero tolerance policy does NOT interfere with our schools mission and goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. Zero tolerance is a necessary disciplinary policy in schools across the country. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |