SOCL 320 Post-Study Essay

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I was introduced to school violence through personal experiences in high school in addition to the media, but through this course in sociology, I have intensively studied the issue through in-class materials, readings and individual research. In this essay, I will incorporate empirical evidence to both support and contradict my initial beliefs about school violence, discuss how this research can be used to implement effective prevention programs in schools, and reflect on my changed understanding of school violence through this course.

In my pre-study essay, I described what I knew of school violence through anecdotal evidence gathered from personal experiences. My parents moved me through a total of four high schools due to violence prevalent within these schools, which made my educational experience very challenging during those years. In addition to this, the school systems often proved to be incompetent in regard to both keeping parents and students informed, as well as properly managing serious violent threats that were made. Furthermore, the school shooting in Parkland, Florida and the widespread media coverage that followed contributed to the uneasy atmosphere fellow students and I encountered in high school and the belief that rates of school violence are increasing. Additionally, I previously mentioned how reform regarding gun control legislation should be put in place in order to lower the amount of violence in schools.

When students don’t feel safe or comfortable at their own school, it can have a significant influence on their academics. It has been shown that unsafe school environments can not only cause stress for students and teachers, but also decrease students’ academic performance and test scores (Dworkin and Tobe, 2014). This reading supported my belief that the violence prevalent at my schools resulted in stress, which in turn led me to have a difficult time academically and socially.

A report from the Federal Bureau of Investigation states that information derived from news media “is not necessarily complete, accurate, or balanced,” commonly offering misinformation about the characterization of school shooters and school violence in general (O’Toole, 2000). This report also contradicted my belief that school violence is more prevalent, but rather the level of school violence in the United States is actually decreasing despite increased public concern resulting from publicized recent occurrences (O’Toole, 2000). The established use of social media and news media throughout the country has continued to provide incorrect and unsupported information, which has only further exacerbated the issue of school violence.

Adequate threat assessment processes were not effectively established or enforced at many of my high schools, leaving them ill-equipped to handling recurring violent or aggressive situations. In addition, threats and violent events that occurred at school were rarely conveyed to parents. Both the FBI (O’Toole, 2000) and U.S. Secret Service (2018) have stated that some form of a threat assessment process is imperative to have at schools in order to help alleviate school violence, which involves informing and communicating with parents.

Professional development for teachers is can also be a really important part of decreasing school violence. Providing workshops and lessons for teachers allows them to gather information on how and when to intervene when addressing bullying and make them aware of warning signs. Handling disruptions within the classroom can be stressful, so teachers often express the need for more training in regard to managing students’ behavioral problems (Orpinas and Home, 2004). This study discussed the implementation of the Guiding Responsibility and Expectations for Adolescents for Today and Tomorrow (GREAT) program in which middle school teachers participated in a 12-hour workshop and support group sessions (Orpinas and Home, 2004). The goals of the GREAT program were “(1) to increase teacher awareness of different types of aggression, risk factors, … and influence of the school climate on the child’s behavior; (2) to develop strategies that will prevent aggression; (3) to improve teacher management skills to reduce power struggles and aggression; and (4) to enhance skills to assist students who are the targets of aggression,” (Orpinas and Home, 2004). Educating teachers on these various skills, risk factors and strategies directly applicable to the classroom are vital in maintaining a safe and welcoming school atmosphere.

Connectedness between students and their family, school, community and religion has also been shown to increase hopefulness, which in turn decreases the amount of aggression and participation in violent activities. Batanova and Loukas (2013) found that school connectedness resulted in declining overt aggression in adolescent boys and family connectedness also resulted in lower levels of both overt and relational aggression in adolescent boys, demonstrating the significance of family and community involvement. This study concluded by illustrating the important role emotion processes play in aggression and violence, which must consequently be taken into account when creating and implementing anti-bullying and violence prevention programs.

Similarly, social and emotional learning can also positively affect education and have proved to result in improved social and emotional skills, fewer conduct problems and reduced emotional distress (Weissberg and Cascarino, 2013). Putting programs in place to include social and emotional learning in formal education would therefore be beneficial to the school environment and contribute to decreasing levels of school violence.

Through research, readings and lectures, this course has broadened my view of school violence to where I now recognize it a much more complex issue than I first understood it to be. Initially, I believed gun control reform was the sole solution to decreasing school violence, but this course presented abundant evidence that other aspects contribute and therefore need to be accounted for the multi-faceted solution to this problem. While I learned that levels of school violence are actually declining, this is still a concerning and crucial issue that requires reform and change. Many influential aspect that could contribute to a safer education system include, but are not limited to, professional development for teachers that focuses on school safety, safer designing and architecture of school buildings, prevention programs regarding bullying, mental health support for staff and students, and family and community involvement programs. This complex nature of such a large-scale and significant issue affecting the entire country requires a solution targeting these numerous contributing factors.

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