

Creating a curriculum for teachers to deal with classroom violence from threats to shootings

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ABSTRACT: In this article we examine the development of a curriculum for student teachers instructing them how to deal with various levels of violence in their classrooms. The curriculum was developed after surveying a number of student teachers to determine their level of fear of violence in their future classrooms and their training on violence. Initially a three session curricula was developed then expanded based upon student feedback from post survey material and the introduction of technology as yet another means of communicating information about violence in our schools.

KEY WORDS: violence, classroom, curriculum, technology, change

Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, and numerous other shooting incidents have been etched in the minds of most teachers, past, present, and future. Each of these incidents are examples of violence occurring in educational institutions. All of these incidents have resulted in a number of changes in higher education and public safety operations (Rasmussen and Johnson, 2008). While some of these changes were mandated by school district reviews or college administrative reviews at government inquests, the need for providing teachers with some training on how to deal with the differing levels of violence in their classrooms is lacking in educational training today. Preparing future teachers requires providing students with a curriculum designed to not only meet their needs in their future classrooms; but also, to understand the ever increasing use of technology now used by our student populations. Today teacher education must adapt to accommodate the levels of violence now confronting our teachers. New approaches in teacher education programs at university, college, and district level, must include practical based training to provide our teachers with the tools needed to deal with the frequency and levels of violence facing them now and in the future. (Baldwin and Baumann, 2005).

This article describes the creation of a curriculum for prevention and reaction to school violence. The curriculum can be adopted by other institutions to provide student teachers with the tools necessary to deal with violence in their classrooms in the future. The curriculum also provides a unique opportunity for combining the resources of a school, college, or university curricula with police to provide a practical training program for both teachers and police officers when responding to critical incidents of violence.

Following the shootings at Virginia Tech, Delaware State University, Louisiana Technical College, and Northern Illinois University, many campuses reviewed their procedures on how to properly respond to shooting incidents. Questions arose such as could these crimes be prevented, or are colleges or universities sufficiently prepared to

respond to these types of incidents, or what can be done in the future to prevent these types of incidents from occurring again? Many institutions have responded by conducting a variety of internal reviews on existing emergency procedures, notification systems, and enhanced communication systems between different operations once thought to be protected by FERPA. While these reviews have brought much needed change in some areas, still lacking is a teacher education program examining the different types of violence facing teachers today in our classroom and how the teacher can deal with these incidents. (Rasumussen and Johnson, 2008).

The creation of this curriculum began with discussions between professors in the College of Education and Social Sciences at University A. A criminal justice professor who recently had conducted a number of workshops in the local school district was concerned over the lack of preparation the teachers had in dealing with school violence. His discussion with two other education professors led to a conversation on how our pre-service student teachers were being trained to deal with school violence issues. A search began for an existing curriculum for teacher education programs. No such curriculum was found so this task was undertaken by two education professors and one professor of criminal justice who was a retired chief of police with thirty years of experience. A thorough review of literature was conducted and while school violence issues were found, no curriculum was found to help pre-service student teachers in a teacher education program. A needs assessment survey was created to ask pre-service student teachers about their knowledge of school related violence as well as their concerns in their future classrooms. While many pre-service student teachers had not yet considered the possibility of dealing with classroom violence, others were very concerned about steps they could take for prevention and appropriate response. (see appendix A for the survey questions.)

The Pilot Curriculum

Based upon the survey results, a pilot curriculum consisting of three sessions lasting three to four hours was created (see Table I). Session I was planned to introduce pre-service student teachers to the types of school violence nationally reported as well as the types of schools where the violence occurred. Data was collected from the national school safety and security service reports years 2005, 2006, and 2007. (see website www.schoolsecurity.org for this report). This report outlined critical information (specific location of the incident – date, location, and then a short description of the incident) that provided the professors with data to confront the student’s attitude of “this type of violence can not occur here”. This first session took demographic data of cities A and B in Texas (the location of two largest school systems in our area), and compared these data to similar cities where school shootings had occurred during the past two or three years. By comparing similar cities with similar populations, socio-economic status, and similar geographic environments (urban, semi-rural, or rural), students readily saw that school violence has happened in similar locations and that they needed to be prepared. Once the students saw these data, the next discussion involved characteristics of the shooting suspects. National statistics collected by the FBI reveal general data involving shooting suspects; they generally are males between the ages of 12 – 19;

however, very specific data does not exist (National Threat Assessment Center, ECSP 2007). In these data, two patterns were found in most of these shooting incidents; the availability of weapons to the suspect, and indications of the suspects prior notifications to friends about planning or executing a shooting at the school (Deadly Lessons, National Academy of Sciences, 2003). Given the accessibility of technology (email, text messaging, and a variety of student data bases – Facebook, My Space, etc.), pre-service student teachers were taught how to access these sites to determine what their students were posting. While this initial training was occurring, a local high school had a text message report indicating a shooting would occur at 2:00 p.m. Media reports provided our students with some insight into how the high school students reacted to this text message, what parents and administrators did, and how the local police department responded (Bernet, 2007). This example provided a timely indication on the need for our curriculum to be flexible to incorporate the expanding use of technology our students now possess. The last part of session I involved discussing the changing role of teachers today in their classrooms. Teachers on a daily basis now deal with issues of domestic violence, custody battles, child abuse, and student/teacher affairs. Each of these areas present the pre-service student teacher with a need to ask their future employers about district policies on what their roles as teachers are when dealing with these types of issues in the future. Also discussed were the potential liability issues facing teacher when reporting these types of criminal incidents to local police.

Following session I, each student was given a homework assignment. Their assignment was to look at how they would discipline their students in the future. Students were asked to look at how they were disciplined by their parents, how they would discipline their children, and to determine what was their school district policy on discipline prior to session II.

Session II focused on dealing with classroom disruption involving verbal outbreaks. This session began with a review of the students' homework assignments and how their perceptions of discipline fit into existing school policy. Following these discussions, the concept of verbal judo was introduced (Bowman, 2001). Verbal judo refers to the idea of moving with an adversary's energy rather than trying to fight against it. The students were given a hand out on what verbal judo was and how to apply it in certain situations. Then they watched two professors demonstrate a simple role playing scenario using verbal judo techniques. The students then were given a series of simple applications using verbal outbreaks in the classroom to role play the application of verbal judo to these incidents. Once the students felt comfortable using verbal judo techniques, several groups were given other situations confronting teachers, then they role played each situation in front of the class. The students evaluated their peers and made suggestions to improve their skills in applying this new concept.

Following session II, each student was given a homework assignment. Their assignment was to review their school district's lockdown policy. The students were told to be prepared to practice their respective policies during session III.

Session III focused on the lockdown policy of the various school districts in our area. The students brought in their schools' policy. All were asked if any of had participated in a lockdown drill and if they knew what to do if a lockdown drill occurred in their classroom. The students stated none of them had known what their school district's policy was, nor did they know what to do during a lockdown drill. A lockdown drill was then practiced in this session. All of the students were placed under the control of one of their peers, the lockdown scripted announcement was read, and the students had to react. The student playing the teacher was then evaluated by the professors on how well he/she reacted, how he/she dealt with moving the students into a safe location in the classroom, how quickly the students reacted to turning out the lights, and moving away from windows or doors. In addition, the student playing the teacher was critiqued on how well he/she maintained silence with the groups of students in a darken classroom. The professors noted the physical response, pose, and demeanor of the student playing the role of the teacher. (During this session, the students were put through a practical application using the room where our training session occurred. Lights were turned out, students were moved up from their desks or chairs, and huddled into a safe area within the room.) The impact of putting the students through this practical exercise provided lots of discussions on how to deal with students fear and anxiety given the darkness and silence necessary in a real life situation. Students also evaluated their peer teacher on how well he/she controlled this application by their tone of voice, demeanor, and pose given this lockdown practice. Students commented how better prepared they felt in dealing with this type of situation following this exercise.

Session III was also designed to cover how to deal with an active shooter outside of your classroom. (Active shooter is defined as a person shooting a weapon outside of your classroom.) *However, the students practice on the lockdown policy took the allotted time so a modification in our pilot program occurred – a fourth session was created just to discuss how to deal with an active shooter.*

Following session III the students were given another homework assignment. Their homework assignment was to have them get mentally prepared on how they would deal with an active shooter in their school. The students were told to *think* about what they could do to get mentally prepared for this type of incident and to *think* about what type of actions they could take as a teacher to protect their students from an active shooter.

Session IV was designed to focus on dealing with an active shooter outside of the classroom. Setting the tone for this type of training was difficult. Since the criminal justice professor had been through a number of shootings on campuses and had to deal with the emotions involved with victims of shootings or other acts of violence in his career as a police chief, he set the tone based on his personal experiences to provide the students with some insight on how to prepare (as best you can) when dealing with acts of violence. The professors then asked three questions of the students:

What will you do if a shooting occurred at your school?

How will you react? How will you keep your students safe?

What do you think the police will do?

All of the students responded to each of these tough questions. Many of them did not know how they would react. All were interested in seeking advice on what they should consider, how they could protect themselves and their students, and what actions the police would do when confronting a shooter in their school. Unfortunately during the time of this session, the Virginia Tech incident had just occurred. The Virginia Tech incident provided a catalyst for discussion on how the teachers responded, how the students responded, and how the police responded. The professors provided the students with some insights into how to protect themselves and their students and what to expect from the police. The professors also explained once the shooting was done, what the police response would involve – getting students moved into a safe area, conducting witness interviews, dealing with other police criteria, reunion with parents, and post traumatic stress issues (both personal and with the students).

Once the students had completed these four sessions, a post survey was conducted to provide the professors with some insight into what changed. All of the student responses were analyzed and the next student teacher training session was modified to address some of their concerns. Once the students completed their post survey, each of the students was awarded a certificate of completion.

Table I – Pilot Curriculum

Session One

Overview of the training
 Reality of violence in education using national report
 Comparing geographical and demographical data illustrating the reality of violence in similar locations like Canyon and Amarillo Texas
 Understanding impact of technology – Face book, My Space, and text messaging
 Discussion on how to deal with new crimes – reporting child abuse, Domestic violence, custody battles, and student/teacher affairs following established school policy and state reporting requirements plus liability issues

Homework Assignment – Look at how you will discipline your future students, identifying your concepts on discipline with your future children, and finding out what is your school policy on discipline

Session Two

Discipline perceptions – students and school policy
 Verbal Judo – what it is and how to apply it to the classroom
 Role playing and evaluation

Homework Assignment – Students obtain their school’s lockdown policy and be prepared to practice it

Session Three

Discussion of each student’s school lockdown policy
Practice with class, lockdown policy – practical application
Evaluation and follow up discussion

Homework Assignment – Students need to mentally prepare on how they think they will deal with a shooting in their school or outside their classroom and how to protect their students

Session Four **

Setting the tone for students on this topic
Discussion on three questions: what will you do if a shooting occurred at your school? How will you react? How will you keep your students safe? What do you think the police will do?
Integration of VT incident and application to classroom
Closing discussion on training session

added due to time restrictions following session three

Modifications to the Pilot Curriculum

Since the pilot curriculum was taught to thirty five pre-service teachers, two hundred more students have been through this curriculum and a number of modifications in the curriculum have occurred. Sessions I and II have remained the same with some slight modifications on the evolution of technology – i.e. new methods of searching in Facebook, or My Space, or the new impacts of text messaging potential acts of violence are illustrated. Also added to the curriculum are certain legal standards on the duty to report incidents of suspected child abuse or other crimes, conforming to school district policy and state requirements on reporting these types of incidents.

Sessions III and IV have been greatly expanded. Session III still includes the lockdown drill and has been expanded to cover the scenario on how to deal with a gun in a backpack situation. Research indicates that bringing guns to schools in backpacks is a common factor in school shootings. The professors working with the university Chief of Police developed an additional training session involving the use of safe guns in backpacks. Collaborative efforts between the University Police Chief and these professors resulted in providing our students with a practical scenario involving a safe handgun in a backpack. While the students are in our classroom, several backpacks with safe guns inside them were placed in various locations in the classroom. (A safe gun is a plastic replica of an issued police automatic handgun.) The students were then divided

into groups of twenty or more. The professors designated a student as the teacher, who was then in charge of twenty or more peers. The teacher was given this scenario –One of your elementary school students tells you that his friend Billy has a gun in his backpack and wants to shoot Jake. Billy’s backpack is in plain view of the teacher. How will you deal with this situation? The student teacher actions were then evaluated by the professors and the Police Chief on how well they handled this situation.

One other modification was placed into this session; the University Police Chief brought a number of confiscated campus weapons into the classroom. The purpose of bringing these weapons was to provide all of the students with the opportunity to look at various types of handguns and to distinguish the differences between a revolver and an automatic. Many of the student teachers were shocked at how small an automatic weapon can be. The discussions following the backpack scenario involved determining what the legal requirements of a teacher were given this type of incident and what were their duties as a teacher under school district policy. This new modification was done under police supervision and control. The use of safe guns inside backpacks, and the display of seized weapons provided the students with their first exposure to weapons and provoked a number of discussions on their rights as teachers in dealing with a weapon and in protecting their students. The lockdown practical and follow up discussions remain part of session III.

Session IV was also expanded. Following the shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, the Attorney General for the State of Texas created a video program titled – *When Seconds Count*. The video is available on line to anyone (see website cite). The beginning of session IV has now been modified to show the first ten minutes of this video. During this time, the video depicts a group of shooters entering into a large urban high school and begins shooting anyone in their paths. The video depicts these actors randomly shooting students, staff, and teachers as they walk down several hallways. The video also depicts the police response that eventually kills a number of the shooters, the arrest of one, and then illustrates the police removing students and teachers from various classrooms into a safe area. The video finally depicts the giving of last rites to several victims – students and teachers, and then goes into detail on explaining what the school administration did right and how the police and teachers reacted to this shooting incident. Immediately following this short viewing, the students are asked three questions: how would you respond to this incident, how would you deal with a shooter outside your classroom, and how do you think your police department would react to this type of incident? Once these questions are discussed, the students get to see how police are trained to deal with a shooter on a campus. The students see what a police “go bag” is and how the police will use it in case of a shooting on our campus. (*A “go bag” is a police term for a rapid response duffle bag many police officers have in their vehicles to properly respond to an active shooting incident in their jurisdictions*). The students’ reaction to the video and then seeing the preparation of the campus police in dealing with this type of incident provides for a lively discussion during this session.

Following the last session, students again were asked to complete their post survey questions to provide the professors with their input. These additions (gun in the backpack scenarios, the use of the video on an active shooter, and the demonstration of the police on their training and go bag preparations), had a significant impact on the student's perception when dealing with an active shooter. Students stated they appreciated seeing the video that depicted the consequences during a school shooting and the response of the police.

Table II – Revised Curriculum

Session One – same as pilot program and same homework assignment

Session Two – same as pilot program and same homework assignment

Session Three – modifications

Lockdown policy and practical application is the same

Backpack with gun exercise and practical evaluations

Educating students on weapon types (automatics and revolvers)

Homework assignment – same as pilot program

Session Four – modifications

Introduction of video – When seconds count

Viewing of video

Student response to how they will react to a shooting in their school, outside their class, and how they will protect their students

Police education on equipment police have and training on how police

Will respond to a shooting on campus and follow up

Equipment display and explanation

Closing discussion

Conclusion

The frequency of school violence does not appear to be decreasing in our future. The need to provide teachers with some tools to deal with the different types of classroom violence and the reality of a school shooting is imperative in education today. The concept of “thinking outside the box,” has evolved into the curriculum now taught in the College of Education and Social Sciences at University A. This curriculum has also been approved by the State of Texas for continuing teacher education training for 2008 and beyond. Future modifications in this curriculum will be directed by survey responses given to first year teachers working in the State of Texas to determine what additional

areas they perceive as a need to address the varying levels of violence now found in their classrooms. Additional modifications may be made if these professors can gain access into local school districts to have their teachers respond to those survey questions answered by our pre-service students. Other areas in development include the possible creation of a national certification program at University A to fulfill the needs of our teachers in successfully dealing with violence in their classrooms. Finally, role playing, practical applications, and the ongoing media reports of classroom violence guide the continuing modification of this curriculum. During this school year, the Chief of Police and the criminal justice professor have modified this program to educate all of the faculty and staff on many of these same curricula. In spring of 2008 parts of this same program were taught to several sections of our freshman IDS class. Our goal is to educate our faculty, our staff, our students and our future teachers on how to survive shootings or other violent threats at their school.

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