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6.1.04

## **The Role of the Bystander in the Social Architecture of Bullying and Violence in Schools and Communities\***

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\* Paper read at Scientific Approaches to Youth Violence Prevention, a conference of the New York Academy of Sciences April 23 through 26, 2004. Research supported by the Menninger Department of Psychiatry Baylor College of Medicine, Houston Texas and Foundation grants for the Peaceful Schools and Communities Project of the Child and Family Program Menninger Clinic, Houston, Texas.

## **Abstract**

The bystander is defined as an active and involved participant in the social architecture of school violence, rather than a passive witness. Bullying is redefined from a triadic (bully-victim-bystander) rather than dyadic (bully-victim) perspective. Teachers, including administrators, and students can promote or ameliorate bullying and other forms of violence when in this social role. Case vignettes are used to illustrate this phenomenon, including one in which a teacher is murdered. Data is presented from a study of teachers' perceptions of other teachers who bully students, suggesting that bullying of students by teachers and bullying of teachers by students is a factor in the aggravation of school bullying and violence that needs to be more openly discussed. An intervention in nine elementary schools involving 3,600 students is outlined to illustrate how a focus on reflective mentalizing and awareness of the importance of the helpful bystander role can promote a peaceful school-learning environment for students and teachers. The paper concludes with an outline for research into how communities and schools adopt bystander roles when faced with complex problems like youth violence, and may avoid facing the problems by blaming law enforcement and educators.

*"At every quarterly examination a gold medal was given to the best writer. When the first medal was offered, it produced rather a general contention than an emulation and diffused a spirit of envy, jealousy, and discord through the whole school; boys who were bosom friends before became fierce contentious rivals, and when the prize was adjudged became implacable enemies. Those who were advanced decried the weaker performances; each wished his opponent's abilities less than his own, and they used all their little arts to misrepresent and abuse each other's performances."*

—Robert Coram, *Political Inquiries* (1791)

## **Introduction**

Clearly bullying has been a fixture in schools for a long time. The epigraph documents school bullying in a way of particular relevance to this paper: although Coram highlights the destructive interaction between boys who were bosom friends and became “contentious rivals”, the problem seems to relate to the apparently innocuous effort by the school to promote excellence by offering a medal for writing. Though characteristic of the bystander role as defined in this paper, the school’s effort does not imply any deliberate or malicious intent on the part of teachers and other members of the community to promote bullying, although some of the bystanders’ actions seem at times self-serving and deliberate. The point is that the potential negative social impact of creating healthy competition based on interpersonal relationships should be considered from the outset by school administration.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate bystander roles often occupied or assumed by teachers and students that create a social architecture for school bullying and violence not usually addressed by traditional school anti-bullying and antiviolence programs. We also will define the role of the bystander from both a psychodynamic and behavioral perspective, review the scant literature on the role of the bystander in school bullying and violence and then present data and case vignettes to illustrate the prevalence of bullying of students by teachers as perceived by other teachers, including a case vignette describing the potentially avoidable murder of a teacher by a student. The failure of policy makers to adequately deal with this problem propels them into an abdicating bystander role, which we propose has an important role in the etiology of school violence. We will then summarize the results of an intervention in elementary schools to reduce pathological bystanding as a method to test the hypothesis that the action of bystanders can promote or reduce violence in schools. We will finish with a summary of potential areas for future research, including innovative approaches to community violence suggested by this work.

### **Redefining Bullying From the Bystander Perspective**

In Webster's encyclopedic unabridged dictionary 1996, the bystander is defined as "a person present but not involved; an onlooker." Synonyms include viewer, observer, witness, and passerby. The hypothesis of this paper is that the social context—rooted in the Latin word, *contextus*, "a joining together"—situates the bystander in an unavoidably active role created, in the case of school violence, by the victim/victimizer interaction; it follows that being passive is not possible from this perspective. From this perspective, the victim, victimizer, and bystander roles are considered to be co-created and dialectally defined, and in these roles, mentalizing, i.e., self awareness, self agency, reflectiveness, and accurate assessment of the mental states of self

and other people, is impaired (1). Fonagy's concept of mentalizing takes an Hegelian perspective that points out that the individual defines himself through social feedback from interactions with others. Thus over time the individual's "theory of the mind" of self and others is continuously modified by feedback from interaction with others. In the case of the infant, for example, if the caretaker gives feedback in an empathic, constructive, and accurate manner, the child develops a theory of mind of others that can process reality in a healthy and adaptive fashion. If pathological feedback is received the mind of the child may develop in distorted ways, manifested in overt and covert psychopathology in adult life. When an individual is not recognized in the mind of the other there is a loss of mentalization, and without a sense of connection to the other, a potential crucible for violence emerges: the other becomes dehumanized and can thus be hurt with greater impunity.

In summary we define the bystander role as an active role with a variety of manifestations, in which an individual or group indirectly and repeatedly participates in a victimization process as a member of the social system. Bystanding may either facilitate or ameliorate victimization. The bystander is propelled into the role by dint of their interaction with the victim and victimizer, and the ongoing interaction can be activated in a helpful or harmful direction.

In other work (2), we have proposed that a "power dynamic" fuels the victim-victimizer-bystander interaction disrupting mentalization through the impact of conscious and unconscious coercion on individuals and groups. The roles of bully, victim, and bystander can be seen from this perspective as representing a dissociating process; the victim is dissociated from the school community as "not us" by the bully on behalf of the bystanding community. The community bystander role could be described as an abdicating one. Abdication then is avoidance of acknowledgement of the role in the bullying process by the abdicating bystander, who projects

the blame onto others. From this vantage point, interventions in a school setting must focus on the transformation of the bystander into a committed community member/witness. Our interventions were aimed at promoting recognition within the large school group of the dissociated element (represented by the victim), as a part of themselves about which they are anxious and the recognition of the dissociating process (represented by the bully) as a defensive action for which the bystanders are in part responsible. A peaceful school learning environment is thus restored when the fragmenting effect of the dissociation process is interrupted by first understanding that the dissociating process is a largely unconscious effort to deal with the anxiety felt by all in response to a dysfunctional, coercive, and disconnected social system. Individuals thus enlightened must then act with the support of all to change how coercive power dynamics are managed in the system as a whole. Dissociation is a violent process, therefore, and the goal of any intervention is the transformation of brute power into passionate statement and respectful communication. This requires a clear conceptualization of the group's task from a perspective that does not permit scapegoating, empowers bystanders into a helpful altruistic role, and does not overemphasize therapeutic efforts with the victim or victimizer. Symptomatic behavior, such as violence and bullying within such a system, is, from this perspective, a consultation-in-action to the authority structure of the administrative system. That is, the symptom is not merely a problem to solve but a dysfunctional solution or adaptation, which keeps a larger more painful and more meaningful problem unseen. The abdicating bystander projects blame on the victim and victimizer as sufficient cause of the problem of school violence and bullying. Several bystander roles are summarized in table 1.

**( Insert Table 1 about here )**

Approaches to school and community violence which place sole attention on correcting pathological bystander roles and/or bully and victim roles, ignore what we believe is an important, if not critical part of the solution: to activate the helpful and often altruistic bystander role.

Who are helpful bystanders? Any individual in the school environment may occupy the role; teachers, students, support staff, volunteers, parents, etc. They are often natural leaders being helpful, in a way that is not self centered. Helpful bystanders do not seek the limelight, but instead gain pleasure in the act of being helpful. They often are idealistic, in a realistic, less driven sense. In schools and communities they rarely occupy traditional elected leadership roles, such as class president or committee chairman; they may doubt their own leadership skills, and need encouragement to emerge. Such individuals often are turn to others with their problems— instead of directing and advising, they tend to listen and mentalize. Shirley Patterson's (3) work with natural helpers in community settings summarizes some of the features of this role. Seelig and Rosof (4) have identified several pathological variants of altruism in which the motivation for such helpfulness may be psychotic grandiosity, sadomasochism, and milder forms of neurotic conflict. In schools and communities, pathological motivations are often self eliminating over time since the stresses of being continuously helpful often activate the underlying pathology. To our knowledge there are no evidence based methods by which such altruistic bystanders can be identified, but in a school setting aware staff, especially counselors and social workers, can use clinical skills to help. Peter Olsson, MD in a personal communication created a clinical characterization of pathological and healthy charisma, which we have found very helpful in assessing altruistic helpfulness:

**(insert Table 2 about here)**

Although this is not the forum for detailed consideration of the research literature on altruism, there is convincing evidence that altruism is a fundamental drive or impulse in human and several other species (5) not merely a derivative, and can thus potentially be harnessed in the service of ameliorating violence. Such pragmatic forms of altruism, although lacking the mysticism and selflessness of well known forms of it in religious and spiritual leaders, focus on benefit to the community as a whole, not a theory, ideal, or deity. The quality of commitment to the community as a whole often serves as an inspiring model for others, often catalyzing unexpected and dramatic change in the system as a whole, although little systematic research has been done on catalyzing major change in social systems with small interventions. Some workers have collected anecdotes and derived a theory e.g. the tipping phenomenon of Gladwell (7). In our experience in a violent secondary school in Jamaica a remarkable system-wide restoration of order began as a sort of epidemic of helpful bystanding seemingly created by a playful chant, the brain child of a police officer helping in the altruistic bystander role. In an effort to get boys to be more tidy, a chant of “tuck your shirt in” was employed, which rapidly inspired songs, joke, even a mini-craze to be tidy. In the space of a few days there was hardly an untidy child in the school, and incidentally, fewer incidents of violence too!

Thus a helpful altruistic bystander might embody the following characteristics we found in a mostly unlikely place: a highly corrupt police force in Jamaica where an unusual group of senior police officers (more than 10 years in the police force) volunteered for training as an add-on to their usual police work. These police officers worked for poverty level wages under conditions that few United States police officers would tolerate. The project is elaborated in (6) and the personal qualities of these altruistic peacemakers are summarized below:

1. Being more altruistic than egoistic
2. Awareness of, and takes responsibility for, community problems
3. Willingness to take physical risks for peace and not easily frightened
4. Relationship-oriented and humanistic

5. Self-motivated and a motivator of others
6. Alert, strong, and positive
7. Self-rewarding with low need for praise
8. Personally well organized
9. Advocate and protector of the vulnerable and disempowered
10. Able to see potential in all people
11. Low in sadism
12. An enthusiastic advocate, committed and understanding of the 'cause'

Viewed from the perspective of the bystander, contemporary definitions of bullying need revision. Leaders of research into school bullying like Peter Smith in England (8) and Dan Olweus in Norway (9) define bullying in dyadic terms. Thus defined bullying is repetitive, harmful, produces gain for the bully, and involves an imbalance of strength where the bully is dominant and victim experience trouble defending themselves. Physical harm is usually of less concern than the insults, ostracizing, teasing, social isolation, and humiliation that cause much of the harm. In contrast, we suggest that bullying be newly defined in triadic terms, as an interaction effect between bully, victim, and bystander in which the responses of each directly effect the harmfulness of the outcome. The bully does not act as an individual, as for example in a private vendetta, but becomes, in part, an agent of the bystanding audience, which fuels the fire, so to speak, and perhaps even intensifies the harm. From our clinical experience (10) we have found that bullies usually fantasize about the impact their actions will have on the bystander even if the bystanding audience is not physically present, along with states of mind suggesting prominent grandiose, sadomasochistic, and voyeuristic elements. To recontextualize traditional definitions in triadic terms, bullying is the repeated exposure of an individual to negative interactions directly or indirectly inflicted by one or more dominant persons. The harm may be

caused through direct physical or psychological means and/or indirectly through encouragement of the process or avoidance by the bystander. How is this bystander role enacted? A case vignette will illustrate.

### **Case Study I: Pathological Bystander Roles<sup>1</sup>**

Children's selection of friends, allies, and comfort groups mirror the organizational and cultural settings of their schools, neighborhoods, and major community groups, as the case to be described graphically illustrates.

The school at hand was a large K-8 school that served a very poor minority neighborhood in an East Coast city, with criminal activity near the school, trash on school property, often in the form of discarded needles, and pedophiles cruising the perimeter. We were asked to assess the school's need for a violence prevention program. The students had spent a long winter essentially shut in the school buildings. The school principal had assured us that the school had few bullying problems. Moments after entering the lunchroom one boy knocked out another in the culmination of a long process of verbal abuse of the boy's mother. After the principal hastily settled this matter, a school counselor rushed up in rage after a student had pelted her in the chest with full milk cartons. The principal was an outstanding individual with idealistic concepts for her school and worked under very difficult conditions. These included an atmosphere of punishment and threat in the form of a school policy that penalized school administrators for poor student academic performance and disciplinary problems. The avoidant bystander role of the principal is not always based on denial in the strict sense, but a need for self-preservation

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<sup>1</sup> Data for this case relied on the first hand descriptions by the school counselor in this school

attended by the wistful hope that nothing terrible will happen if one takes a positive attitude.

Emphasis on the positive is a common technique used by teachers.

In the incident that followed several days later, during the first outside recess of the spring, two sixth grade students faced off of a fight in front of 125 peers who interlocked arms and cheered on the fight. When one of the fighters was knocked to the ground, 10 students continued punching the downed victim. The victim suffered serious facial damage from a ring worn by one of the students bullying him, a “dirty trick” similar to those seen on the World Wrestling Federation television show, proudly announced by one of the bullies

Teachers were unable to intervene in the fight for more than 90 seconds because of the tightness of the audience of bystander children with arms interlocked around the combatants. Although students had been talking about the upcoming fight throughout the day, teachers were not aware of the brewing problem. The whole peer grade became invested in one side or another and excitement built up throughout the day.

Bystanders were active in fanning the flames of the violent act, beginning with the ride in the school bus. The two kids were matched up by rumor and innuendo, not actual personal conflict, i.e., this fight was staged by the bystanders through a peer group fantasy enacted in the fight.

### **Selected Literature Review of the Role of the Bystander in School Conflict**

The recent spate of school shootings has placed bystanders squarely in the public eye (11), with articles highlighting the inaction or aborted actions of students, teachers, and parents who were

aware of fellow student threats but did not act out of denial (avoidant bystanding) or fears that they would be targeted for tattling on peers (the conspiracy of silence). In some California schools bystanders who did not report a shooter's previous threats were considered in need of protection (12). On a more positive note, several high schools encourage bystanders to help prevent or stop violence by providing confidential or anonymous online and phone-line reporting. (13,14)

Until recently, bystander behavior has largely been overlooked in the literature on victimization, although the role of the bystander we suggest is an important determinant of chronic victimization. Bystanders in the school environment are those who witness bullying and other acts of violence but are not themselves acting in the role of bully or victim (15). Bystander behaviors may perpetuate bully-victim patterns. For example, when passively allowing bullying to occur, or encouraging bullying by actually participating to the exclusion of others(16), Henry et al (17) showed that teachers who openly discouraged the use of aggression had students who were less likely to show the usual developmental increases in aggressive behavior over time. Slee (18) showed that teachers who did not intervene in bullying often had students who would not help victims. The effectiveness of programs aimed at promoting helpful bystanding is clearly dependent on teacher modeling, as our own research has shown (19). One study (20) of the ability of teachers and counselors to differentiate between bullying and other forms of conflict, noted that both had a rather poor understanding of bullying. Teachers often rated all physical conflict as bullying and underrated verbal, social, and emotional abuse. Kupersmidt (21) looked at whether teachers could identify bullies and victims and found that they were more likely to accurately do so in elementary rather than middle school. Haundaumadi (22), in a study of Greek children, reported that teachers and students felt that teachers rarely talked about bullying

and children tended to speak more to their parents about such problems. This indicated that in Greece, as in the United States, if a child cannot handle the problem on their own, they may be perceived as a wimp, and therefore bullied. Interventions, thus, must address the social climate, particularly the complicated peer group interactions, in order to effectively deal with the problem. These factors are influenced by teacher training and the awareness of children's psychological needs and subjective states (23). In a Finnish study (24) of several hundred children bystander roles were categorized into several groups: defenders of the victim, bystander from our perspective, assistant to the bully, reinforcer of the bully and outsider. Boys were found to be more closely associated with the role of bully, reinforcer, and assistant. Girls with defender and outsider. In other studies passive bystanders were found to reinforce the bully by providing a consenting audience, which sent the implicit message that aggression is acceptable (25,16) Child bystanders are often effective in trying to stop bullying (26,16) Bystanders have been found to be less likely to help when they observe others doing nothing (the norm of nonintervention) (27). When adults intervene in response to bullying, lower levels of aggressive bystanding were found in elementary schools (28). Although this was not found in junior high school, Zerger (29) reporting that adolescents who believed that one should intervene in bullying, did predict bystander helping and that the opposite feeling that one should not intervene and that aggression is legitimate were related to joining in bullying. Cowie (30), studied gender differences, suggesting that part of the difficulty in targeting boys into helpful roles results from the fact that they are more likely to drop out of these interventions because of their macho values, especially as the social modeled concept of masculinity develops.

## **Teachers' Perceptions of Other Teachers Who Bully Students**

Our research has identified yet another piece of this complicated bystanding puzzle: in a study of teachers' perceptions of other teachers who bully students (31) we report on 116 teachers from seven elementary schools who completed an anonymous questionnaire reflecting their feelings and perceptions about their own experiences of bullying and how they perceived their colleagues over the years. Forty-five percent of our convenience sample of teachers admitted to having bullied a student and many recognized that the roles of bully, victim, and bystander are roles and not moral indictments or diagnoses and usually become damaging only if repeated frequently and if the roles become fixed. In our study, teachers' openness to seeing and admitting bullying suggests that efforts to prevent bullying by training teachers to recognize and deal with it both in themselves, students, and colleagues may be quite helpful. Our study showed that few if any teachers perceived a current school policy or training experience that might help them handle a particular problem. Teachers who displayed a tendency to bully students also reported having been bullied when they were students in school, and were far more likely to report seeing other students bullied by teachers. They also reported having been bullied by students inside and outside the classroom. Lack of administrative support, lack of training in discipline techniques, overcrowded classrooms, and being envious of smarter students were found to be elements that were part of the pattern of these bullying teachers. A principle component factor analysis was performed on the data and rotated using a varimax procedure. The resulting screen plot showed two factors that together accounted for 52% of the variance. Factor one accounted for 34% of the variance (sadistic bully factor), and factor two accounting for 18% (Bully-Victim factor). Sadistic teachers tended to humiliate students, act spitefully, and seemed to enjoy hurting

students' feelings. The Bully-Victim teacher is frequently absent, fails to set limits, lets other people handle their problems, and tends to see lack of training in discipline techniques as the primary cause their behavior, acting in many ways as an abdicating bystander by blaming others for their problems. Such teachers often explode in a rage and react in a bullying fashion when they have "reached their limit."

This research addresses a very sensitive area that we feel compounds the problem of bullying and violence in schools and pulls the school and surrounding community into abdicating bystander roles. It is our experience that many principals are aware of teachers who have a tendency to bully students often do not place certain students with certain teachers, but are reluctant to talk about this due to fear of aggravating teacher unions and difficulty recruiting good teachers. Thus administrators and school policy makers have been slow to directly address the issue. Children can see teachers as bystanders when another teacher bullies a student and the problem is not addressed. Bullying teachers "force" loyalty in their colleagues, who may personally abhor their actions, but teachers who complain are often shunned as being anti-labor. Few positive alternatives exist for a teacher who wants to stop another teacher from bullying a student, and frankly few alternatives exist for parents who are often scapegoated and often spend significant sums of money on attorneys in pursuit of protection for their children. The matter is further complicated by the increase in bullying of teachers by parents in the guise of protecting their children. Teacher unions may actually hurt the larger body of teachers it represents by protecting the few who bully while ignoring the impact those teachers have on other teachers and on their students. This loyalty conflict forces the non-bullying teacher into the passive (victim bystander) role, and role suction propels the school administration into an abdicating bystander

role. Facing these problems in an effort to deal with them may encourage better trained teachers and more creative and peaceful school learning environments.

## **Case Study II : The abdicating bystander role of the school and community in the murder of a school teacher<sup>2</sup>**

On December 5, 2001, an African American family life counselor and minister was stabbed to death by a 17-year-old student in front of two teachers and eight students, the first recorded case of the murder of a teacher by a student in Massachusetts. The student is now serving a life sentence for second-degree murder with the possibility of parole after 15 years. The murder took place in an alternative school designed for adolescents with behavior disorders.

The murderer was a young man who had been shuttled between living with his mother, grandfather and with friends, transient situations resulting from a conflict with his mother. At the time of the murder, he had been on probation for stabbing his mother. Reports indicate that he felt overburdened and devalued by his family, specifically by his duty to care for his two younger siblings. He was also resentful and angry at what he experienced as a devaluation of his social status by his mother by what he felt was her publicly shaming him by calling his friends to apprise them of what she saw as his manipulations. In this incident, which was eerily similar to his stabbing of the teacher, he used a small blade to lash out against his mother: life events seemed to create a pattern of fear-based response against perceived shame and humiliation in this boy, a response called “injustice collection” in the recent school homicide literature e.g. (11). Reports also indicate that the boy worked with counseling services in order to try to repair his relationship with his mother. He also participated in individual psychotherapy as well as case

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<sup>2</sup> Data for this case was taken from police reports of the eye witnesses to the murder as well as the clinical case record of the student convicted of murder.

management efforts by state agencies, probation personnel, and private sector therapists to motivate a process to reconnect him to a more positive relationship with his mother. In fact the murdered teacher was trying to find a place for him to stay because of these conflicts.

The lethal interaction began after the boy entered the classroom. Just prior, in the hallway, the victim had asked the boy him to remove his hood. The boy remarked to two other students that he was sick of “the same old thing every day.”

One of the students described the lethal incident: “We were going to sit down at our desks when I heard the student and the teacher arguing by the teachers desks, which is near the hallway door. I hear the teacher ask the student again if he would “just take the hood off.” The student told the teacher that wanted to be left alone. The teacher moved as if he was about to touch the student and the student told him not to. The teacher said something like “what is that going to solve or do.” The student then said again, “don’t touch me.” The teacher then said something that I couldn’t hear. I then heard the students say, “you ain’t going to leave me alone about it.” The student then took off his coat that had the hood underneath. When the student took his coat off it looked like he wanted to fight the teacher. The teacher looked like he was squaring off too. The student then shrugged his shoulders a few times and brought his hands up in front. The teacher then made a fake left at the student. He came close but didn’t hit the student. At this time, they both started going at it. They were both throwing punches. Punches were landed by both of them.” The teacher was fatally stabbed in the abdomen in blows that looked to the audience like punches, and initially, the teacher seemed unaware that he had been seriously injured. He left the classroom and various people asked him if he was OK, to which he replied that he was, until finally the school nurse noted he was “covered in blood from his shirt to his shoes.” CPR failed, and he was dead on arrival at a local hospital.

In this tragic example, the murdered teacher had been put in a complicated, undefined role, a role the students did not fully understand. They called him a “security guard or counselor.”

This boy had repeated and prolonged absenteeism, was disconnected from any positive environment in the school, and expressed a feeling of being picked on and regularly provoked by his teachers and peers. His past history of psychiatric disorder was relatively insignificant although there was a single experience of trauma due to kidnapping when he was about seven, which resulted in the development of night terrors. His father was functionally absent, a street criminal and visible to him in that role from time to time. His mother was hard working and an overburdened social service worker. He experienced her as an exhausted victim of the system and there were regular fights with his stepfather. He was often unkempt with poor bodily hygiene, which was the reason he gave for wearing his hood, concerned about how others would see him. He noted to his therapist on one occasion that he “had to fight in order not to be seen as weak by other kids.” He spoke regularly of the victim, whom he felt was accusing him of things he did not do.

The school administration, school board, and people in the community the school served collectively assigned a very confusing role to the teacher, and in doing so functioned as an abdicating bystander. The teacher was of imposing stature and had been recruited to monitor behavior problems as well as to counsel and teach students. It is often assumed that a big strong individual with the authority of a teacher may know how to handle these complicated and contradictory roles but he was not trained for the dangers of such a situation and especially in how to activate a helpful bystander role for himself.

### **Intervening in Schools to Reduce Pathological Bystanding**

The Peaceful Schools Project<sup>3</sup> began as an attempt to test a psychodynamically influenced social systems approach to bullying and violence in elementary school settings. The theory driving the intervention was an evolving one and the experimental model is abductive; that is instead of a formal proposal of hypothesis with testing of that hypothesis the project evolved as a trial of ideas. The intervention was thus modified as various aspects of ideas worked or did not work. Between 1993 and 1996 a pilot study was launched in three elementary schools in a Midwestern city (32). The intervention was largely driven by the teachers who implemented it; these teachers were also involved in deriving concepts and creating the interventions and were not reluctant bystander participants forced into the research by administrative fiat. High buy-in by those involved has been shown to be an important indicator of success in any complicated social systems intervention where the goal is to change the way the system operates. The two schools involved in the formal trial were matched for demographic characteristics and a third school was

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<sup>3</sup> The Peaceful School Project, Co-Principal investigators: Peter Fonagy Ph.D., Eric Vernberg, Ph.D., Stuart W. Twemlow, MD, Research Department, The Menninger Department of Psychiatry, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas

chosen and compared since it was in a more affluent part of town. The intervention school had a very high out of school suspension rate, a high rate of violent incidents, and a record of very poor academic achievement. The control school matched demographically, was built in an almost identical way and was also in the same socio-economically deprived area. The control school received only formal psychiatric consultation as has been traditional in school psychiatry for many decades. Data was collected largely by teachers invested in the project and the cost of the overall project was minimal. The project did not pathologize psychiatric groups or at risk children and thus did not invoke expensive referrals to medical care and other experts. Since the project was addressed to a current need that was felt as urgent and was designed by those who experienced the need, the buy-in problem was minimal and schools were willing to tolerate longer term, more difficult solutions rather than quick fixes designed to placate a possibly impatient school board or electorate.

We found that instead of overloading teachers and students with massive initial training, ongoing supervision based on a psychoanalytic/psychodynamic model was more practical to trouble shoot problems as they emerged.

The program utilized four primary components; first a **Positive Climate Campaign** with reflective classroom discussion, counselor led sessions, and posters, magnets, bookmarks, etc. to encourage a shift in language and thinking of all students and personnel, in relation to coercive power dynamics which were assumed to dominate the violent school environment (33). In such a model children help each other resolve issues without adult participation. This helpful bystander mode is demonstrated by examples such as sharing playground equipment peacefully

and not pushing and jostling in the lunch line. A **Classroom Management Plan** assists a teacher's discipline skills to focus on understanding and correcting the root problem rather than punishing and criticizing behavior and emphasizes the important role for children in resolving these problems rather than only teachers. For example, a behavioral problem in a single child is conceptualized as a problem for the whole class, each individual occupying bully, victim, or bystander roles. Scapegoating a single child is thus reduced and insight into the meaning of the behavior and the personal responsibility of all bystanders becomes paramount. A **Physical Education Program** was designed from a combination of role-playing, relaxation, and self-defense techniques derived from the martial arts. Such skills help children handle victimization and bystander behavior by fostering an understanding of them through role-playing and in the instruction of physical and psychological techniques to handle such victimization. The program helps children protect themselves and others with non-aggressive physical and cognitive strategies; for example enacting bully-victim-bystander roles provides students with alternative responses to fighting. Learning ways to physically defend one's self (e.g., when grabbed, pushed, or punched) was coupled with classroom discussion emphasizing personal self-control, the importance of helping others to respond effectively (helpful bystander role), and respect for other people and the environment. Finally schools put into place one of two support programs: **Peer Mentorship** or **Adult Mentorship**. These relationships provide additional containment and modeling to assist children mastering the skills and language to deal with power struggles. For example mentors refereed games, helped resolve playground disputes, and maintained an emphasis on the importance of helping others.

From 1996 to 2000 the program was expanded to five schools in the district where academic performance was investigated using a multiple base line design (34). 1,106 students were monitored before and after the program across the school district for academic attainment according to standardized Metropolitan Achievement Test Scores. An equivalent control sample of 1,100 children from school districts who attended schools that did not join the program was compared. Program participation was associated with pronounced improvement in the student's achievement test scores, with notable reductions in the scores of students who left schools with active programs. In a later evolution of this project nine schools and 3,600 students were involved in a randomized controlled trial of the intervention between 2000 and 2003. The experimental intervention was compared to three other schools that received a traditional child psychiatry consultation for a half day a week involving assessment of children and observation of classroom behavior, a model that has been used in school psychiatric consultation for several decades. Finally, three schools received no intervention but were promised the most effective of the other two interventions after a two-year period, if they desired it. This was an attempt to provide a motivated control group rather than a pure no treatment group. Although the final results of this trial are not available at this time and will be reported when the data is fully analyzed, preliminary findings point in the directions expected: in the intervention schools there was a marked decrease in victimization of children by self report and peer nomination with an increase in helpful bystander behavior towards each other, representing an increase in reflectiveness and mentalization and an enhancement of the helpful bystander role in ameliorating the bullying process. Teachers in experimental schools observed that they have less to do during recess since children often resolve their own conflicts using the language and techniques they have learned. Principals often have less to do since teachers do not make regular

and frequent referrals to them for discipline and the school as a whole becomes more performance oriented.

As expected, teacher buy-in to the program was closely related to its effectiveness. Biggs (19) conducted a study of teacher fidelity and how that may have influenced helpful bystander or negative bystander interactions. Students' bully-victim-bystander interactions were assessed using peer reports on two sets of behavior nomination items. One set comprised a helpful bystander scale which included three items assessing students' reputations for helping victims when they are being bullied (e.g. "tries to stop it when they see a kid getting bullied or picked on"). The second set comprised the aggressive (bully) bystander scale including three items assessing students' reputation for encouraging and joining in on classmates that are bullying others (e.g. "joins in or cheers when they see a kid getting bullied or picked on"). For each item, participants were presented with a classroom roster and asked to identify any individuals who fit the descriptions. Findings suggested that students whose teachers reported a greater fidelity had greater empathy (defined as a student's awareness of the negative effects of victimization of other students) over time than students whose teachers reported less fidelity. Overall the study suggested that the natural developmental "hardening" of students' attitudes to other students' bullying was ameliorated by this program; that is, the decrease in empathy was less in those in experimental programs than in control conditions. The results also suggested that students whose teachers reported greater fidelity were viewed by peers to show less aggressive (bully) bystanding than did students whose teachers reported less fidelity. Over the second and third years of the program, helpful bystanding behavior was significantly related to the adherence of teachers to the elements of the program and awareness of its usefulness. Students whose teachers

reported greater fidelity were viewed by peers to show more helpful bystanding over time than did students whose teachers reported less fidelity.

This program was instituted in elementary schools on the basis of the empirical hypothesis that beginning an intervention earlier in life is more likely to have a lasting effect than beginning later. Young children thoroughly enjoyed being more responsible for their own helpful actions towards each other, including conflict resolution, than if they had to ask for the help of adults. As might be anticipated this is part of the growth expected as they become more biologically and psychologically competent. The learning curve for children is especially influenced in the young by complex psychological factors including identification with teachers as role models. One educator cogently noted that education is the cure to the extent that ignorance is the disease. By overemphasizing intellectual and instructional approaches to problems in the learning environment, teachers, curriculum, and policy planners inadvertently occupy avoidant and abdicating bystander roles, thus undermining the potential value of their function as a role model for children and exemplar of these critical psychological factors which facilitate intellectual, social and emotional learning.

### **Conclusion: Innovative approaches to school and community violence**

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore in detail the complicated problem of violence in the community at large, studies of violence in schools provide a potentially useful microcosm for understanding surrounding community violence. Schools have often failed to realize that education also depends on the social and emotional climate surrounding learning as evidenced by the largely behavioral training of schoolteachers in educational psychology with little emphasis on normal and pathological development, unless the teacher elects for specialized

training. Given this narrow focus on intellectual training it is not surprising that coercive power dynamics are not given sufficient attention. One result of this limited focus is that community leaders can scapegoat agencies those who have been delegated the responsibility to educate children and to provide a safe learning environment, such as teachers and law enforcement officers. Without sophisticated awareness of pathological bystander roles, problem children can be unnecessarily “evacuated” into the medical or criminal justice system and special classrooms and schools as aberrant or sick. Such an action causes considerable expense for the community and does not address the universal responsibility of everyone in the community for how schools function, an abdicating bystander role as we have defined it, dramatically illustrated in the case of the murder of the teacher. Since education is not just a right or a service it is a defining necessity for a healthy society, addressing the social and emotional needs of children is an imperative of even greater importance than attention to structural issues in the school climate, such as the use of increasing security surveillance and increased presence of law enforcement. The work of Sampson and others (35) on the collective efficacy of communities in the Chicago area is a helpful model. Collective efficacy is defined as social cohesion among neighbors combined with a willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good. Their large scale studies showed very strong evidence of a link between that factor and reduced violence in over 300 Chicago neighborhoods.

**Table 3 about here**

Table 3 represents a summary model for the social and psychological factors that we feel are in a dialectical, co-created relationship with each other. Helpful (altruistic) bystander will promote

mentalization, and vice versa. In such a community, social affiliation and the needs of the group as a whole are of dominant concern, i.e., an individual sees personal needs as interdependent with the needs of others. The Peaceful Schools Project described in this paper addresses these two elements in a primary prevention and secondary prevention approach to school violence. Coercive and humiliating power dynamics (defined as the conscious and unconscious use of force and humiliation by individuals and groups against other individuals and groups) and social disconnection (the feeling of being actively separated from a social group in the community, are two other factors that the research of Sampson and others, including Felton Earls, in social sciences research have related to violence and other forms of community disruption. Such factors create a social crucible of at-risk groups of individuals who may be violence prone, inviting a secondary prevention approach to such problems. These communities consist of individuals or small groups fighting for their own survival and the needs of the larger community are often ignored or forgotten. When coercive power dynamics and social disconnection become a fixed modus operandi of a social group, outbreaks of lethal violence occur, such has been hypothesized in the adolescent homicide perpetrators in the spate of murders in schools in the '90s. Treating such children and their victims, is a tertiary prevention action to address a collapsing and fragmented community.

This research suggests a testable model for producing social harmony in our communities and for improving the learning environment in schools, by connecting all stakeholders as passionate and committed members of the community rather than remaining bystanders in fragmented, self-centered sub groups. From this perspective then, connected and mentalizing people make safer communities.

**TABLE 1**

**BYSTANDING ROLES**

Type	Mentalization	Subjective State	Role in the system
Bully (aggressive) by stander	Collapse of mentalization	Excitement, often Sado-masochistic	Establishes a way to set up victimization within the school community
Puppet-master variant <sup>4</sup> of Bully bystander	Authentic empathy and reflectiveness collapses. Capable of logical planning and non-feeling empathy.	Arrogant grandiose sense of powerfulness	Committed to violent outcomes, achieved by conscious manipulation
Victim (Passive) by stander	Collapse of mentalization	Fearful, Apathetic, Helpless	Passively and fearfully drawn into the victimization process.
Avoidant bystander	Mentalization preserved by denial.	Defensive euphoria. An individual action	Facilitates victimization by denial of personal responsibility
Abdicating bystander	Mentalization preserved by projection and projective identification	Outraged at the “poor” performance of others. An agency or group action	Abdicates responsibility by scapegoating.
Sham bystander	Mentalization preserved	Uses conscious largely verbal manipulation. Deliberate and calm	Neither victim nor victimizer role is authentic but is adopted for personal political reasons.
Helpful (altruistic) bystander	Mentalization enhanced.	Compassionate sometimes outraged at harm to others. Not a “do gooder”.	Mature and effective use of individual and group psychology to promote self awareness and develop skills to resist victimization.

<sup>4</sup> In one of the recent school shootings a boy set up a shooting that occurred at a school dance, taking few pains to hide the plan and recruiting a resentful victim bystander into the role of killer. The puppet-master bystander did not attend the dance, but came later to observe the murders at the prearranged time. (36)

**TABLE 2**

**DISCERNING HEALTHY CHARISMA\***

**Characteristics of Healthy Charisma**

- 1) Non-cutting sense of humor that connects and empathizes with peers to encourage their autonomy and participation
- 2) Sanguine ability to empathize with peers in a way that helps Self & others
- 3) Creativity applied to leadership that promotes creativity in group projects and in individual group members
- 4) Charismatic leader's personal needs are met by benevolent reaching-out to challenge the peer group to connect with their community via helpful projects and activities
- 5) This leader reaches out to foster and mentor positive leaders in younger grade level children modeling future leaders

**Characteristics of Unhealthy Charisma**

- 2) Cutting, sarcastic, cold-alloof humor that puts-down or victimizes peers.
- 3) Empathy that largely promotes the Self above others and eventually at their expense or harm.
- 4) Creativity that promotes destructive sub-groups that cause isolation or alienation from the larger group.
- 5) Charismatic leader's personal needs or psychopathology is deepened by efforts to dominate the peer group.
- 6) This type of leader bullies or puts-down younger aspiring leaders so as to maintain his or her fiefdom.

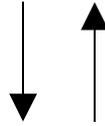
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Keene, NH, 03431.  
[drolsson@cheshire.net](mailto:drolsson@cheshire.net)**

TABLE 3

A SOCIO-PSYCHODYNAMIC MODEL of COMMUNITY HEALTH

HELPFUL (ALTRUISTIC) BYSTANDING

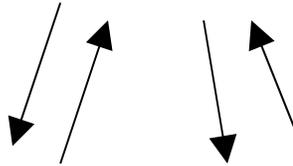
Primary  
Prevention



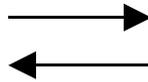
Group  
Needs  
Dominate

MENTALIZATION

Secondary  
prevention

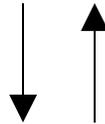


COERCIVE  
HUMILIATING  
POWER  
DYNAMICS



SOCIAL  
DISCONNECTION

Tertiary  
Prevention



Individual  
Needs  
Dominate

VIOLENCE

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