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Why did a concern for safer schools develop in the UK?

Concerns about safety and crime prevention in and around schools in the UK really began to gain ground during the 1990s. These concerns came from different quarters. Firstly, a number of critical incidents such as the Dunblane ‘massacre’ in a Scottish primary school in 1995 and the murder of London head teacher, Philip Lawrence, in 1996, raised awareness of the potential vulnerability of schools to such incidents. Ironically in a television interview in 1994, just a year before his murder, Philip Lawrence said that he had increased security around his school by locking some of the gates and installing a video camera in a bid to better protect his staff and students (BBC, 1995). Yet these were very different kinds of incident: Dunblane involved the fatal shooting of 15 primary school children and their teacher by a local man who came on to the site during the school day. Philip Lawrence was stabbed at the school gates at the end of the school day by a 15 year old from another school, whilst trying to protect the potential victim. This latter incident was said to be ‘gang’ related. Following Lawrence’s death, a Working Group on School Security was formed. This made a number of recommendations in relation to improving the security of school premises and encouraged schools to have an appropriate security strategy (DfES/Home Office, 1997). These events followed a period of protracted debate after the abduction (during the school day in a shopping mall near Liverpool) and murder of 2 year old James Bulger (1992), by two ten year old boys. One of the sub-themes to the Bulger murder was that the two boys (Thompson and Venables) were truanting from school that day. These were very different kinds of event, requiring different types of response: with threats coming primarily from outside schools, or related to not attending school. Taken together these events provided a persuasive backdrop to the argument for greater control and surveillance in and around school sites. This paved the way for an enhanced role for the police in and around schools and in ‘truancy’ sweeps; as well as the widespread use of CCTV and other safety and crime prevention initiatives in schools (Hayden and Martin, 2011).

Secondly, alongside these critical incidents, there were ongoing reports from teachers about highly problematic behaviour from children and young people in and around some schools. Records of exclusion from school were increasing for much of the 1990s, adding to a perception that behaviour was getting worse. The connections between truancy, exclusion from school and increased opportunities for offending were becoming better understood. Thirdly, there was an appreciation of the potential of schools in relation to crime prevention. Research within the risk factors paradigm (see for example Farrington, 1996) was influential in reframing schools (and ‘education’) as both potential ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors in terms of the development of criminality. Fourthly, the Street Crime Initiative launched in 2002, included the development of Safer Schools Partnerships (SSPs) around schools located within one of the Home Office’s 10 crime ‘hot spots’ (Bhabra, Hill and Gate, 2003). There was particular concern about the number of robberies committed by teenagers. One of the key original aims of SSPs was the prevention and diversion of young people from offending.

Parallel developments in education meant that a series of initiatives to do with pupil behaviour were also developing: the Behaviour Improvement Programme (which ran from 2002-2005) aimed to develop better responses to behaviour and reduce...
truancy and crime. As part of this programme multi-agency Behaviour and Educational Support Teams were established around schools that were seen as having high levels of truancy and problem behaviour. SSPs were linked to these Teams; with attached police officers having a role in helping to create a safer school community, provide a support structure for victims of crime and anti-social behaviour and also to work with those who had committed offences.

The increasing availability of surveillance technology and private security, only added to the already persuasive argument for greater control and surveillance in and around school sites. While having police officers in schools in the UK is not a new phenomenon, the SSPs altered their largely educational role to one in which they became responsible for assisting in the reduction and management of problem behaviour, whether it was criminal or not. Arguably this has led to a blurring of the boundaries between problem, anti-social and criminal behaviour; and, an increased risk of criminalising young people (Hayden and Martin, 2011).

**Do we need ‘safer schools’?**
The evidence base on whether the behaviour of young people in general is getting worse or more violent is complex, in school as elsewhere. There are records of highly problematic behaviour in and around schools dating back to the nineteenth century; with incidents including well-known public schools (see Tubbs, 1996). Teacher surveys for decades have highlighted concerns about pupil behaviour, often citing the behaviour of young people in school as a key reason for leaving the profession. Yet the most recent teacher led review emphasises that highly problematic behaviour is relatively rare in schools (Steer, 2009). Longitudinal research conducted by educational researchers in the last 10 years suggests either slight improvements (see Munn et al, 2009) or no real overall change in the broad pattern of problematic behaviours in schools although a concentration of severe problems in a small minority of schools in ‘challenging circumstances’ (Neill, 2005, 2008). The various school-based, self-report, youth surveys conducted for the Youth Justice Board between 2000 and 2008, show minor fluctuations but no overall increase in the prevalence of offending behaviour (see for example YJB, 2009). The latter YJB surveys have also measured young people’s perceptions of safety, showing that children tend to feel safer in school, compared with out in the community. Youth Justice Board annual workload data shows a decrease in all proven offences (33% decrease between 2005/6 and 2009/10); and, a decrease in violence against the person (31% decrease between 2002/3 and 2009/10) (YJB, 2011).

However, the Steer Committee (2005) also recognised that certain aspects of pupil behaviour in schools are new: such as the general availability of technology like mobile phones. These are used by pupils in new forms of bullying and to record assaults and humiliations or to summon angry parents into the school at the behest of a pupil who has been disciplined. Furthermore the uncertainty about the meaning and application of in loco parentis is highlighted for contemporary teachers and parents alike; who have been found to be confused about the boundaries between school and parental responsibilities for children’s behaviour (Holt, 2011). It is noted by Steer

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1. *In loco parentis:* this concept gives teachers the same authority over their pupils as parents have over their own children
(2005), as well as by the Elton Committee in 1989, that the legal judgements supporting this concept are very old and that the principle is based on an ancient doctrine of common law. This is seen as problematic in a context in which ‘the trend for parents to challenge schools at law, noted in the Elton Report, has continued and intensified’ (Steer, 2005, p.80). Together these changes provide a more stressful environment for teachers.

Specific concerns about weapons carrying and gang culture entering the school environment is relatively recent but has led to both legislative changes and new guidance to schools (DCSF, 2008). The Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 introduced the power for members of school staff to search pupils for weapons if they have ‘reasonable grounds’ for suspecting that a pupil is carrying a weapon. Commenting on the guidance issued to schools on gangs, a spokesperson for the National Union of Teachers (NUT) said:

‘The Government’s guidance on gangs is a compilation of good sense and practical advice. Our evidence shows that there are a minority of schools which face increasing difficulties from weapons brought on to school premises. These schools need all the support they can get’ (NUT, 2008, para 1).

At the time of writing a staff walk-out in a Lancashire school (in northern England) illustrates the emotive nature of responding to the behaviour of young people in schools. In this latter instance classroom teachers are quoted as saying: ‘poor behaviour includes challenging teachers to fights, pushing and shoving staff, pupils making malicious allegations, constant swearing, and filming lessons on mobiles and threatening to post them online’. Whereas school managers and governors in this school responded: ‘there is no problem at the school and (that) most pupils are well behaved’ (Teachernet, 2011, paras 4 and 6). There is a big gap between ‘no problem’ and a situation where staff walk out. No doubt there are other issues that explain this major disparity in viewpoints in this school. So, the evidence about what is happening in schools tends to be both complex and confusing. Teachers working in a school where there is a general problem (rather than a problem with individual teachers or classes); particularly where there appears to be a breakdown in communication with those managing the school, tend to be vocal. This is not to discount their experiences, it is more a case of a need to take care with what we infer from them. Wider evidence tends to illustrate that rather than an increase in highly problematic and ‘violent’ behaviour from young people in general; there is an increased concentration of problems in a small number of schools, usually in the poorest areas. These problems include weapons and gang related behaviour. New technology adds to the possibilities for conflict and victimisation and parents are not always supportive of attempts by schools to address aggressive behaviour from their children. All this is happening alongside wider changes about what is seen as acceptable behaviour in public institutions such as schools: there is a reduced tolerance for aggressive behaviour and a desire to promote greater civility.

Background to the UK case study schools
The research that informs this article is based on a European Safer Schools Partnership that included ten countries and specifically the UK case study which was located in London. The initiators of this partnership had been involved in early SSPs
in the UK and the educationalists were very much focussed on work that would address problematic behaviour in schools. This was then coupled with a wider European development that linked the promotion of democratic values with violence prevention. The European Charter for Democratic Schools without Violence (hereafter referred to as 'The Charter') was adopted as a framework for the initiative, which including a training programme. This was a heady mix of hopes, aspirations as well as practical commitment to concerns about behaviour in and around schools across Europe.

The UK case study local authority is based on five schools in an inner London borough, the police and local authority education department. Four schools are for primary age children and the other is for secondary age young people.

**Figure 1: The Charter – democracy and violence prevention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article (or statements) in the Charter</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. All members of the school community have the right to a <strong>safe</strong> and <strong>peaceful school</strong>. Everyone has the responsibility to contribute to creating a <strong>positive</strong> and <strong>inspiring environment</strong> for learning and personal development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Everyone has the right to <strong>equal</strong> treatment and <strong>respect</strong> regardless of any personal difference. Everyone enjoys <strong>freedom</strong> of <strong>speech</strong> without risking discrimination or repression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The school community ensures that everybody is aware of their <strong>rights and responsibilities</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Every democratic school has a democratically <strong>elected</strong> decision-making body composed of representatives of students, teachers, parents, and other members of the school community where appropriate. All members of this body have the <strong>right to vote</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In a democratic school, <strong>conflicts are resolved</strong> in a non-violent and constructive way in partnership with all members of the school community. Every school has <strong>staff and students trained</strong> to prevent and solve conflicts through counselling and mediation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Every case of <strong>violence is investigated</strong> and dealt with promptly, and <strong>followed through</strong> irrespective whether students or any other members of the school community are involved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. School is a part of the <strong>local community. Co-operation and exchange of information</strong> with local partners are essential for preventing and solving problems.</td>
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**Bolding** = authors’ emphasis, to highlight key issues covered by The Charter.
**Concepts underlined** correspond with the items on the graph in Figure 3.

Violence prevention and democracy were the guiding concepts in the partnership, although it was clear that different countries had very different ideas about what these concepts meant to them. Perhaps for this reason the approach was to raise debate and discussion, rather than impose a definition. For example, the programme training materials for the work in schools acknowledges that the concept of ‘violence’ in schools is a contested concept (Ortega *et al*, 2006):

_in her report to the Council of Europe, Vettenburg (1999) concluded that there_
was no clear definition of school violence, which made it difficult, amongst other things, to ascertain whether school violence was on the increase or to make valid comparisons between different countries’ rates of school violence. However, as Debarbieux (2003) points out, there is now greater awareness of the need to accept a multiplicity of definitions of school violence from a range of perspectives, including those of children and young people (p.2).

On the other hand the principles that underpinned a democratic approach to reducing ‘violent’ behaviour were more explicit through the idea of adopting or accepting ‘The Charter’. So, for ‘violent’ behaviour we should read unwanted and highly problematic behaviour, which is aggressive and helps to make young people feel less safe in and around schools. It is behaviour that teachers have to respond to, it may challenge their authority and so gets in the way of teaching and learning.

**Findings**

The empirical data collected in this research includes a school based survey completed by 119 school based staff (51 from the secondary school and 68 across the four primary schools); and, in-depth interviews with 17 adults closely involved in the initiative (2 partnership co-ordinators, European and National; 3 local authority education advisory staff; 7 head or senior teachers; 5 other teachers).

**The outside coming in?**

All of those interviewed highlighted the challenges faced by schools located in an area of high deprivation and the multiple problems (e.g. poverty, unemployment, housing and crime) which affected pupils as a result. The local authority is in the top 20 most deprived local authorities in England (out of 354) and is ethnically very diverse, around half the population are from a Black or Minority Ethnic group. Teachers tended to make a strong distinction between inside and outside the school; with most reporting that currently there were few problems with violence inside the school (although some acknowledged that there may have been in the past). Instead, the problem of violence was viewed as a problem based outside the school in the local community, and that consequently the pupils saw the school as a safe place to be. Nevertheless, many teachers recognised that the effects of violence outside the school were impacting on children’s learning and development:

“We’ve got a lot of families that are involved in crime outside, involved in drugs and maybe sex workers. So we’ve got parents that are involved in things like that. So our infant children, although they are not as influenced by what’s going on outside, they may come from families where they see things like this going on [……..] But it is the juniors that are aware and very worried. You know, when you talk to children about what they are worried about, the first thing is usually sex, and the second thing is about crime and being bullied and what’s [going on] in the gangs. You know, they are really worried about gangs.”

Thus, it was concerns over violence outside the school, particularly gang-related issues involving pupils travelling to and from school, which motivated head teachers to get involved with the initiative:

“I have been caught amidst local gangs having problems amongst
themselves, of them being after somebody from the school community. Within the normal school day we have very few issues related to violence other than normal school-ground bust ups between kids playing sport or something like that. One of my real interests for joining the project was what could we do as a school to look at dealing with instances outside the school.”

The purpose of the questionnaire, distributed to all adult staff in the five schools, was to investigate a wider adult perspective on safer schools, than could be captured in interviews with adults who had a more specific role and involvement in relation to the initiative. Most respondents to the questionnaire were teachers (72%) with the rest being teaching assistants or similar roles.

**Awareness and level of agreement with the values embodied in ‘The Charter’**

We started by checking on staff awareness of ‘The Charter’ as the guiding framework for the initiative. About three-quarters (74%) of respondents had heard of the Charter but only half (51%) had actually seen it, with a third (33%) having seen it displayed within their school. Staff did not need to have actually seen or be aware of the Charter to answer the rest of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire asked about the extent to which staff agreed or disagreed with the statements (derived from the 7 articles) in the Charter; firstly in relation to the statements as principles (their ‘Viewpoints’) and secondly in relation to the extent to which these principles were applied in the different schools (‘Current practice’). As the seven Articles in the Charter usually covered more than one issue these were broken down further into fourteen separate statements cross referenced with each of the seven articles (see Figure 3).

Each response to these two questions was rated 1 to 4, the nearer the response is to ‘4’ the more positive it is. In Question 1 the highest rating of 4 indicates ‘strongly agree’ with the statement. In Question 2 the highest rating of 4 indicates ‘we’re there’ meaning that the principle was being applied in the schools. Figure 2 summarises and compares the overall mean results for these two questions.
Figure 2 illustrates the gap between the principles (encompassed in the Articles or statements) that staff agree with, or believe in (their ‘Views’) and the extent to which their schools can apply them (‘Current practice’). This high level of agreement with the principles embodied in The Charter was not something that was surprising for Education staff in the local authority; they saw The Charter as something that schools would want to strive towards:

“… there’s nothing in The Charter that is sort of controversial; nobody can disagree with anything in there, really. And all schools would want to be like that. So I don’t think, on principle, I don’t think there’s a problem with any of the schools signing up…..”

However, for certain local authority education staff there was also a recognition that investigating and following through all cases of violence (Article 6) might be difficult in practice for schools, depending on how they interpreted this statement and the concept of ‘violence’ used. Also it was recognised that school staff were likely to have very different philosophies in relation to some issues that underpin the ideas behind The Charter, particularly in relation to the balance of power between teachers, children and young people, as well as other adults.

Figure 3 illustrates the pattern across individual statements. The key issue in each statement is highlighted and numbered 1 to 7 (as in the seven statements in The Charter) and can be cross-referenced with Figure 1.
Figure 3: A comparison between the mean level of agreement about individual statements within ‘The Charter’ (‘Views’) and their application (‘Current practice’)

Key:  
‘Views’  
1= ‘Strongly disagree’; 4= ‘Strongly agree’  
‘Current practice’  
1= ‘Not happening yet’; 4 = ‘We’re there’

The responses show a strong overall level of agreement about all the principles embodied in The Charter: the mean (or average) rating for each item ranges from 3.53 (Article 4 – right to vote on the decision-making body) to 3.94 (Article 1 – the right to a safe and peaceful school). In relation to current practice within the schools, responses indicate that in almost every aspect schools had at the very least ‘made a start’ and in most cases had gone beyond this. Here the mean (or average) rating for each item ranges from 2.64 (Article 5 – students trained to resolve conflicts) to 3.94 (Article 7 – the school is part of the local community).

There were interesting differences when the responses from primary schools were compared with secondary schools. An independent samples t-test showed that primary schools were more likely to view the current practice in their schools as near to the values and practices embodied in The Charter (p = .048). There were highly significant differences between certain aspects of The Charter: respondents from primary schools were more likely to view their school as ‘a positive and inspiring environment’ (p = .006); their decision-making body as inclusive of pupils and parents (p=. .001); to agree that all had the right to vote on this body (p=. .000) and to agree that their pupils had been trained to resolve conflict (p= .000).

‘Violence’ and pupil behaviour in schools

Figure 4 illustrates that nearly three-quarters (74%) of staff agreed that ‘violence’ was an appropriate description of some pupil behaviours in their school. Often this was qualified as relating to a minority of children:

“Only a small proportion, but still.”
“Some pupils constantly hit each other or use other violent acts to react to situations which do not go their way.”

Figure 4: Whether staff thought ‘violence’ is an appropriate description of some pupil behaviours in their school

The focus was often on ‘fights’ and physically aggressive behaviour:

“Mostly in the context of ‘play fighting’ which sometimes (and only sometimes) gets out of hand.”

“Children bite, slap, hit, spit.”

Comparison between responses from all 4 primary schools and the secondary school showed that agreement with the term ‘violence’ (for some pupil behaviours in their school) was more strongly associated with primary school staff (Chi2, p=0.29).

Around a fifth (19%) of staff who did not think ‘violence’ was an appropriate term made comments that indicated that the term was too strong for use in relation to the behaviour of children:

“Violence seems too strong a term.”

“Disruptive but not violent in the strictest sense of the word (no knives, guns etc.).”

“It’s childish behaviour.”

**Pupil behaviours: staff personal experiences**

Some aggressive behaviours were common, with the great majority of adults seeing (74%) bullying between pupils during a one year period and 60% seeing damage to school property. Threats from pupil to pupil (74%) and unwanted physical contact
between pupils (79%) were seen by most staff. In general staff witnessed more of these events than were directly at them personally, or as incidents they had to resolve. This was particularly apparent in relation to threats from a pupil to an adult: 50% of adults had witnessed this at some point in the last year; this reduced to 26% experiencing this personally. Possession of an offensive weapon had been witnessed by 7% of adults but experienced personally by only one member of staff (in the secondary school). Unwanted physical contact from a pupil to an adult had been witnessed by 55% and experienced personally by 31% of staff during the last year. Figure 5 illustrates whether school staff have experienced particular behaviours personally, over the last year. There were no significant differences in the behaviours experienced or witnessed by type of school (primary or secondary).

**Figure 5: Percentage of school staff experiencing specific pupil behaviours (over the last year)**

![Bar chart showing percentages of school staff experiencing specific pupil behaviours](chart)

Adult responses to these behaviours varied. Conflict or problem resolution was more common in relation to bullying, threats and physical contact between pupils. Punishment was more common in relation to damage to school property, threats from a pupil to an adult and was the response to the one case of possession of an offensive weapon.

**Training**

Training was part of the purpose of the initiative, but this was not widely accessible to classroom based staff. Nearly three-quarters (73%, 85) of staff reported no professional development in behaviour management in the previous twelve months. For those staff who had received this type of professional development, views were very mixed, with only seven staff (out of 30 responding) saying that the training provided was very valuable.
Conclusions
The research illustrates the kind of context and issues SSPs are concerned with in the UK. The nature of schools as organisations means that high profile incidents are a shared experience and affect everybody but we should be careful not to exaggerate the prevalence of such events and look carefully at the evidence available. Schools in the poorest areas are beset by all kinds of problems and pressures and the behaviour of some children and young people is certainly aggressive and occasionally violent. It is interesting that it was the primary school staff in the current study who agreed most with the concept of ‘violence’, possibly because younger children can be more physical in their responses to conflict. This finding reminds us to look closely at the context and meaning of concepts like ‘violence’ when applied to the behaviour of children. In the main the problematic behaviours presented in schools are not criminal and are best managed by teachers. However, teachers must be supported and trained in responding appropriately to the range of behaviours that may be presented in a school. The indications are that most teachers in this study agreed with the importance of the positive principles embodied in The Charter and that in the main the schools were well on the way to achieving this sort of ethos, especially the primary schools. At the same time the research acts as a reminder of the reality gap that can exist between those running such an initiative and teachers in the classroom. It was clear that the training and other benefits of this initiative did not reach most teachers and support staff in the schools involved. Better all staff initiatives and dissemination of ideas is clearly needed. Finally, we need to avoid the ‘morality of low expectations’ (Furedi, 1997) that can be associated with increased surveillance and security in the lives of children; as well as stay alert to the possibility of critical incidents in schools.
References

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