



## **An Investigation of School Violence and Pre-Service Teachers**

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All educators need to be aware of issues regarding school violence. Recent years have shown that violence can happen in a variety of school settings. This study conducted a one-group, pretest-posttest, pre-experimental design to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding school violence. First, pre-service educators were asked to complete an online, anonymous survey. Next, the participants, members of the same English/Language Arts Methods class, were taught a three-part school violence curriculum. And finally, a posttest, optional and anonymous, was administered. Results suggest that there was a change in respondents' perceptions regarding school violence after having participated in the curriculum.

School violence is a reality in many schools. Although violence can range from comparatively minor to significant levels of intensity, it is a threat that continues to plague our schools. The 2005 National Youth Risk Behavior Study found that between 3.0% and 9.4% of students in the United States reported feeling unsafe because of violent behavior of others either in school or on the way to or from school (Centers for Disease Control, 2005).

Although a recent study indicated that violence and aggressive behavior at school has declined in the last decade and that children are more likely to be harmed away from school than at school (Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2005), school violence is still an issue of great concern (Ballard, Rattley, Fleming & Kidder-Ashley, 2004). Reports of highly violent incidents, such as school shootings, leave students and teachers with a lasting feeling of shock, apprehension, and grief (Alvarez, 2007). During the April 16, 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, 32 students and faculty lost their lives. This

shooting became the deadliest school shooting rampage in our country's history (Bloomberg, 2007). In the wake of this tragic event, more questions are being asked than answered. A recent white paper on the Virginia Tech Shooting contains findings from the FBI and the Secret Service which indicate that in most cases of violence in schools, the student had communicated his or her intentions of the attack well in advance. These intentions may have frightened their peers. In these same cases, the FBI, the Secret Service, and the U.S. Department of Education have recommended that schools adopt a threat assessment approach and act on them (Sennett, 2007).

Kandakai and King (2002) report that there is a growing belief that conflict resolution, problem solving, and decision making skills are critical for educators who must deal with school violence. Alvarez (2007) asserts that teachers, who are trained to be more effective in meeting both academic and non-academic student needs, have classrooms with a more positive and successful climate for all students

and are better able to handle aggressive student behavior. In a study of the effects of this type of training on teacher reactions to problematic behavior, Alvarez found that advanced training in behavior and classroom management, similar to that provided to special educators, was most useful and could be useful to general educators as well (2007).

If specialized training in behavior management can assist teachers to better manage and prevent violent or aggressive behavior in school, it would follow that teacher education programs would include this type of training for pre-service teachers. However, Kandakai & King (2002) found that pre-service teachers report receiving little or no training in their university program on how to deal with aggressive behaviors or school violence. They further report that pre-service teachers have concerns about student aggression and feel inadequately prepared to deal with this kind of behavior in their classrooms.

A recent satisfaction and feedback survey from graduates of teacher education programs, required as part of a teacher accreditation process, indicates higher ratings from graduates who have had extensive clinical or internship curricula (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002). By integrating numerous practical, applied, in-class exercises into teacher education curriculum, pre-service teachers found practical applications helpful in preparing for their future roles in the classroom. Practical clinical application, combined with content-based pedagogy results in higher pre-service teacher satisfaction.

This study conducted a preliminary assessment of the school violence training needs for pre-service teachers at a mid-sized regional university. This University offers both general and special education teaching degrees. At this University, students studying general education are required to take only one course in classroom management whereas students pursuing special education certification must take additional coursework in behavior disorders and support techniques.

In addition to assessing the University's pre-service program regarding the preparation of students for the possibility of violence in their classrooms, an exploratory probe of local school districts was conducted. This probe suggested the lack of a detailed plan for dealing with school violence on the part of some local school districts. This combined information prompted a joint project between professors in the Departments of Education and Criminal Justice.

### **Design and Methodology**

This study conducted a one-group, pretest-posttest, pre-experimental design to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding school

violence. First, 95 pre-service educators were asked to complete an online, anonymous survey. Next, the participants, 20 members of the same English/Language Arts Methods class, were taught a three-part school violence curriculum. Finally, a posttest, optional and anonymous, was administered to the 20 participants.

A limitation of this study is that initially, the project team intended to provide the curriculum training and the posttest to the group of 95 pre-service teachers. Due to logistical reasons, the training and posttest were only administered to a portion of the pretest participants. Despite this limitation, the information gained from this exploratory study contained rich insights that will further the research of this topic.

### **Instrument**

Professors from the fields of elementary education, special education, and criminal justice reviewed the existing literature base and, collaboratively, developed a School Violence Rating Scale. This online instrument consisted of two sections. The first section consisted of basic demographic information. The second section was comprised of 10 items and one of those items was open-ended. The items/responses were presented in Likert format: Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. As this rating scale was designed to be anonymous, there was no tracking mechanism in place.

A pilot test was conducted to assess accessibility, readability, and ease. Researchers asked participant volunteers to further answer follow-up questions regarding their interpretation of each survey item. Based on participant feedback, minor revisions were made. Respondent validation was attained.

The pilot test, pre-test, and post-test were available electronically. This instrument was designed to address four specific research questions:

1. Do pre-service teachers feel training in this areas is important at the pre-service level?
2. Do pre-service teachers feel prepared if confronted with issues of school violence?
3. Are pre-service teachers concerned that they may experience school violence?
4. Where do pre-service teachers learn most of their information regarding school violence?

This instrument's online link was posted on the course website and was also emailed to students upon request. The rating scale was available for eight weeks. The results were then analyzed by the project team and used to develop a three-part violence curriculum workshop for the pre-service teachers. The curriculum consisted of three 3-hour sessions. Each session was held once a week for three

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consecutive weeks. At the conclusion of the workshop series, pre-service teachers were again requested to complete the School Violence Rating Scale. The study's time frame is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

### *School Violence Project Timeline*

Semester	Project Component
Nov./Dec. 2006	Conducted pilot study
Dec. 2006	Analyzed pilot study results
Jan. 2007	Made survey revisions
Feb. 2007	Pre-test study participants; analyzed results
March 2007	Developed 3-part curriculum
April 2007	Implemented curriculum
April/May/June 2007	Post-test study participants; analyzed results

### **Participants**

The project participants were pre-service teachers in the same English/Language Arts methods course. All students were in their first semester of their senior year. Demographic data reports that all participants were female and all pursuing their Early Childhood through 4th Grade teacher certification.

### **Curriculum Development**

Project participants took a revised version of the school violence survey in February of 2007. After reviewing the results of the pilot test and this survey, the project team developed a three-part curriculum to address school violence issues. The curriculum was designed to be co-taught by the project team over three consecutive weeks. Each session was delivered during a regularly scheduled methods class which met for three hours one time per week. The curriculum was delivered during this class in April, 2007.

The first session, occurring week one, introduced students to the issues relating to school violence. The second session focused on providing students with "real-life" situations in dealing with behavior issues ranging from minor (verbal non-compliance) to major incidents (physical aggression). The final project week emphasized awareness of issues of intense violence, prior to – during – and after the incident. As is evident in Table 2, each week/session introduces the students to a more intense level of violence.

**Session 1.** This first introductory session explained the ideas and overall spirit of the project. As mentioned in Table 2, professors discussed

foundational information regarding school violence to expose students to the basic facts of school violence and encourage student self-reflection concerning their own experiences with violence or school violence situations. This preliminary session was the shortest session of the three.

Table 2

### *Course Content*

Session	Course Topics
1	Introduction and background Pilot study results National school violence statistics District/school policies Student reflections
2	Building caring classroom communities Using effective communication Recognizing and addressing stress (student and own) Using verbal judo techniques Conducting role play situations
3	Reactive situations School shootings Post traumatic stress disorder After-care management

**Session 2.** This session began with students discussing their own experiences with dealing with classroom behaviors, how they observed other teachers dealing with behavior issues, and what they learned (either in class or from "veteran teachers") on how to most effectively address a problem behavior. Students were then introduced to the concept of verbal judo. Verbal judo, created by Dr. George Thompson, refers to the idea of moving with an adversary's energy rather than trying to fight against it (Bowman, 2001, p.28). Table 3 outlines the verbal judo components that the team used in teaching this session.

After the verbal judo technique was discussed and modeled by the project team, students were placed into random small groups and were given six role play scenarios. The project team role played the conflict aspect of the first scenario. This first scenario involved a six year old student who angrily states "I don't want my paper. I don't like you!" The student then pushes his paper off his desk and refuses to do any work. At the end of the role play, each student group was asked to address this situation using their verbal de-escalation techniques. Responses were discussed as a class.

Table 3

*Verbal Judo Components*

Action	Description
Individualize the Situation	Begin by talking with the student and using his/her name. Deal with the situation as privately and respectfully as possible. It is important to get down on the student's level and "eye to eye." When speaking with the student, use a calm, quiet, firm tone of voice.
Describe the Action	Describe the student's action in clear, objective terms (what you observed the student doing). For example, "I saw that you knocked over your chair" as opposed to "I saw that you were having a fit."
Address the Action	In some situations, you may need to address the action as being "okay" in another context. For instance, "You know, I like to run when I'm outside." State the behavior is "okay" in another context (if appropriate), but not under these conditions.
Use Negative Assertion Statement	a Use a negative assertion statement to address the behavior. For instance, "I'm not saying you can never do this 'action' in school with your friend, you just cannot continue to do this when in school." This step, as well as the previous step, is particularly important when there is rule discord between home and school. There are behaviors that may be allowed at home, but not in school (i.e., swearing, use of language, voice volume, etc.). Students may not realize the situational difference and may require direct instruction and reminders.
Summarize the Resolution	Tell the student to address his/her need while allowing your needs to be met. For example, "if you can agree with my request that you will (describe the correct action) that will be fine, if not I am going to have to (describe the action; something to correct/put the student's action on the right path).
Solicit Student Commitment	It is important to have the student commit to the plan; "Great! We have a deal!"

Following this discussion, each group was asked to address the behavioral issues within the five other scenarios. Each group then role played a scenario, using their verbal de-escalation techniques, in front of the class. After each group's presentation, the students received feedback from their peers and the project team.

**Session 3.** This final session began with a discussion about the stress related to this session's topic. The training emphasized that all teachers should be aware of and trained in district procedures and policies regarding school violence situations. It was explained that this workshop was designed to enhance district training and provide additional techniques/suggestions to use should they encounter a violent situation – always relying on their district policy as a base.

Following this introduction, the team reviewed the steps in verbal judo from the last session. Then, students were given a scenario that included an elementary school student telling the teacher that another student has a real gun in a backpack. Students were encouraged to begin their response using existing school policy or procedure. Unfortunately, all of the students stated they did not know if their school had a policy or procedure on this type of incident. In response, the project team suggested, for the purpose of this experience, that students rely on the information that they have learned from these workshops to address this scenario. Students were first instructed to write up a solution independently. Then the students were assigned randomly to a small group. The students took turns discussing their solutions with their groups. Each group needed to agree on solution based on their discussion. After the discussions, each group shared their solutions with the class and received feedback from their peers and the project team.

Following this activity, the team discussed some "best steps" to take when a report of a gun is received. Table 4 lists the basic steps teachers can take, in accordance with district policy, when a student reports the presence of a weapon.

The project team then conducted another practical exercise. Four backpacks were distributed throughout the classroom. Each backpack contained a safe gun. Safe guns are constructed of rubber and are weighted to look and feel like real guns. However, the bright blue color distinguishes these safe guns from actual weapons.

Students were randomly assigned to a group and directed toward a backpack. Each group needed to assign a student to play the role of teacher. The teacher was then given this situation: Johnny, an elementary school student, just told you that a classmate, Mickey, has a gun in his backpack. The

backpack is on the classroom floor. How are you, as teacher, going to handle this?

Table 4

*Basic Steps when a Weapon is Reported*

Steps	Action
Pre-Police Arrival	Separate the student from the backpack/locker where the weapon is reported to be hidden. Calmly call the student to the back of the room.
	Ask another teacher to come supervise your class or take your class to their room.
	Have that teacher put the backpack under/behind the teacher's desk to separate it from the rest of the class.
	Escort the student in question down to the principal's office. You can use your verbal judo skills to encourage the student to admit bringing the weapon to school.
Post-Police Arrival	Assist the police when they arrive. The police will take charge of the situation and remove the weapon from the classroom.
	Objectively document the incident as soon as possible for reports for the school district and the police.
	Speak with the class about this incident. It is important for the teacher and the school counselor or administrator to speak with students, answer questions, and assure the students that they are safe.
	Follow policy and instructions provided by your district.
	Be aware that this incident may cause you physical and emotional stress. Seek out support and take care of your own emotional needs.

The “teacher” then role played the scenario. Each group observed the other groups’ actions. The project team critiqued each group’s performance, specifically focusing on what action the “teacher” took or did not take in managing his/her students, dealing with the gun in the backpack and assuring the safety of all the students in the classroom. After this exercise, the students were asked questions regarding how to deal with the aftermath of this type of incident.

This scenario was followed by a discussion of a lockdown situation with a possible shooter. Students were given the scenario of a lockdown with

a possible shooter and asked how they would handle the situation. Their responses were again discussed with the whole group. School policy was analyzed and suggestions for modifications were made. For example, school district policy might state to not open the door for anyone except a police officer. The team added that teachers need to ask the officer to slide ID under the door to verify his/her identity. The curriculum advocates for teachers to not open the door until the identity has been ensured. Students were advised to follow district policy and consider other basic safety information such as:

- Lock the door and move all students away from the windows
- Report to office who is in your room (attendance)
- Keep students as calm as possible during the event
- Do not open the classroom door until you verify the ID of the person on the other side. Follow the directions of the officer once you verify his/her ID.

Following the discussion on lockdown policies, the class practiced lockdown procedures as part of their training. One student assumed the role of teacher and the other students assumed the role of his/her class. The teacher then role played the procedures of a lockdown drill. The project team took notes on the actions of the teacher and the students during this practiced lockdown drill. At the conclusion of the drill, the project team shared their notes regarding the teacher’s performance in directing his/her “students” during the drill. In addition, the team also noted the actions of the students. The team noted whether the students maintained a quiet demeanor, turned off cell phones, and cooperated with the teacher’s directions. Once the lockdown activity was complete, the team also discussed other possibilities of what might happen during and after a shooting incident. The following list includes some of the information that teachers should be aware of during a crisis:

- Be aware that police are trained to “take out” a shooter before they attend to victims.
- Once the scene is secure, officers may instruct you to move your class to the “safe zone.” Parents will not be allowed to pick up their children during this time.
- Be prepared that you may see injured people and/or fatalities after a shooting incident. This situation will take an emotional toll on both you and your students.

At the conclusion of this session, the curriculum series was reviewed and discussed with students. Students were informed that the online

School Violence Rating Scale would again be available. Students were also reminded that participation was optional and anonymous.

**Results**

This study conducted a one-group, pretest-posttest, pre-experimental design to explore pre-service teachers’ perceptions regarding school violence. Ninety-five pre-service educators were asked to complete an anonymous pre-test using the School Violence Rating Scale. Twenty of those pre-service teachers then participated in a three session school violence curriculum workshop occurring over three consecutive class periods and, finally, those 20 participants responded to an optional and anonymous post-test.

**Pretest Results**

Of the 95 students requested to complete the School Violence Rating Scale, 50 responses were submitted, yielding an overall response rate of 52%. Of the pretest participants, 86% were female and 14% male. The majority of participants (64%) were pursuing an Early Childhood – 4th grade teaching degree, while 35% were pursuing a 4th – 8th grade teaching degree. Six percent of respondents reported studying special education.

The first research question explored in this study queried whether pre-service teachers feel that training in the area of school violence is necessary at the pre-service level. Participants responded using the key: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Somewhat Agree (SWA), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The participant pretest responses are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

*Pretest Responses*

Research Questions	n	SA%	A%	SWA%	D%	SD%
Do pre-service teachers feel training in this area is important at the pre-service level	50	62.5	27.1	6.2	0	4.2
Do pre-service teachers feel prepared if confronted with issues of school violence?	50	8.2	26.5	38.8	24.5	2.0
Are pre-service teachers concerned that they may experience school violence?	50	18.8	31.3	33.3	12.5	4.2

As evident in Table 5, the majority of students responded that they felt that school violence training is important at the pre-service level. Students also reported that they do feel, to some degree, prepared to confront issues of school violence and the

majority also reported being concerned that they may experience school violence in their future. Equally interesting, however, is that 16% of respondents did not feel concerned that they might experience school violence and that 26% of respondents reported feeling unprepared to deal with issues of violence.

**Posttest Results**

The posttest survey was electronically available to 20 students who had participated in the three week school violence curriculum. Of the 20 students requested to complete the School Violence Rating Scale, all 20 students participated, yielding an overall response rate of 100%. Of the posttest participants, 100% were female and all participants were pursuing an Early Childhood – 4th grade teaching degree. The posttest participant responses are found in Table 6.

Table 6

*Posttest Responses*

Research Questions	n	SA%	A%	SWA%	D%	SD%
Do pre-service teachers feel training in this area is important at the pre-service level	19	84.2	10.5	5.3	0	0
Do pre-service teachers feel prepared if confronted with issues of school violence?	20	65.0	35.0	0	0	0
Are pre-service teachers concerned that they may experience school violence?	20	45.0	25.0	25.0	5.0	0

As evident in Table 6, all student responses indicated agreement that school violence training is important at the pre-service level. Additionally, all students affirmed (Strongly Agree 65% and Agree 35%) that they feel prepared if confronted with issues of school violence. However, it is important to note that although the majority of students reported they felt concerned that they may one day experience school violence (95%), 5% of respondents disagreed.

**Qualitative Data**

The rating scale’s one open-ended question asked “What sources have you used to learn about school violence?” The pretest results found that the majority of students listed various forms of media (television, online news sources, etc.). In the post-test, 100% of participants responded that the school violence curriculum has helped them to learn more about this topic.

**Discussion**

This study was based on a needs assessment within our own University preparation program to

determine our students' perceptions of preparedness for dealing with school violence. Although school violence situations happen across the country, many of our students hold to the belief that it "doesn't happen here." Our students have also stated "I honestly haven't thought about it." The goal of our project was to determine the need and address that need through the school violence workshop.

This study's post-test yielded two critical findings. First, after participating in the workshop, students reported that school violence training is important at the pre-service level. Second, students stated that they felt better prepared to deal with issues of school violence. These two findings suggest that the curriculum raised student awareness and understanding of the issue of school violence.

The third finding indicates that students reported an increased concern that they may one day experience school violence. This finding may be interpreted in two different ways. First, the workshop may have increased students' sense of anxiety regarding school violence. Since the focus of the workshop was violence (including gun violence), the concentration and depth of this topic may have heightened students' fear and apprehension. However, this finding may reflect that since learning about the issues surrounding school violence, students are more aware that violence can happen in any school, in any socioeconomic area, and in any geographic location. Given student feedback, discussion, incidental data, and the finding that students reported feeling more prepared to deal with issues of school violence, researchers suggest that the latter interpretation is probably more accurate.

This research study was geared toward students pursuing an Early Childhood-4th grade teaching certification. Although the case scenarios in this curriculum can easily be adapted to address all grade levels, this study focused on using examples primarily within the elementary age range to address our study participants' needs.

Another limitation to our study is the lack of curriculum dealing with the various levels of classroom violence. According to Mary Margaret Kerr, there is a lack of research in school crisis prevention and intervention programs. As a result, the use of related disciplines dealing in child trauma or other psychological conditions focus primarily in the mental health field, rather than in education. Kerr suggests the best form of learning is done by "doing" (2009). Our curriculum is a reflection of this concept, learning by doing. As indicated by this current literature and supported by our findings, school violence curriculum is an area that requires future research and examination.

Despite the limitations of our study, including that of providing the curriculum training and posttest to only a portion of the original pretest sample, valuable information was gained throughout this study. Although the results did indicate a change in participants' perceptions, that change cannot be definitively attributed to the curriculum. However, incidental data seems to suggest that the curriculum did have an impact.

#### **Incidental Data**

In addition to the survey data results, the team also had the opportunity to collect additional information. This information was unsolicited by the team.

Several students expressed, verbally and in writing, their gratitude and excitement over the curriculum information to team members and other faculty. Students explicitly commented on the role playing scenarios. Many students emphasized that they appreciated the "hands-on" practice of using their verbal de-escalation skills in a safe, learning environment. They also commented that the practice helped them to feel better prepared to use these skills in an actual classroom situation.

Additionally, faculty (not associated with this project) observed the participants engaging in and leading professional discussions regarding safety issues and school violence. This information was especially noted by faculty and administrators as the third week of our project coincided with the shooting incident at Virginia Tech. Finally, students and faculty not involved in the project requested the school violence curriculum training.

#### **Conclusions**

Since a change did occur, a tentative hypothesis can be drawn from this study; however, due to the limitations of the study, change cannot be definitively attributed to the curriculum. Incidental data gathering and descriptive information suggest that the curriculum did contribute to the change.

School violence is an important issue that needs to be addressed in teacher preparation programs. Although it is likely that many teachers will never need to use these skills, it is still important to provide teachers training and opportunities to practice should the need arise. Schools routinely train and practice fire and severe weather drills, yet many teachers may never encounter a school fire or weather-related emergency.

Similarly, lockdown drills are beginning to be practiced by many school districts in accordance with federal guidelines. Following the Safe School Initiative Final Report, the Department of Education recommends that all schools address several preventive and practical models. This recommendation includes lockdown drills (Final

Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative, May 2002).

School violence response training is needed both for practicing teachers and pre-service teachers. This training needs to begin at the teacher preparation program level and continue through district/school in-service training. As this study's curriculum continues to be implemented, it is expected that additional issues will arise that the project team will address and incorporate into the workshop series.

School violence is an ever-present threat to our schools. This threat affects educators across the country, not just those in metropolitan areas. Consistent with the literature, this study suggests that pre-service teachers feel unprepared to deal with issues regarding school violence. The results further suggest that research needs to be conducted regarding school violence training programs and their respective effectiveness..

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**Note from the 2015 Executive Editor, Constantin Schreiber**

**May 14, 2015.** This article was first published at the original *Current Issues in Education* website, located at <http://cie.asu.edu/articles/index.html>. In 2009, *CIE* changed online platforms to deliver the journal at <http://cie.asu.edu>. The original *CIE* website was from then on only used as an archival repository for published articles prior to Volume 12. After the new *CIE* website moved to a different server in 2014, the original website and original article URLs could not be accessed anymore. Therefore, this article had to be repurposed into the published format you are viewing now.

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