ABSTRACT. This article examines how school staff conceptualize their work with youths in an alternative school for weapon policy offenders after having undergone at least one year of a whole-school violence prevention program conducted by the Syracuse University Violence Prevention Project. The article examines the intent of school staff, their ideas, perspectives, and language about youths, violence, and schooling, and provides insights into the challenges and benefits of a whole-school approach to violence prevention. Their insights highlight what is needed for a violence prevention program to be successful. A major issue raised in the article is the importance of linking social learning and academics in violence prevention strategies, and of sustaining collaborative efforts.
that connect conflict resolution to acts of justice and support for youths’ intellectual and emotional lives. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Whole-school violence prevention, school violence, alternative schools, urban education, social learning, academics, anger management

Alternative schools have a long and complex history. In the mid-twentieth century, their popularity reflected a desire to offer mostly middle-class students progressive educational experiences, in schools such as Summerhill, the Ithaca Alternative School, and the City and Country School in New York City. More recently, though, the burgeoning of alternative schools results from discipline and weapon policies, and especially expulsion policies, adopted by public schools: if schools are going to expel students in greater numbers, then they need a place to put them.

The focus of this article is on a violence prevention program in an alternative school for teenagers in a mid-size city in upstate New York, and on how the school staff conceptualized their work after having experienced at least one year of the violence prevention program. The school was set up specifically for students caught in possession of a weapon in their original public schools.

The violence prevention program was initiated by the Syracuse University Violence Prevention Project (SUVPP), a consortium member of the Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence. Each of seven universities in the consortium teamed with a school or school district to study the results of an intervention over a two-year period. SUVPP’s whole-school approach to violence prevention included a year-long course for all students on prosocial skills and anger management, and the incorporation of conflict resolution strategies into the daily academic curriculum of the school. Though we refer to the initiatives at the school as a violence prevention program, the program was multifaceted with roots in practices developed by Arnold Goldstein and Ellen McGinnis (1997), Forrest Gathercoal (1990), and others who have introduced strategies for successful anger-management, conflict resolution, mediation, and civic education. The violence prevention
program at the alternative school linked the academic and social aspects of schooling, maintaining the value in each, and, as Joan Burstyn and Rebecca Stevens (2001, p. 142) pointed out, took as their starting point the belief that violence prevention should become a focus in our public schools because “academic excellence for the individual flourishes within a civil society where citizens demonstrate concern and compassion for one another.”

The violence prevention program had several strands: it provided workshops for teachers, administrators, hall monitors, teaching assistants, the school secretary, nurse, and police officer, to explain the curriculum in prosocial skills and anger management and to engage them in brainstorming how they might reinforce what was being taught in it. The program also included a prosocial skills and anger management class for students that challenged them to improve their behaviors, and also taught them academic skills associated with logic, problem-solving, and debate. During the 1998-1999 school year, students attended the class only once a week, as part of a community service component of the curriculum. Beginning with the school year 1999-2000, however, the class was included in the regular curriculum. Students attended it every other day, and they received a grade for the course. Through “lab experiences” specially designed for them in Art and in a Radio Forum, (where a small group of students recorded the voices of their peers in the neighborhood for a documentary about their lives that was broadcast on local radio), students were offered safe environments in which to practice the skills they had learned in their prosocial skills class.

Until 1999, when the school day was lengthened, students attended Garfield, the alternative school, for a shortened school day. About 100 students attended the school each year in what one teacher called a “rolling in and rolling out” fashion. At times enrollment could drop to about 60 students, because students were assigned to the school only upon committing a weapons violation. When that occurred, students attended a discipline hearing where the length of their expulsion from the regular public schools was determined. They could be assigned to Garfield for a minimum of one marking period up to one calendar year. Most students attended for several months and there was a constant stream of students moving in and out of the school.

At the beginning of the 1998-1999 school year, the majority of teachers at Garfield were part-time. Some had attended workshops on violence prevention in the past, and one had been trained as a mediator. Because of budget cuts in the Northeast City School District, staff reassignments were made just prior to the opening of the 1998-1999 school
year. The man who had directed Garfield since its founding in 1994 was replaced by a woman with a longer history in the City School District as both teacher and administrator. In March, 1999, she successfully negotiated with the district an improvement of the part-time teachers’ situation; some were appointed as full time teachers, others, while remaining part-time, were provided with additional benefits. During the previous year, 1997-1998, Garfield had been located in a high-crime area in a dilapidated building that had once been a Catholic elementary school. In late August 1998, the school was moved downtown to a newly renovated building, the city’s former public library. Because the interviews reported in this article were conducted in 1999 and 2000, the comments made by the teachers were colored by these changes at the school.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The research reported here is based on interviews with 22 staff members at Garfield. Each participant was interviewed at least twice, once in 1999 and then again in 2000. The research is ongoing and what is reported here is one part of a larger study that has included surveys, evaluations, the acquisition of quantitative data, and longitudinal research. As Deirdre Kelly (1998) pointed out, teachers do not simply implement ready-made programs and policies beamed into schools from above, they “actively realize policy,” and in the process of converting plans and goals into action they, in a sense, make policy. Between the making of an initiative and its implementation lies the conceptualization of the project by teachers and other school staff charged with translating it into action. This article examines a school staff’s ways of conceptualizing and talking about the intent of a policy (in this case, the city’s effort to develop an alternative school for students who have violated weapon restrictions) and how they felt they should go about the implementation of the program instituted in the school (in this case, the violence prevention program introduced by the Syracuse University Violence Prevention Project).

Though this article does not include site-based observational data that describe the processes of the violence prevention program, it does analyze the thinking of the staff as they experienced the violence prevention program in the school. It examines the intent of school staff, their ideas, perspectives, and language about youth, violence, and schooling. It represents the people who work closely with troubled
youths—those in alternative schools such as Garfield—and foregrounds their knowledge, expertise, and decisions.

The interview data are examined in two ways. First, they are examined for the teachers’ insights into schooling, violence, and the city youths they work with. Secondly, the language in the interview transcripts is analyzed for what it says about the teachers. These two ways of looking at language are described by Donald Freeman (1996) as being, in the first case, “representational,” and in the second case, “presentational.” Freeman (1996, p. 733) pointed out that the study of what people know usually turns on an analysis of what they say they know: “Words are taken as providing a vehicle for thought . . . thus, teachers’ words are taken for their capacity to reveal what is in the users’ minds and therefore to represent their thinking.” In the second case, the words that teachers use, and the meanings of those words, are understood not as shedding truth on the world, but as conveying meanings about themselves and their roles in schools. Of course, the ways that language presents ideas about the world and the meaning embedded in that language are not mutually exclusive, and for this reason, the article examines both the meanings of what teachers say and the knowledge presented by teachers as they talk about their jobs working with troubled students in a city alternative school.

**BENEFITS OF THE VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM**

When examining how school staff viewed the effectiveness of the violence prevention program, we found that they were almost unanimously in favor of the program, and saw its benefits on a daily basis. While school staff referred almost naturally to how the program had helped students to “recognize choices” and to understand how to “control their behavior”—which were common themes in the interviews—they also pointed out how the social learning aspect of violence prevention also influenced academics. The principal in 1999 summed up the program in this way: “It has been wonderful for us. It has given us support in terms of classroom teaching and being able to present the project’s ideas, issues, challenges, collaborative strategies, and alternatives for the students.” That the violence prevention program included academics, or what the principal referred to as “support in terms of classroom teaching” was evident in the words of other school staff. This, of course, is a defining characteristic of a whole-school approach to violence prevention.
Violence prevention should link progressive and classic notions of education, and therefore work not only to improve the behaviors of students, but to improve what the social studies teacher in the following quotation referred to as the “learning process.” Amid the usual talk of “improved behavior” and “less fights” was the understanding that violence prevention was not just about the actions of youths, but also about improved academics:

A lot of these students, in the last two years, have fought less—I think there has been one fight here this year. . . . They will talk it out upstairs, they will go behind closed doors to save face in front of the other kids and will talk it out. If worse comes to worse, they will ignore each other. I think that is really key, less fights, less disruption, more teaching, more learning. I’ve seen a couple of kids whose temperament has gone down and calmed down throughout the year and I think in large part it was due to the pro-social class. It has been a great benefit for students, but indirectly it comes back to the class and it affects the whole class. It helps out the teacher and the whole learning process.

The point that this teacher made about violence prevention improving teaching and learning in school was reiterated in interviews with other school staff. Though there was an overwhelming conviction that their jobs could not be divorced from the emotional lives of students and that their efforts should teach students social skills, which is undoubtedly an intention of most violence prevention programs, the effectiveness of the program was also seen in the opportunities it gave teachers to work more intently on academics. There are plenty of haughty claims made by those who promote violence prevention programs in schools—that school violence prevention can also prevent violence in the community, for example, or that violence prevention can alleviate violence even between warring gangs. Perhaps the most poignant, and politically pleasing, claim made by proponents is that a whole-school approach to violence prevention not only reduces violence but can promote academics, and perhaps, even, increase test scores. Whether or not students will score higher on standardized tests because of a whole-school approach to violence prevention, academics can be enhanced in several ways by such an approach. First, it can provide a way to connect to the social and emotional upbringing of youths. Second, violence prevention can teach about peace and conflict resolution at a time when incivility and violence remain problems in schools. In addition, it can, and should, in-
crease students’ reasoning abilities, enable students to problem-solve better, increase their reading and debating skills, and, in general, enhance the effectiveness of an academic curriculum.

While school staff made clear the importance and benefits of a whole-school approach to violence prevention that helped in the everyday teaching and learning processes of the school, they also remarked about the short-term benefits by explaining how students changed their behaviors for the better, as pointed out in the previous quotation by the social studies teacher. Several remarked that after two years of the violence prevention program there were noticeable differences in the climate of the school and that the behaviors of students had improved. Ian Rogers, a special education teacher, explained that the violence prevention program taught students how to recognize their “bad choices” and replace them with the “right choices.” He noted:

I think it makes a huge difference in the fact that the students have choices that they can make, [that] they become aware of. A lot of our students don’t make good choices. They are good kids who make bad choices and I think sometimes those are bad choices because they don’t know there is an opportunity to make a different decision that would change the course of their actions. I believe [the violence prevention program] makes them at least aware of those decisions, that they can make different decisions. I think that affects how they perceive their choice-making after taking the classes.

Some school staff, who noted that there were fewer fights in the school, could not be sure that was due to the violence prevention program. Lance Renski, a teaching assistant, explained: “The only thing I can say is we haven’t had many fights this year like in the past years. But as far as seeing them [the students] going ahead and using de-escalating skills, I don’t know. I haven’t really seen that.” That nearly all school staff saw benefits to the program is one indication that the program did benefit the school. However, if the point of the violence prevention program at Garfield was to do more than change the environment there, if it was also intended to reduce violence in the city’s public schools by enabling students who entered Garfield to return to regular high schools and middle schools and to be successful there, then further longitudinal research is needed (and is, indeed, being undertaken currently by the Syracuse University Violence Prevention Project.) Lewis Reid, a business and computer teacher, hinted at this point, as well, when he remarked, “You
don’t really know whether the program is effective until the kids are two or three years out.”

The school counselor made a similar remark, as pointed out in the next quotation. She reiterated an important message made by several staff members, including those quoted earlier. Since the violence prevention program was, at least partially, integrated throughout the curriculum and since the prosocial skills class itself included academic lessons in addition to training in anger-management, it had what Crary (1992) called a “spreading effect.” Under the best circumstances, violence prevention and conflict resolution programs in schools can transcend the rather narrow intent of teaching kids to make “good choices” and can, in addition, improve both academics and the climate of a school. Most school staff held the violence prevention program to both of these standards. The counselor, for example, asked about students who had left the program, replied:

When we return them to [their regular public] school, what happens to them? Did they continue on, did they stay mainstream, did they end up going to the other alternative school, or did they drop out or whatever? I think those kinds of pictures would statistically give us a good idea of whether it has had an effect or not. This is the first year that it [the violence prevention program] has been of this magnitude. Yes, I see it having an effect. I think one of the biggest things is kind of a vicarious thing, but I think one of the biggest differences is that the teachers are more and more aware of the fact that there are alternatives to dealing with students.

According to this group of school staff, the benefits of violence prevention programs depended on several outcomes and changes that they wanted to see. These included reductions in fighting and other forms of violence, how well the students improved in their academic subject areas, and whether or not students, who were previously unable to, were now able to succeed in their regular schools. Succeeding in their regular schools was premised on the belief that it was their neighborhood public schools that would improve students’ life-chances and, in the words of one teacher, “make something of themselves.” In many ways, the teachers focused on the students and their chances, changes, and improvements.

However, there was another aspect of the violence prevention program that school staff saw as part of its benefits and positive outcomes: the power to change school practices and the behaviors not of students,
but of teachers and other school staff. As the counselor explained, the program had the positive effect where “teachers are more and more aware of the fact that there are alternatives to dealing with students.” In this case, though, when school staff discussed the benefits of the program, often they talked about the benefits that it offered other staff members not themselves. The counselor, for instance, saw clearly that it helped the teachers. The administrators pointed out how it helped teachers and students, but again, rarely themselves.

**TEACHER SELF-REFLECTION**

**AND UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS**

In spite of this shortcoming in the self-reflections of the adults, there were occasional examples given by some school staff that highlighted the benefits that the program could offer to their own practices and methods of working with young people. Some school staff did talk about how violence prevention helped them improve their understandings about students and their lives, which ultimately helped them in their interactions with the students. One teacher, in a rather pointed example, explained how he had learned, through mediation, that he had offended a student. The teacher, out in the hallway between classes, had reprimanded a student for slacking-off by saying something to the effect that his mother worked two jobs to give him opportunities and basic necessities, and that the student just did not seem to appreciate that. From the teacher’s perspective, this was a mild reprimand, a kind of “you better shape-up” lecture given to a student who was not doing his work. However, from the student’s perspective, this was a reminder that he did not have a father and that his family was poor. The student took the teacher’s remark as an insult, and since the teacher was White and the student Black, may have even have seen racism in the remark. The student blew-up at the teacher and began yelling at him. As part of the violence prevention program in the school, they ended-up going to mediation. The teacher learned through the mediation that what he had said was disrespectful to the student, which was, to this teacher, an eye-opener. In their discussion of the violence prevention program, the teachers saw the violence prevention program as integral to the development of a link between the social and academic purposes of education. It is narrow thinking that channels all energy into either “serious” academics or “soft and fuzzy” social learning. It is even narrower thinking to assume
that the one does not have anything to do with the other. Some of the most successful education plans have combined these two aspects of life: the intellectual and social. The Coalition of Essential Schools, the Comer Project in New Haven, and many Jesuit traditions in education have all focused on the social upbringing, integrity, and intellectual capabilities of young people and, unlike much of education reform at the beginning of the 21st century, do not get caught up in discussions about which is better: academics or social learning. The push for academics is too often based on a social efficiency model of schooling where economic competitiveness with other nations sets the course for school practices. In a different way, but no less insidious, the singular focus on social learning can turn paternal and can perpetuate a way of looking at youths that sets them up as in need of a civilizing process offered by morally upright adults touting such “child-saving” activities as violence prevention programs (Casella, 2001).

These two goals of schooling, which are only part of what schools should do, cannot, and should not, be separated. Taken together, they make for what is needed to help young people to succeed in life: they provide the knowledge and confidence, intellect and positive demeanor, the wisdom and social capital to succeed in a world that relies heavily on intellect and interpersonal skills (rather than brute force) in the workplace. To improve social learning and academics is to provide students with the will, capabilities, and steadfast determination to work individually and cooperatively with others to improve their standing in life.

Violence prevention programs become doubly beneficial when they are offered to school staff. The teacher who learns about students—how, for example, they interpret the teacher’s rebukes—is a teacher better equipped to work closely with students to improve their hopes for the future. Nel Noddings (1992; 1996) is well-known for pointing out the integral place that caring has in schools (see also Gootman, 2001). Learning will not take place, or will take place only minimally, in a school where people do not care for or about other people. A whole-school approach to violence prevention, according to the people who work closest with students, improves not only the overall well-being of students but also the climate for teaching and learning. Those who argue that social learning, in the guise of violence prevention, has replaced hard academics in schools must take into account what these teachers say about the importance of attending to the emotional and social lives of students, not just for behavior management, but for improved learning.
In spite of the school staff’s positive reactions to the violence prevention program, though, there remained an aspect of detachment in what school staff said about it. While several discussed how the violence prevention program benefitted them or their classes, most discussions about benefits were projected out, at students. The reason for this has a lot to do with the way violence prevention is often implemented: it is “common knowledge” that to reduce violence in school one must improve the behaviors of youths. What McLeod, Eveland, and Nathanson (1997) referred to in their discussion about censorship as a “third-person effect” applies to teachers and violence prevention programs as well. The researchers, who pointed out how individuals who discussed the benefits of censorship talked about “some third person” that it benefitted, considered this a progressive, yet morally superior, way of thinking about “benefits.” Essentially, individuals saw benefits, but not for themselves, only for others. The teachers in this study, also, talked about a third-person effect. In this case, the “third person” was usually the student body, and sometimes other teachers. In this scenario, the program developers initiated the program, the school staff received the training, but it was the students who received the benefits. This perspective tends to be one of the downfalls of violence prevention programs: they are usually set up as something that will change a targeted audience. They do not stimulate reflection on the part of people doing the initiation or running the school. The difference here is subtle but important: when violence prevention aims to “fix” students it does not live up to its promises to promote change within the school. To say that a school’s ethos or climate can be improved by improving student behavior is only half the story. Changing the school also means changing the adults who work in it. Violence prevention must up-end the morally superior attitude of many adults who see in students only “bad choices.” This is a paradigm and social construction of schooling that is hard to dismantle, though teachers at Garfield, with the guidance of the violence prevention program, did begin to pick apart this way of thinking.

How teachers come to think about youths will affect how they interact with them. Ray Rist (1970) made this point many years ago in his discussion of the self-fulfilling prophecy, and it has been pointed out in other research on teaching and learning in more recent years (Darling-Hammond, 1997). When school initiatives, such as a whole-school approach, enable teachers to better understand the circumstances and lives of students, teachers are better prepared to work with them. Though the Syracuse University Violence Prevention Project may not have been directly responsible for the generally positive outlook of
teachers and their sympathetic attitudes toward students, the program set up the structures so that positive connections could be made between school staff and students. This was pointed out by the teacher who found out, through the mediation program, that he had insulted a student. In another case, a principal of Garfield discussed a situation that highlights how positive encounters between students and schools can be established when schools take the time, and have the resources, for meetings between students, staff, and families. In her discussion of how the violence prevention program had benefitted the school, the principal referred to the home visits made as part of these efforts:

We have one student who, though we wouldn’t say he doesn’t smoke a certain amount of weed on a regular basis, we thought he was high all the time. When [one staff member] went into the home, she saw the breathing apparatus that he has, and all the medications that he is on for allergies and asthma. He is really heavily medicated and when his eyes are blurring it’s not always that he is stoned. There were many occasions when he was not. He was just high on medication. This [understanding] gives me an opportunity to work better with him, to apologize for thinking he was always blasted when he was medicated. The parents have loved the concept [of home visits], they feel support and are encouraged that we really love and care about this child, when, in many previous instances they felt like the child has been given over and neglected, because the child is a pain in the neck.

While recognizing that many students at Garfield were difficult, and that some of them were truly a “pain in the neck,” the principal pointed out, nevertheless, that these were kids who had problems that went beyond what many school staff knew about. Teachers did not just talk about students and their individual behaviors and “bad choices,” they also talked about problems that kids had with gangs, poor neighborhoods, family breakdown, and pressures that most middle-class kids did not have. The school nurse put it this way: “The kids I see generally are from broken homes and I don’t see too many of them, but the ones I do see just come in to talk basically. They come in with a stomach ache, but I think they mostly want to come in just to talk.” School staff pointed out an obvious, but sometimes forgotten, truth about schooling: To improve schooling, staff must know about the lives of their students and sometimes, as a result, they will have their ideas about the students changed. However, for this to happen, there must be opportunities for
teachers to have their perspectives changed. No student wants to be accused of smoking marijuana when it is medication for poor health that is, at least partly, responsible for his red, dopey eyes. And yet, it took a home visit by an adult to recognize the circumstances of the student, and to see how school staff were mistaken about him. This story also brings to light a national problem involving poor health, and especially increased rates of asthma, among poor city children.

There was no doubt that the teachers at Garfield acknowledged the varied and not always pretty contexts of their students’ lives. They saw a side of these students that many adults did not. School staff sometimes made evident how their own perceptions changed for the better, and how other people who lived in the city did not know the students on a personal level and therefore could not see their good sides. Robert Nixon, a social studies teacher, noted how poorly the school was perceived by others in the city, something made evident in the way people responded when he got his job at the “weapons school.”

The term “weapons school” scares people away. Even now they will ask, “Where do you work? The weapons program! Oh! Wow! How is that?” People just misunderstand. I had kind of a sense of prejudice almost, pre-judging the school. “Wow, weapons, those are really tough kids, huh?” I just say, “No. Once you get to know these kids, these kids are regular kids who made a mistake and for the most part they are bright kids who just need attention and need smaller classrooms that they don’t get in their regular schools sometimes.”

The notion that the students at Garfield were not necessarily “bad kids” was reiterated by other school staff as well. A teaching assistant described the kids in this way: “Some of them have behavior problems and a few of them just made mistakes.” The Garfield staff neither romanticized the students nor vilified them. Some were, in the words of the principal quoted earlier, “a pain in the neck.” This teaching assistant recognized their “behavior problems.” However, the teachers also saw the flip side—how behaviors occur in a context and are not simply the result of choices that students make. Many school staff saw the “mistakes” that students made: what they meant by this, or what they were professing, was that students could be essentially innocent even though they broke school rules and even the law. This is the meaning of the story, repeated by several school staff, of the “forgot the knife in the backpack excuse.” Many school staff pointed out times when a student
had been found with a weapon (usually a knife or some kind of “cutter”) but had brought it to school inadvertently. The staff seemed to believe these claims. They saw the naturalness with which some students carried weapons or stored them in their pockets or in backpacks. For some youths, carrying a weapon, especially some kind of blade, is part and parcel to life in their neighborhood. What Elijah Anderson (1999) called a “code of the street” includes acts and manners that are taken-for-granted in predominantly poor and black city areas: the carrying of weapons is an example of this (see also, Kingery, Coggeshall, & Alford, 1999). Whether it be box cutters, guns, makeshift knives, or a “killer attitude,” the carrying of weapons is pretty much accepted in certain areas and even supported by parents who fear for the safety of their children. When a student brings a weapon to school he or she can often be making a mistake similar to another kid who forgets there is sports equipment, a book, or raffle ticket money in his or her backpack. This was something that many Garfield staff seemed to know, and often they used this knowledge to educate the young people with whom they worked.

VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN THE CONTEXT OF CITY LIFE

The school staff recognized that students’ lives were shaped by the environment and political realities of the city. In one of the more pointed charges made against the city and the school system, one staff member quipped that Garfield was, in the eyes of the city, “a jail,” a place to dump students who were difficult to educate in the public schools. He felt that students knew this. The business teacher, when asked what he would like to say about the school, explained: “If there is a message, this is it: We do suffer here from neglect from downtown. They don’t really look at this as a productive program, it is just a holding tank. If we could get beyond that, then somebody might start to pay attention and things could really happen.”

When asked about their jobs at the alternative school, many staff members said they were looked down upon by other city residents and sometimes they were shortchanged for resources by the city and the board of education (though in recent years the alternative school had acquired more resources and a better location and building). When discussing the history of the alternative school, several staff members described how the initial location of Garfield School had impacted students negatively. Since its opening, the location of Garfield had been
changed several times. Monica Donato, a school counselor, described the unnerving effect this had on her: “In 1994 we opened, and since then we have moved six times. It is getting to be very bothersome because the stuff I have collected I still have in my study. I don’t bother to bring it in since we are just going to move it and then I won’t be able to find it. So that really bothers me that we can’t just settle into a place and that we are always in flux.”

During the time of the research reported here, the alternative school was in downtown after being moved from a neighborhood street corner where warring gangs came together to fight. A science teacher explained in a matter-of-fact way that the old Garfield location scared many students and prevented them from coming to school. He summed up their thinking: “This is not my area, this is somebody else’s area. I don’t want to walk through it.” Isaac Lake, a hall monitor, explained how the former location of Garfield was on the dividing-line between the turf of two gangs. Students coming in on the Northeast City buses had to worry about two different “turfs” as they traveled to the school. There had been gang fights and attacks on buses in the past, so the worries were legitimate. The hall monitor explained the situation in a way that showed support for students and how violence prevention was not only an effort aimed at students but sometimes it was a battle against the city:

There were numerous complaints about how dangerous the neighborhood was and everything that was going on there. It was taking every opportunity that I had at board meetings and talking to commissioners and assistant superintendents— and I’m sure I had support of the building administrators also— for it to finally get through to them that that was a bad location. If we really wanted to do something to help the kids, we needed to be at a better location. [So, a former library, downtown, was decided on as the school’s new location.] There was a lot of resistance from the downtown committee because it was like, “Oh, you are taking the worst of the worst and you are going to put them down here, and they are going to destroy downtown and there is going to be robbing and this and that.” None of that happened. . . . And being here made the kids start to feel better about themselves because the old place was also like a gray, dreary building which a lot of people were saying is like an institution.

The teachers saw two sides of city life: the lives of students whose days were wrapped-up with gang tensions and neighborhood and fam-
ily strife; and the city life of the power-brokers who made decisions about the alternative school, controlling facilities and resources. In a rather old, de-industrialized city where resources were short and problems long, the alternative school had to vie for fiscal and material support just like other public institutions. Unfortunately, though, the alternative school was not recognized as something a city would like to publicize, and therefore support. However, the Syracuse University Violence Prevention Program may have changed that; an added bonus was that the program brought resources to the school, and did, also, increase the school’s reputation in the eyes of city-level school administrators who were impressed with new endeavors and the ability of the school to attract outside support and attention. An English teacher at the school pointed this out when he described changes that had occurred:

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At first, supplies were kind of scarce. We were kind of an island within the school district. We didn’t get a lot of communications about standards, expectations of students. We very rarely got invited to workshops. I was still part-time. We have a situation now, though, where we have a system where we have administrators. We are getting more support. We have the people from the university that have made a tremendous difference in the attitudes of our students. There is a little more stability...we are more connected to the district now.

The staff recognized differences between those students who still chose to stay in school, even to risk traveling through dangerous neighborhoods to get there, and those who did not. The students were “normal kids” as Lance Renski, a teaching assistant, explained: “You know there is a lot of gang activity going on and I see that everywhere pretty much, but I don’t think we have too many kids that are in gangs that go to this school. So they are just normal kids.” As with the hall monitor, who saw the success of Garfield intimately tied to battling “downtown,” these staff members pointed out subtleties that are important when considering the character of the students they worked with. Though the students were often troublesome, they continued to come to school, which can be quite a feat when the pull of the street is so strong. Though these were students who had been caught with weapons, the staff also pointed out that carrying a weapon did not necessarily mean that the students were dangerous or even capable of using the weapons they were caught with. These were subtleties that other people did not quite understand.
In addition to the success of students, what school staff also wanted was the success of the school. The business teacher wove into his criticisms his own promotion of the school. He complained that some school administrators in the city’s public schools would not send students to Garfield because, he said, “[to them] it would be like throwing them in a waste can.” He concluded, “There could be a lot more students here.” In a similar way, a school counselor talked about what the students were like at Garfield. She did so while responding to a question about what would indicate to her that a Garfield student was not ready to return to regular public school. She concluded that some students might never be ready to return:

Poor behavior, poor attendance, real oppositional stuff [that’s what would keep them at Garfield]. Because we are small enough, we know the kids we work with, I think, in a positive way, in a way that allows them to have room for growth, unlike in some of the big schools where it is totally just punitive. If you make a mistake, you get squashed in some way or another. Whereas we try to work with the students to promote growth. So, if none of that is working, then I would say they are just not ready and they may never be ready.

The Garfield staff almost always challenged negative views of youths. They got past surface appearances and came to understand the students in the context of their lives in the city and with families that could not always be supportive and resourceful. This understanding about their students, which undoubtedly influenced how they taught and interacted with them, was not something that emerged automatically as a result of working at the alternative school. As teachers pointed out, their notions of youths were partly a result of a culture in the school that promoted such thinking as well as the availability of activities—such as the prosocial skills class and home visits—that enabled new thinking about students to develop.

As public schooling becomes more fragmented—with increases not only in the numbers of alternative schools, but of charter schools, magnet schools, voucher schools, and other offshoots of the public school system—what is offered to different students in different schools will become of greater importance to those concerned about equity and academic achievement. Institutionalizing a school for youths who have been charged with weapons violations need not be a promotion of punitive ways to treat such youths (Tomczyk, 2000). The school counselor,
along with other staff members, pointed out that Garfield alternative school was, in fact, an alternative to the common method of punishing those who fell foul of a school district’s zero tolerance policy. Paradoxically, though, the school staff were part of the system of zero tolerance that required that students be expelled and placed in alternative settings such as Garfield after being found violating weapon policies. Without the zero tolerance policy, the Garfield school community would not exist.

CONCLUSION

While other research would be needed to allow readers to assess the validity of the teachers’ discussions about the effectiveness of the violence prevention program, their insights point out the considerations that must be accounted for when determining how a program is beneficial to students, and what is needed for a program to be beneficial. The school staff made clear that if a school does not have the resources to educate properly, then even the best programs will have little effect. Without honest and supportive city officials, school reform is nearly an impossible task to undertake. Tinkering with a faulty system may produce short-lived changes. However, for changes to be institutionalized in formal and informal ways, schools—as public systems—need the support of many levels of the public sphere, from parents whose children attend the schools to the officials who control money and merchandise that go to the schools.

Another issue raised in the teachers’ discussions was the importance of linking social learning and academics. Violence prevention was not just about preventing poor behavior by youths, though that was certainly an important part of it. Violence prevention was also an integral part of academics because the education of young people should include social learning. There is much in school that causes students to learn the naturalness of competition (testing, grades), segregation (tracking), and even aggressive behavior (some sports). Schooling also reinforces social hierarchies that identify certain students as smart and others as incapable (Eckert, 1989; Oakes, 1995). This is where violence prevention can promote an amalgam of activities, academic and interpersonal in nature, that bring to education the knowledge, relationships, and challenges needed to educate students for academic, social, and emotional success.
Research on the hidden curriculum has pointed out how students learn not only subject areas such as math and science but also values and ways of being, which inhere in the structure of schools, and which saturate teaching and learning (Apple, 1993; Foley, 1990). What is there, then, that teaches students peace and conflict resolution—what foregrounds these topics as important to us? If violence prevention is not integrated in the academic curriculum, it becomes an add-on approach, and what is taught then to students is that peace and conflict resolution are ancillary, incidental to academic subject areas, and to the skewed, sometimes unjust ways they are taught. When students learn subjects in school in ways that promote aggressiveness, or if they are not taught that aggressiveness is wrong, then we have lost sight of a key goal of education, which is to provide citizens with the capabilities to be a part of a civil and democratic society.

REFERENCES


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