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Urban Education 2010; 45; 293

DOI: 10.1177/0042085910364475

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Urban Education
45(3) 293–311
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DOI: 10.1177/0042085910364475
<http://uex.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

Zero tolerance policy was created as a result of the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994. Varied views exist on zero tolerance policy that include its substantive impact, for whom it is intended, and its viability to address the problem of school violence. Parents, politicians, principals, and teachers have stated their views on the issues. However, there is a voice that is conspicuously absent in this dialogue—that is, students for whom the policy was created to protect. Therefore, in an effort to understand the impact of zero tolerance policy, this study examines urban student perceptions regarding their sense of safety in their schools.

Keywords

education policy, urban youth, school safety

Introduction

Michigan's zero tolerance policy is a result of the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandated all states receiving federal money must require local education agencies to expel from school [not less than 1 school year] any student found to have brought a weapon to school. In 1995, the state of

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Michigan adopted its version of zero tolerance policy in response to the heightened fear resulting in public outcry for stronger measures to address school safety concerns in light of the tragedies that have swept our nations' schools. Local school boards were entrusted with the responsibility to determine whether an incident violated zero tolerance policy and, if so, dispense the punishment.

The law originally drafted by Congress focused on truly dangerous and criminal behavior by a student(s), such as gun possession, on school property. Whereas, zero tolerance policies are school district policies that require predetermined consequences for specific violations (Sughrue, 2003). The policies were designed to punish those who engaged in egregious acts that potentially put themselves and others at risk of harm or danger (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Villarruel & Dunbar, 2006). However, many states, including Michigan, extended these laws to include weapons such as daggers, dirks, stilettos, knives with blades more than 3 inches, pocketknives opened by a mechanical device, iron bars, or brass knuckles (Advancement Project and Civil Rights Project, 2000; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002). In addition, zero tolerance policies have been extended to include more types of punishable behavior that have ranged from possession of drugs that include Midol and Aspirin to possession of toy guns, insubordination, and disruption (Schwartz & Rieser, 2001). Although many of these items pose little or no threat to school safety, students throughout the country have been expelled for having one of these items in their possession (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002, 2004; Henault, 2001; Sughrue, 2003; Villarruel & Dunbar, 2006).

With the increased pace and scope of parental challenges to zero tolerance policies, many stakeholders in education have questioned whether the policy is achieving its intended purpose. Although concern over the nature and application of zero tolerance policies has rightfully increased, this increase should not be interpreted as a lack of concern about ensuring a safe school environment. "In fact laws and policies governing criminal behavior in schools, which cover students who knowingly and intentionally bring weapons or illicit drugs to school, are recognized as legitimate" (Sughrue, 2003, p. 240). This is precisely the point of this study. If zero tolerance policy was implemented to support safe school environments, then mechanisms put in place toward that end must function properly and security must be enforced. However, the ambiguity around what constitutes an expulsionable offense has led to growing opposition, confusion, and disgruntlement from various factions of the school communities across the country about what exactly zero tolerance is and who is it

intended to serve? Therefore, we thought it important to provide background information on the opposing factions of the policy.

In an effort to explain public discourse around issues of school violence, which was the impetus for zero tolerance, John Devine (1996) in his book *Maximum Security* couches the public perception into two diametrically opposed tiers. The first he refers to as a “right-wing discourse,” which he describes as “chaotic,” meaning schools are viewed as being out of control. The second view is described as “mainstream liberal discourse,” which he suggests means to “minimizes it and psychologizes it (school violence) as a result of student alienation” (Devine, 1996, p. 21). The first view posits “closing the system (schools) down”; the second suggest that schools need to “reform its learning process.” In other words, the view of schools from right-wingers is that schools are in a situation of hopelessness as a result of moral and behavioral decay. Consequently, not much can be done to correct the situation therefore warranting school closures. This view places the blame on the victims (i.e., students).

The opposing view postulates that if children are absorbed in the matter of learning, behavior problems will take care of themselves. This view directly situates the blame within the structure of schools—that is, teachers engaged with the curriculum (that is so distant from students’ sense of reality) are unable to engage students in learning. As a result, students react to the disconnect within their learning environments through destructive behavioral patterns.

Zero tolerance policy aligns with the view that the moral fabric of those who attend inner-city schools is flawed, and therefore draconian measures must be instituted to address moral and behavioral decay. The punitive actions implicitly suggest that it is the victim who bears the responsibility and not the structure of schools themselves, as mainstreams liberals would suggest.

There are additional views on zero tolerance policy held by some school principals that shed still another light on the issue depending on the perch in which they rest. In a study of urban and rural school principals on zero tolerance policy, Dunbar and Villarruel (2004) learned that the perceived need for and the implementation of zero tolerance policy often depended on the community they served. That is, a majority of urban school principals in the study supported zero tolerance policy and hence have aligned themselves with the perception held by right-wingers that schools are in a chaotic state. Subsequently, their efforts are deemed as noble with the sole purpose of addressing moral decay in schools. Rural school principals, however, view(ed) the policy as an intrusion into the quintessential cultural fabric of their communities. So herein lies a third tier of perspectives regarding school violence and

subsequent zero tolerance policy. That is, in the case of rural principals, zero tolerance policy was an imposition that clearly (in their minds) had no relationship to the community they served. One rural principal noted that it was his impression that zero tolerance policy was instituted to address behavior issues in large urban schools (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2004).

A fourth tier of this ongoing dilemma around zero tolerance policy involves the disproportionately higher number of African American and Latino students suspended or expelled as a result of the modified version (by some states) of the original policy that sought to only expel students for egregious acts of behavior (Advancement Project and Civil Rights Project, 2000). It is evident that there exist varied views on zero tolerance policy that include its intent and its viability to address the perceived problem of school violence. Parents, politicians, principals, and teachers have stated their views on the issues. However, there is a voice that is conspicuously absent in this dialogue—that is, students for whom the policy was created to protect.

Much has been written about children who have been adversely impacted by zero tolerance policy. Infractions ranging from possession of aspirin to possession of toy guns have led to school suspensions or expulsions of students (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002, 2004; Henault, 2001; Sughrue, 2003; Villarruel & Dunbar, 2006). Yet there is paucity of literature on zero tolerance policy from the voices for whom the policy was designed to keep safe—that is, children who behave appropriately. A doctoral dissertation study titled “School-Wide Discipline in Urban High Schools” was conducted in an effort to provide insight on school staff and students’ perceptions of violence prevention strategies, including zero tolerance policies. In this study, the data revealed significant differences between security guards and urban students’ perceptions regarding zero tolerance policy in relation to fairness, impact on school safety, and overall utility (Thornburg, 2001). Hence, the findings in this study highlighted the need to conduct additional research on the impact and effectiveness of zero tolerance policy by soliciting the reactions and responses of urban school students. Therefore, the focus of this article is to provide a vehicle for the voices of inner-city students on their sense of safety in schools and the effectiveness of zero tolerance policy.

Context of the Problem

In theory, zero tolerance policies were intended to preserve safe school environments. It was intended to remove students who were the most disruptive and who had committed egregious acts of misconduct. However, the number of expulsions and suspensions began to increase to alarming

proportions with the onset of zero tolerance policy (Skiba & Leone, 2001). The rise in school expulsions/suspensions coupled with the increased pace and scope of governmental focus on school safety issues raised questions among lawmakers, educators, and the general public regarding the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies. The public began to call for policy reforms. They demanded that more of the responsibility and discretion to recommend suspension be placed on the on-site school administrators. As result, discipline concerns became the focus of attention at school board meetings throughout the country.

Zero tolerance policy has been met with stark criticism by the media, educators, administrators, and concerned parents for failing to improve school safety and its disproportionate impact on African American males (Casella, 2001; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Skiba & Leone, 2001). Although, several research studies have examined the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies through the perceptions of parents, administrators, and educators, little attention has been given to student perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of zero tolerance policies. Therefore, in an effort to understand the substantive impact of zero tolerance policy, this study examines the perceptions held by students attending a Midwest school district regarding their sense of safety in their schools.

Theoretical Framework

The street-level bureaucracy theory, developed by Michael Lipsky (1980) was employed as a theoretical lens to examine student perceptions of zero tolerance policies within their schools.

The street-level bureaucracy theory utilizes an integrated approach to examine policy implementation by focusing on the critical role of street-level bureaucrats as policy makers and their influence on policy outcomes. In other words, this theory highlights the significant players and their services to the quality, equality, or inequality of the policy's implementation because they are responsible for its enforcement. We argue that because street-level bureaucrats are charged with monitoring compliance they essentially become the policy makers.

Lipsky (1980) describes street-level bureaucrats as welfare departments, schools, legal aid officers, and lower courts. Tenets of the street-level bureaucracy theory posit that field-level workers serve as policy makers as a result of the tremendous amount of discretion and autonomy they are allotted within the organizational bureaucracy. The primary responsibility of street-level bureaucrats is to oversee and participate in the daily implementation of

public policies. The collective actions of individual field-level workers formulate agency behavior and the quality of services provided.

Street-level bureaucrats are bestowed with high degrees of discretion for several reasons. First, street-level bureaucrats work in multifaceted environments that warrant context-specific responses to issues that arise as opposed to following a programmed format applicable to all situations. Second, street-level bureaucrats' interactions with the population of people they oversee often require flexibility and compassion due to the potential impact their policy decisions may have on the lives of others. Lastly, high levels of discretion will remain an essential characteristic of street-level bureaucracy because it helps establish and crystallize the authoritative power street-level bureaucrats possess over the population for whom they serve.

The strategy utilized in this conceptual framework allowed us to examine student perceptions of the implementation of zero tolerance policy by street-level bureaucrats (i.e., security guards, teachers, and administrators) and student perception of school safety.

Method

Design and Participants

We employed a qualitative approach consisting of individual face-to-face interviews and focus groups to garner an understanding of student perceptions of zero tolerance policy. We selected qualitative methodology because it offered participants an opportunity to provide researchers with rich, in-depth descriptions of the impact and effectiveness of zero tolerance policy on school safety. Historically, the voices of African American youth in urban schools have been noticeably absent from educational research (Lattimore, 2001). Miron, Bogotch, and Biesta (2001) suggest that by incorporating the voices of poor students (in this study African American) we can better understand their social and academic needs. They also postulate the "possibilities for restructuring public high schools in the inner-city are increased when we listen to the students and prudently act on this knowledge to further academic equity and excellence" (p. 491).

Therefore, the selection of qualitative methods was also intended to create a forum for underrepresented groups' perspectives and voices to be articulated (Freeman, 1997; Tierney, 1993). We offer a diagnosis of social reality, that is, what is actually occurring inside this inner-city school district as perceived and lived by these students participating in our study. School safety is an issue these students face daily despite the intrusiveness of cameras, metal

detectors, and their perception of the seemingly ineffective security guards. Students walk into these buildings under the guise of safety yet report that they do not feel safe at all.

We acknowledge that we may garner a different perspective from students who have had problems with suspension or expulsion in the past or from students who have come to normalize the action of having to go through metal detectors. We also recognize that students perceive themselves as under the scrutiny of constant monitoring in their multiple walks in life and therefore have come to operate as though this behavior is standard operating procedure. Thus, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, students align their behaviors to reflect the publicly held perceptions of who they are. However, the groups of students participating in this study do not prescribe to the belief that they are disruptive students. In fact, these students attend school with other students who are in fact disruptive, which adversely impact their educational learning environment. Hence, these students feel there is a need for security that is effective.

Participants

This study comprised of 90 students in Grades 11 through 12 from 15 different urban high schools in the Midwest. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 19 ($M = 17.5$), with 15% male and 85% female. The ethnic distribution was 99% African American and 1% Hispanic. Students in this study were all participants in a college enrichment program designed to enhance their preparation for college entrance with the hope to pursue a career in teaching. The enrichment program provides urban students opportunities to become youth leaders in their communities through their participation in research and advocacy projects concerning the conditions of schooling in their city. We acknowledge that all of these students were above average academically and that the majority of them will enroll in college in the near future.

Data Collection and Analysis

Students were given a series of open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of zero tolerance policy. A total of 25 students were interviewed individually, and all 90 students participated in the focus groups. The interview format was designed to promote an environment conducive to collecting reliable data. Students were interviewed in pairs, all from the same classroom to ensure that they felt comfortable when talking among each other. Individual interviews lasted between 30 to 40 min. Focus group

interviews consisted of 4 to 5 students and lasted approximately 50 min to an hour. Student focus group and interview responses were transcribed and coded for emerging themes.

Local Context

We began this study by posing the question as to what zero tolerance policy is? We thought it an appropriate question because one of the themes of the enrichment program centered on social justice. For our purpose, social justice meant an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, security, opportunities, obligations, social benefits, and fair treatment (Garner, 2004). We provided student participants with a brief summary of zero tolerance policy and its adverse impact on students of color. We expected students to be enraged by the disproportionately high numbers of Africa American and Latino students suspended or expelled from school. We could not have been more grossly mistaken. Students began to exchange stories about ineffective security monitoring equipment, miscarriages of justice with respect to treatment of drug dealers in their schools, and an inequitable dual system of enforcement, which included ineffective monitoring of students committing suspendable/expellable offenses in school. Students who lived the experience of attending an inner-city school challenged our, the authors as outsiders looking in, notions of zero tolerance policy.

Although much of the literature portrays inner-city schools using descriptors such as disengaged students, poor communities, and disinterested and unqualified teachers, all of these students were engaged in this enrichment program and particularly engaged in their responses to our query. Their perceptions were almost unanimous, respecting the need to have security on campus and in the schools. On several occasions, student participants complained that the some security guards were complicit or complacent in looking past students who engage in illicit activities. By providing students with a venue for open communication, we sought to understand their reality with respect to zero tolerance policy and its impact on their safety and learning.

Students' statements were interpreted as both moral in the sense of "doing the right thing" and practical in the sense of believing that all schools should be safe. This was stated in a very matter of fact way. In a more practical sense, one student asked, "How are we expected to learn when we have to be worried about our own safety?" Through our analysis, it became clear that students were comfortable describing their lived experiences regarding their

safety in school. In some instances, students expressed angry in telling their stories. One lamented, "Clearly school is not supposed to be like this. We should not be scared for our safety while trying to learn." For some, noncompliance with zero tolerance policy was perceived as normal. They expressed that the only students who followed the rules were those who would not violate them in the first place. Others suggested that zero tolerance did not exist. Still others responded in what could have been a chorus that chimed, "Zero tolerance is a joke; even the security guards are out of order!"

We believe this method of gathering data was a morally viable option because first we listened to the students. More specifically, the first phase of our data-collection process was more of an open dialogue session rather than an interview. Students were able to voice their experiences without being judged. In addition, we believe that students in some sense were empowered because they were able to critically assess their school environment to those who are in the field of education and to whom there was a great degree of trust. "Through engagement in students' voices, educators may be instructed in ways to morally link school practices to students' own conceptions of morality" (Miron et al., 2001, p. 493). What follows is a snapshot of the interviews and a discussion of the themes that emerged.

Findings

Students' perspectives were illuminated and understood through Michael Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy framework. Examined within this framework, urban high school students revealed that there is a fundamental philosophical difference between what zero tolerance policy purports to accomplish and the actual policy outcome. Although zero tolerance policy was designed to promote a safe learning environment, students overwhelmingly indicated that they perceive zero tolerance policy as ineffective and still do not feel safe in their schools. The following themes, which emerged in this study, collectively illustrate the underlying explanations for student concerns and criticism of zero tolerance policy: (a) inadequate security, (b) quality of security services, and (c) lack of consistency in policy enforcement. The following section will examine these three central themes and the policy implications.

Inadequate Security

Many urban school districts have employed metal detectors, security guards, and surveillance cameras in an effort to provide a safer environment for

students. In addition, schools have expanded the use of identification badges in high schools and middle schools for both teachers and students. The main entrances of many of the schools are no longer used as an added security measure as well. Despite increases in security, many urban students still do not feel safe in their schools. Although it appears that school safety is a high priority in many urban schools, respondents in this study clearly indicate that safety continues to be an issue of concern. The following statements illustrate student concerns:

Security guards are underpaid. Since they are not paid enough money, they aren't going to do their job correctly. Security guards are the main reason things happen in our high school. They make friends with the students who constantly get in trouble. At my school, the security guards are on a first-name basis with the students. Also they allow the students to sit at the desk with them during class hours. (Darin)

Zero tolerance is ineffective in our high school because they don't have enough security guards. My school has about four security guards, in a school of a population near 3,000 students. There are just not enough security guards. This shortage is due to a deficit in the budget that has been overused. (Lanie)

Our metal detectors don't work, so anybody can bring a weapon in the building. Our principal says we don't have any money to buy new ones. (Colin)

One day this boy came to our school and walked through our metal detector with a weapon. The metal detectors did not go off. He was in class with the weapon, and he told the teacher if he doesn't give him a passing grade he would stab him. (Tiara)

School seems to be a place where people show off their various weapons, including guns. The zero tolerance policy is not effective. (Chezeka)

The first statement suggests that there is no demarcation between the students and the individual charged with providing school safety. It suggests that some students would prefer a more formal relationship with security guards rather than an informal (first-name basis) relationship. The informal interaction seems to diminish students' sense of the authority

of security. Based on student perceptions, security guards befriend students whom behave inappropriately, which raises concerns among other students with regard to the ability of security guards to enforce zero tolerance policy uniformly. In addition, it is also implied that students who carry weapons are not afraid of consequences if found with a weapon because there is a good chance that the detectors would not detect them. However, these students are brazen enough to let others know they have a weapon. Furthermore, teachers must have a sense of uncertainty when confronted by a noncomplying student. How does this uneasiness affect their ability to instruct, and what impact does this have on the majority of students who want to learn?

The statement by the fourth student, Chezeka, suggests a paradigm shift in student culture in relation to their perceptions of the role of guns in school. Collectively, the student comments suggest that schools are perceived as a venue to showcase weapons to fellow peers, as opposed to an environment where learning takes place. This type of social integration of guns into schools supports the notion that weapons may be perceived as a status symbol in the school context, which contradicts studies, which suggest that students bring weapons to school as a means of protection (Duker, 1994; Sheley & Wright, 1993). In essence, zero tolerance policy does not appear to deter some students from bringing weapons to school.

Quality of Security Service

In examining student comments through the street-level bureaucracy framework, it appears that inadequate resources and inappropriate relationships between security guards and some students inhibit the successful implementation of zero tolerance policies in urban schools. Insufficient resources, which are characteristics of urban schools, directly hinder the street-level bureaucrats' (i.e., security guards' and teachers') ability to successfully implement zero tolerance policy in their schools. For instance, faulty metal detectors require school security staff to manually check each student, which is time consuming and burdensome. The absence of female guards may inhibit the search of female students. Sometimes, students go unchecked, which can prove beneficial for students attempting to bring weapons into school. These situations often promote a high intensity school environment due to the risk of unchecked students carrying weapons into the school. Working under these conditions may serve as breeding grounds for school staff to abuse the considerable amount of discretion given them as they struggle to implement policy with insufficient resources. The abuse of discretion

by street-level bureaucrats typically results in poor delivery of services and inconsistent policy application (Lipsky, 1980). This abuse of discretion is illustrated in the following:

We have security guards that are very lazy and do not take a big enough action on major situations. (Kami)

The security guards care more about money than protecting us. I have seen trouble makers in our school give security guards money in the morning to let them walk around the outside of metal detectors so they can bring weapons into school. (Lanie)

Even though we got metal detectors, people still come through with weapons. Sometimes the security staff doesn't say anything. (Chris)

I believe zero tolerance is not effective. Each morning before entering the building for class, we have to walk through metal detectors. Then we have to give our bags to the people at the door so that they can search through them. Many times we walk through the door and it beeps, but still they don't check us properly as they should. Bags are simply often given a quick look-see, and students are told to move on. (Sonya)

The above students' comments are congruent with tenets of street-level bureaucracy theory, which purports that resource constraints are commonplace within organizational bureaucracies. Street-level bureaucrats are often expected to yield high performance despite (in this instance) insufficient numbers of security guards. Evidenced by the students' comments, this type of working environment often produces frustration, high anxiety, and lack of motivation among street-level bureaucrats, which can manifest into poor performance. However, insufficient resources do not explain why security guards allow disruptive students to sit at the guard station with them. Could it be that there is nowhere else to send them, or is there a perception (on the part of the guards) that these students are better off in school than out of school, or could it be that in the minds of security these students don't pose a real threat? In cases like the above, are security guards utilizing their discretion and therefore determining policy as Lipsky suggests? Are they using their flexibility and compassion in situations where they may see themselves in these disruptive students and therefore decide to give some

students another chance by not having them expelled from school? Do these security guards see themselves not only as security but also as quasi social workers? Are they in schools to also build relationships with students, or are they simply there to enforce the policy? Would more of the same type of security address student safety concerns?

Lack of Consistency in Policy Enforcement

School staff as street-level bureaucrats are given considerable discretion in implementing sanctions for student violations of zero tolerance policies. This high level of discretion and autonomy is given to school staff with the understanding that they will apply traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice when evaluating disciplinary issues. Simply meaning, school staffs are expected to enforce zero tolerance policy irrespective of their personal biases or relationships with students. However, the urban high school students participating in this study revealed that they do not perceive their school staff as unbiased in their enforcement of zero tolerance policy. To the contrary, student statements convey a school environment riddled with double standards in applying zero tolerance sanctions based on school staffs' personal relationships with the student. The statements below address student perceptions of school staffs' inability to make unbiased decisions in implementing zero tolerance policy.

The staff in school show favoritism most of the time. If they like a student, they let the student get away with everything. If they don't like the student, they suspend the student every chance they get. (Tanzia)

I don't think the policy is enforced fairly to everyone. Mostly because when students do something to break the zero policy rules, a staff member might let it slide because of the relationship the student and staff member have. But if another student breaks that same rule, the staff member would punish that student. (Tamirra)

Whether or not you get in trouble just depends on whether the people who work at the school like you. If they like you, you keep getting second chances. If they don't like you, they kick you out the first time. (Kyle)

Student perception of the abuse of discretion by school administrators, teachers, and security guards is further exemplified in the statements below:

No, zero tolerance is not effective because they play favoritism to those whom are on sports teams and are physically active in the schools. (Lanie)

I don't think zero tolerance is effective because the staff, at my school, let certain students get away with things—mostly, the athletes and others who participant in school activities. (James)

Zero tolerance policy does not work because it hurts us kids whose parents don't have good jobs. They give students second chances if their parents have money but don't do the same for students whose parents are on welfare and struggling. They act like poor kids don't deserve second chances because they think we are going to end up in jail anyway. (Janelle)

In my ninth grade year, a fellow freshman girl was found with a gun in her book bag. It belonged to a junior who was on the varsity football team. Both students should have been excluded for at least a year, but they both were let go with only a slap on the wrist. The girls' parents argued that she was manipulated by an older boy, and he got off for his superstar role on the football team. (Otis)

According to student perceptions, school officials determine whether to enforce zero tolerance policy based on the accused student's status in the school. Student athletes appear to receive a "get out of jail free pass," whereas other students not as active in extracurricular activities are more likely to be suspended or expelled. These findings exemplify the prejudicial influence of "class, academics, and the value of students to school systems" in administering zero tolerance policy in schools (Casella, 2001, p. 877).

Zero tolerance policy and its capacity to assure urban school students a sense of school safety has failed in the minds of those to whom the policy was designed to make safe. Instead, the policy and the way it has been instituted leave too much discretion in the hands of some who exercise it inappropriately. Students are left sensing that the policy is not enforced uniformly, and as a result students who behave inappropriately are not held accountable for their actions and are viewed as friends of security. Imagine walking by a security table and seeing a student known to carry a weapon sitting and talking with the guard. We would imagine that a student would be less likely to report this student to security for inappropriate behavior for fear of retaliation. Furthermore, if there is a perception that student athletes and

others are treated favorably despite inappropriate behavior, why would anyone comply with the policy?

Students reported smelling marijuana on students who walked past security who confronted them yet still allowed the student to continue to class without sanctions. If there is what appears to be security, yet it is viewed as essentially ineffective, this will likely prompt complying students to entrust their safety in their own hands. How many students are victimized by zero tolerance policy because they had to protect themselves from those noncomplying students? How many felt the need to bring weapons to school for their own safety, believing that the perpetrator would have a weapon? In addition, how many students attend school hoping to simply learn as much as the noncomplying students will allow them to as a result of their inappropriate behavior?—that is, students who simply disappear in a classroom hoping to go unnoticed by noncomplying students. Numerous studies report that a disproportionately large amount of classroom time is spent on addressing inappropriate behavior (Lopes, 2004; Salend & Sylvestre, 2005; Smith, 2000). Will more security address this issue? Perhaps, it would if the quality of security is improved. If the cameras and metal detectors worked, students would likely feel secure in their building. In addition, school safety would improve if the street-level bureaucrats had a greater stake in the safety of all students.

Based on the perceptions of urban high school students, zero tolerance policy has not substantively impacted their sense of feeling safe in school. This is primarily due to inconsistency in its enforcement by school staffs, which has undermined students' confidence in the school's capacity to foster a safe learning environment. Children and teachers must feel safe in schools, and parents must be secure in their sense of their child's safety. Student concern for their safety has a direct affect on their personal, social, and academic growth. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, an individual's innate need to feel safe and secure must be met to promote personal growth (Maslow & Lowery, 1998). Maslow posits that an individual's needs for safety include needs for structure, order, security, and predictability, all of which are typically not present in unsafe learning environments. Maslow's paradigm posits that children will not achieve their full potential unless their safety needs are sufficiently met. This notion raises grave concerns considering the recent influx of violence in schools, such as the 2006 incidents in Paradise, Pennsylvania, involving the schoolhouse shooting death of five Amish children and the Platte Canyon High School shooting in which six female students were held hostage (McNeal, 2007). According to Maslow, these types of violent crimes in schools undermine students' sense of safety, which is a basic need for human growth.

How can children possibly achieve their full academic potential in a learning environment that lacks stability and consistency? As incidents of school violence continue to rise on both a local and national level, it is understandable that students may experience difficulty learning in an environment they deem as unsafe where a catastrophe can happen at any moment.

Conclusion

Zero tolerance policy was designed to promote students' sense of safety, but as indicated by the findings in this study students still feel unsafe in their school environment more than 10 years after the policy's initiation. Thus, it appears that in practice zero tolerance policy has not produced the substantive impact intended. The findings in this study illuminate the need for changes in the implementation of zero tolerance to transition it into a more robust policy that achieves its legislative intent.

It is imperative that school administrators take measures to ensure a sense of safety for children in urban schools. How can children be expected to excel academically in an environment that promotes trepidation and high anxiety due to safety concerns? The first recommendation for addressing safety issues stemming from poor implementation of zero tolerance policy is the creation of a bias-neutral approach to imposing zero tolerance sanctions through the establishment of universal handbook that clearly defines what constitutes a violation of zero tolerance policy and the appropriate sanction response. This will help ensure that students receive the same reprimand for zero tolerance policy regardless of what school they are attending and minimize school staff abuses of their discretionary power.

The second recommendation is to improve the quality of security provided to students in secondary schools. The student participants in this study expressed not feeling safe in their school environment due to faulty security equipment and inadequate security staff. Security guards must have formal professional training. They should be compensated based on the value of what they do—that is, to provide a safe environment for our children. In this era of fiscal constraint, school safety appears to have taken a back seat to high paid (often ineffective) school administrators. There is an old expression that states, "You get what you pay for." If school safety is a high priority, then treat it as such by hiring quality security and paying them as though they are valued.

Often security guards are hired for reasons other than their ability to perform the job at a high standard. It is not uncommon for school administrators to hire a person from the neighborhood in hopes that the individual will have

a vested interest in school safety and thus provide exemplary service. However, this is simply not enough to ensure the safety of children. Many of these security staffs serve simply as a body with a badge according to some students. Yet they are placed in schools that our children attend and should obviously feel safe. We don't suggest that commandos be placed in urban schools to throw every child out that has a bad day. To the contrary, we contend that because security guards are immersed in the educational landscape in which they are charged to protect, they are in a position to use discretion in their implementation of zero tolerance policy. However, the high level of discretion bestowed on them should not be used to allow students who bring weapons to school to get "a get out of jail free pass." Security guards should have boundaries with respect to their relationship with students and their use of discretion should be clearly defined. Students should not sit at the guard station unless they're waiting to go the principal's office. The need for greater commitment to safety is especially relevant in light of the recent influx of school shootings in K-12 settings, as evidenced by the 2007 school shootings at Cleveland High School in Ohio and Henry Foss High School in Tacoma, Washington (McNeal, 2007). Establishing a high level of standards for school security guards will promote professionalism and the successful implementation of zero tolerance policy. Ultimately, addressing the issue of poor school security will enable students to freely pursue their intellectual growth without fear for their personal safety and ensure that zero tolerance policy achieves a substantive as opposed to symbolic impact.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Financial Disclosure/Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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