A VIEW FROM INSIDE:

PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE FROM HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

WITH A HISTORY OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR AT SCHOOL

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By

Corissa Stewart

Thesis Committee:

Garnett Smith, Chairperson
Rhonda Black
Dennis McDougall
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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father and mother who raised me to believe in the doctrine of ahimsa or nonviolence. Through their unending love and support I have become the person I am today. They both have inspired me to achieve my goals and pursue my dreams. It is through these two amazing individuals that I learned how essential it is to bring love, peace and hope into this world.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined high school students’ perspectives on school violence. Data were collected over three focus groups. Two of the groups were comprised of six students, all with a history of violent behaviors. The third focus group was comprised of six special education teachers. This study was conducted in part because of the dichotomy that existed between teachers and students perceptions of school violence in the literature. However, the results of this study indicated that participants in this particular study had consistent perceptions of school violence. Results of this study also indicated that the participants did not feel their school was a safe environment due to the frequency of bullying and fighting that occurred on campus. Both teachers and students agreed that the number one reason for fighting on campus was to demand respect from peers. Participants in all three groups also agreed that the crowds which surrounded fights served to exacerbate the problems. These findings are consistent with much of the current literature on violence prevention, and indicate a continued need for more research in this area.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Rationale

As human beings, we consider ourselves to be among the most highly evolved of all species. We may pride ourselves on achievements and advancements in establishing our modern world, but mankind has still not been able to conquer the aggressive nature within. Countries throughout the world have worked diligently to develop new programs for space exploration and billions of dollars have been put into research for the advancement of medicine and technology (Gross, 2004). Yet it seems that those same monetary supports and efforts have not been put towards achieving long lasting peace amongst our fellow human beings.

Instead, billions of dollars have been spent to create weapons of mass destruction and to build strong militaries to defend against enemies. That same support however, is not put towards diplomacy efforts, which could eliminate the need for weapons and military use in the first place. The work that the United States Diplomatic Corps does in other countries saves both money and blood by defusing crises before there is a need to send the military, or to use weapons however, annual budget cuts in this area continue to impede this department (Borosage, 1999).

Americans also choose to spend more money to build prison systems than to improve education. Research shows that for the last two decades state spending on corrections grew at six times the rate of state spending on education (U.S. Newswire report, 2004). These dichotomies in spending and effort might provide some insight into the reason our nation is not at peace with the world or within itself.
By looking at the media and popular culture, it appears that violence is not simply tolerated in our modern world, but in many ways promoted. Today's youth are being raised on a steady diet of violent cinema and television. The most popular games amongst teenagers and children are video games which create a dangerous computer world in which they must kill or be killed (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). Violence has perhaps always existed. What is alarming is the ways in which it has begun to seriously affect children. "Violence is taking an increasing toll on American society generally and on children and adolescents specifically, who are the victims of more crimes than any other age group in the United States" (Kaufman, Chen, Chapman, Rand & Ringel, 1998, p.71).

Our changing times have forced us to educate our children about the dangers of this world before they even go outside to play. Many of us were raised in an era where even Halloween has been tainted by the violence with seems to permeate society. Children are warned not to eat their candy until it has been inspected for cyanide poisoning and razor blades. Nor should they trick or treat alone for fear of kidnapping. Instead of seeing the outside community as caring and safe, children are increasingly raised to fear any and all people they do not know.

These violent components of our modern world beg several questions. First, if we truly are an evolving species then why has evolution not brought about the extinction of the violent nature of humanity? Next, what function does perpetual violence serve for mankind, and what are the contexts in which that behavior is most likely to occur? Finally, the most important question is not why does violence exist, but rather why doesn't society proactively work towards it's' prevention?
These philosophical questions are beyond the scope of this study. This part of human nature may never be completely understood. However, it is this researcher’s contention that the effort put towards understanding the nature of violence, will ultimately lead to discovering the means to diminish it. To understand the nature of violence at the macro level, it may be helpful to first examine it at the micro level.

Perhaps by looking at violence through the eyes of those who partake in it, a better understanding can be obtained as to the purpose that it serves for these individuals. The purpose of this study pertains to special education and therefore, it is fitting that we look to these students for their perspectives on the issue. Today’s schools are not exempt from dealing with violence, yet within the schools lay a rich resource of student experience and perspective that may provide new insight about the issue.

Today’s schools are very different environments from what they used to be. “Fifty years ago the main disciplinary problems were running in halls, talking out of turn, and chewing gum. Today’s transgressions include physical and verbal violence, incivility, and in some schools, drug abuse, robbery, assault and murder” (Johnson & Johnson, 1995, p.1). In this study the perspectives of high school students, many of whom are receiving special education services for these transgressions, will be explored. Their perspectives are unique because the students were selected for this study based upon their documented history of violent behavior at school.

**Background**

Schools are the social centers that serve to prepare future generations for the world (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). Therefore, it is within education, within the schools, that hope for a better world should rest. Our schools are supposed to be safe havens, places of
hope, and places where dreams can flourish. Yet, when students are afraid to be on

campus or to take the risks necessary for learning, schools cannot serve their purpose
(Thornton, 2002).

Children are not born knowing how to be violent; violence is a learned behavior.
Walker, Ramsey and Gresham (2004) stated “This socially destructive pattern of
behavior is usually learned, developing out of long term exposure to unfortunate social
contexts in which violence and coercion are modeled as effective ways of relating to
others and achieving social goals” (p. 245). It is therefore, our job as educators to teach
students the skills they need in order to understand themselves, their world and their
behavior. To prevent illiteracy we teach reading to children at an early age, to prevent
social chaos and violence we must teach social and behavioral skills to all children at an
early age (Dwyer, Osher & Hoffman, 2002).

Bullying at school is a very old phenomenon and it is very likely that most
people have had to deal with some degree of bullying and teasing at school. Many adults
see it as a normal part of growing up and therefore it is often either overlooked or ignored
(Olweus, 1996). However, the chronic harassment, victimization, and isolation of
students have gone too far and many students may choose to retaliate against their
attackers with violence.

Violent behavior serves a purpose for students and research has shown that it is
often used as retaliation against peers (Walker, Ramsey & Gresham, 2004). When Junior
High School students were asked what they thought caused violence in school, their
number one answer was “being picked on” (Thornton, 2002). Students can usually
handle some degree of minor taunting and teasing. However, when the teasing becomes
systematic bullying and abuse, often students feel the situation will be exacerbated by involving others. Since intimidation is one of the tactics used by bullies to gain power over their victims, it is unlikely that adults will be notified and in these cases the bullying and harassment may continue for years (Walker, et al., 2004).

For two years, Johnny, a quiet 13-year old, was a human plaything for some of his classmates. The teenagers badgered Johnny for money, forced him to swallow weeds and drink milk mixed with detergent, beat him up in the rest room, and tied a string around his neck, leading him around as a 'pet.' When Johnny's torturers were interrogated about the bullying, they said they pursued their victim because it was fun (newspaper clipping presented in Olweus, 1993a, p.7).

In this particular situation where the harassment lasted for over 2 years, it is impossible not to ask questions. How could this type of abuse go unnoticed or be overlooked for so long? Were the teachers and faculty in the school aware of what was happening? Or did the events take place during transition times and in unsupervised areas? Currently, most secondary school teacher education programs emphasize subject specialty and the professional role of high school teachers is focused primarily on the transmission of subject matter (Astor, Meyer & Behre, 1999). This leaves little or no time allotted for social skills training or building teacher student relationships, which may leave students, more open to victimization.

Regardless of the professional roles teachers must fill, there is also a moral obligation to protect students from harm when they are aware of it. Victimization from frequent bullying has been cited as a factor in hostility, aggression towards others, truancy, school drop out, weapons carrying and even suicide (Walker, et al., 2004).
Therefore, bullying is not something society can afford to ignore. The victims of bullies are not the only ones who suffer, "criminal behavior is a well known correlate of persistent bullying" (Walker, et al., 2004, p. 244). Furthermore, "Olweus (1991) has shown that adolescent bullies have a 60% chance of having at least one criminal conviction by age 24, with 40% having three or more arrests. Bullies and chronic offenders also have an elevated risk of committing later violent acts" (Walker et al., 2004, p.244).

Olweus found that the typical victims of school violence are usually anxious and insecure, often suffer from a low self esteem and tend to feel lonely and abandoned at school (1996). These characteristics are undoubtedly conveyed to the teachers as well as the student’s classmates. This suggests that there are numerous possibilities for intervention. Students need to be educated about self-determination, social skills and emotional health, as well as the required academics. We live in a world where knowledge in these areas, could possibly save lives.

Educators and policymakers have been faced with the issue of bullying and violence in schools for years but it took the school shootings in Colorado, Oregon and Kentucky to finally get the public’s attention (Schlozman 2002). These in-school homicides were apparently motivated by a desire to get back at their peers and some adults in retaliation for the harassment, bullying and ridicule they had experienced (Walker, et al., 2004). These tragic events did not just occur randomly, or without warning. Schlozman (2002) stated, “studies of extremely violent behavior in schools have found that those who commit high-profile acts of violence have almost always made their intentions known to peers through direct or indirect communications” (p.90). It is
therefore, imperative to really listen to what students are saying. Their voices are an essential component of violence prevention.

There is a desperate need for teachers to teach more than just academics and to concern themselves with more than just grades and test scores. Nichols (2000) stated, “To serve the students that cause the greatest worry, the ones whose social and personal problems explode in gunfire, teachers must expand their intervention skill-sets to include restructuring the thoughts and feelings that lead young people to such desperate acts” (p.400). Our job as teachers is not to simply suppress violence in school, it is to educate students about the skills they need to become healthy human beings who can function successfully in school and in society.

Current research suggests that schools need to be proactive in their approach to violence prevention and focus on teaching of alternative skills, not simply enforcement of harsher punishments (Willert, 2002). Schools have responded to recent school shootings and increase in adolescent violence by adopting programs that they hope will reduce or eliminate violence on campus. These programs include, eliminating weapons brought to school by installing metal detectors and conducting random searches of lockers. Some schools attempt to suppress violent behavior by asking police to patrol the schools and arrest students who are violating the law or behaving violently. There is also training for faculty and staff on how to recognize and intervene in violent situations. Other schools have chosen to implement dress codes, and require students to wear identification badges, or have simply tightened up the enforcement of school rules which has resulted in more suspensions and expulsions (Johnson & Johnson, 1995).
It is interesting to note that these reactionary approaches only target the surface of the problem. There seem to be few proactive initiatives aimed at understanding the underlying reasons students feel the need to carry weapons to school or engage in violent acts to begin with. To truly make a difference in school safety more needs to be done than merely confiscating weapons and increasing security measures (Willert, 2002). “To understand the function of an act as infrequent as bringing a gun to school or as secretive as selling or using drugs, it is also necessary to assess such elements as students’ social perspectives, beliefs, consciences, and feelings. These are what really drive intolerable behaviors, not merely the antecedent events that trigger them” (Nichols, 2000, p.394).

Ironically, by turning our educational institutions into police states the situation may be exacerbated. Inarguably it is essential to protect the students and faculty on campus. However, if schools are institutions of learning then what happens when students are suspended or expelled from school for inappropriate behavior? If these students are not allowed to attend school than how can they be educated about the alternative, appropriate behaviors we want them to exhibit?

This issue must be considered when we look at reactionary legislation such as the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994. In response to a national movement toward zero tolerance, this act mandates a 1-year expulsion for any student caught bringing a weapon to school (Skiba, 2002). The problem with this act is that expulsion is a punishment, and punishment only aims to stop the behavior from happening. It does not build new replacement behavior which would inhibit a reoccurrence. The business of schools is to educate students. Punishment without the added acquisition of alternative behaviors is counterproductive to any institution of learning (Maag, 1999).
If society wants to attack the problem of school violence then we must look to its roots which means looking to those most directly involved; the students. Researchers have conducted many studies on school violence and violence prevention (Thornton, 2002; Willert, 2002). The majority of this research focuses on the issue from the perspectives of the administration, teachers and parents. As a result, the students’ voices have often been left out. “High school students are seldom invited to discuss their views on school violence or school climate. When school districts or researchers decide to address such issues, they tend to rely on adults in the community—parents, agency representatives, and school personnel” (Willet, 2002, pg. 2).

It is because of this lack of student perspective on the topic of school violence that I have chosen to investigate this area. The focus of this study is on those individuals who have repeatedly committed violent acts at school, either towards their peers or school staff. The goal of this study is to add the voice of high school students in special education for the movement towards violence prevention.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine high school students’ perspectives of school violence. More specifically, this study will explore the perspectives of students who are receiving special education services and have a documented history of violent behavior at school. This study will also explore the function of violent behavior for these individuals and the contexts in which it occurs. Data was collected through the audiotaping of two focus group interviews. Based on the findings of this study the researcher hoped to convey the importance of proactive initiatives towards violence prevention in the field of special education.
Research Questions

There are a multitude of questions that arise when we look at violence prevention in schools. First, do students feel their schools are safe environments in which they can learn and grow? Second, what roles do teachers, administration and students play in establishing a peaceful learning environment? Third, how can the students themselves contribute to improving school safety? Forth, in their opinion are the current policies for violence prevention in their schools effective? Lastly, what are the predominate reasons students behave violently at school? These are the questions that I addressed throughout this study. The specific questions that I asked in the focus group are as follows:

1. Do you feel school is a safe environment? Why?
2. How does the school discourage bullying and fighting?
3. What should the school do to make campus safer?
4. What do teachers and faculty do when there is a fight?
5. Are there specific places where fights tend to occur? Who supervises these areas?
6. What does the school do when people are involved in a fight? Do you think these things are effective ways to deter violent behavior at school?
7. Why do you think students get into fights or behave violently at school?
8. What factors escalate a situation or push someone over the edge?
9. Was there ever a time when you personally held back from fighting? Why? What would you need in order to be able to do that again?
10. What can students do to improve school safety?
Significance of the Problem

This particular study has many implications for the field of special education. The majority of misbehavior which occurs at school is often committed by a very small percentage of the student population. A study of middle school students in a large Midwestern, urban school district, found that 6% of the students were responsible for 44% of all office referrals (Skiba, 2002). Many of the students who are frequently referred to the office are receiving special education services (Larson, 1998). Therefore, it is essential that we continue to further our understanding of school violence as it is perceived and experienced by these students in particular.

In order to better serve the needs of our students we need to listen to their stories. We need to gain a better understanding of their world and see what life looks like through their eyes. If we can understand why students feel a need to react to situations in a violent manner, perhaps we can then develop effective interventions and strategies to help change their behavior. We can look to the students to teach us how to best teach them the skills that they need (Thornton, 2002).

It is also important to let students know that they have a voice and that what they have to say is important. Often difficult students are ignored and overlooked by their peers as well as their teachers. By giving them a chance to voice their opinions and concerns we are validating them as contributing members of school and society (Willert, 2002). Since the field of special education is flooded with the viewpoints of teachers, parents, administrators and legislators, this study will help to add the students’ voice as well.
**Definition of Terms**

To begin to explore the concept of school violence we must first establish our definition for violence. Furlong and Morrison (2000) stated “School violence is now conceptualized as a multifaceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools, which inhibit development and learning, as well as harm the school’s climate” (p. 71). In this research, I considered bullying behavior in the form of aggression, physical or otherwise a component of violence. There are three common features in most definitions of bullying: (a) a clear power balance between the bully and victim, (b) an intentional desire to cause harm, and (c) a pattern of behavior that is repeated over time. Harassment is defined as verbally or non verbally demeaning a person in regards to attributes such as race, gender, sexual orientation or religion and harassment is an illegal act (Walker, et al., 2004).

**Delimitations**

This study has multiple limitations. First, this is a qualitative study, and is therefore concerned with peoples’ ideas and opinions. Since people can change their ideas and opinions whenever they choose, one must keep in mind that these opinions and ideas are not facts, but merely what the individuals feel at the time. Second, the fact that I worked with these students for a semester may have an impact on the information they choose to share in the focus group interview.

Third, because I used a purposive sampling based partly on convenience, rather than random sampling of subjects from a defined population, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the students who actually participated in the focus group. The data
from this study describes what these particular students thought and felt about high school violence, at the time of the focus group interview.

Fourth, these students were selected because of their history of violence in the past, based on school records and teacher nominations. Therefore, some of these students are currently exhibiting violent behavior at school, and some are not. A major limitation of these focus group interviews is that they were only conducted one time and only yielded one type of data. Another limitation is that this study is being conducted by a firsttime researcher.

**Assumptions**

When a child is taught that all people are equal regardless of race, religion or socioeconomic status, the concept of discrimination is difficult to grasp. Likewise, when one is raised to believe that peaceful conflict resolution is the only option, the concept of violence itself is also difficult to grasp. If violent media, cinema and games are censored throughout childhood, one does not have a chance to become desensitized to these graphic images. All of these factors helped to contribute to the lens in which I view the world.

Acts of violence are in direct contrast to my belief system. I believe that violence should hold no place in a civilized world. Nor should it be glorified or promoted through governments or societies. This is why the subject of violence is so intriguing. It stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the phenomenon and the purpose it holds in a civilized world. Why do some people act violently when so many others do not? My bias in this study is that violence is an unnecessary means of resolving
problems. Therefore, the way in which this research was conducted was no doubt influenced by that idea.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Students with Disabilities

By looking at the predictors of violent behavior proposed by researchers, we begin to see why certain students seem almost predisposed to this behavior. Strong predictors of violence for youth include involvement with antisocial peers, low socioeconomic status, aggression, weak school performance, patterns of aggressive behavior and substance abuse (Walker, et al., 2004). The student participants in this particular study fell into at least one, if not all, of these categories.

Students with learning disabilities, emotional disturbance or behavioral disorders usually experience both academic and social difficulties beginning at an early age (Quinn & Newman, 1995; Roffman & Herzog, 1994). The problems and frustrations resulting from their disabilities effect many areas of their lives (Quinn & Newman, 1995). A student’s disability in one area often leads to deficits in other areas, resulting in a snowball effect of problems and frustrations (Roffman & Herzog, 1994).

By definition, students with learning disabilities experience underachievement academically. This may lead to behavioral problems which result from the student’s frustration at school. The negative academic experiences of students with learning disabilities can also lead to low self-esteem and low self concept (Roffman, 1994).

Students with emotional disturbance and behavioral disorders often lack appropriate social skills and may have difficulty interacting with their peers. A common characteristic of students with E/BD is social skills deficits, which can include not only peer relationship problems, but also aggression, and oppositional behavior (Sutherland,
Wehby & Gunter 2000). Emotional and behavioral disorders often lead to severe academic difficulty (Ruhl & Berlinghoff, 1992). In fact, students with E/BD have the lowest grade point averages (U.S. Department of Education, 1995) and the highest dropout rates (Wood & Cronin, 1999) of students in any other disability category.

Researchers have found that children who develop emotional and behavioral disorders tend to share similar experiences. These experiences may include "weak bonding to caretakers in infancy and ineffective parenting practices such as lack of supervision, inconsistent discipline, highly punitive treatment, and failure to reinforce prosocial behavior" (Morrison & Furlong, 1994, p. 359). As a result of these early experiences children may begin to show signs of aggression and violence at a young age (Larson, 1998).

Domestic problems can lead to the need for foster care. Students who are in foster care are at a disadvantage academically and emotionally, and a large percentage of these students eventually receive special education services (Smucket, Shelly & Kauffman, 1996). These students often change schools frequently, which can lead to inconsistencies in their education. They usually have higher retention rates than other students and are perceived by school staff in a more negative way. As a result, recent studies suggest that these students exhibit serious academic and behavioral problems (Smucket, et al., 1996). The school experience itself can sometimes exacerbate the problems experienced by these students, who may already have emotional and or behavioral problems.

A major concern related to school violence is how it affects students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Exposure to school violence may be an additional stressor for these students. Since there are already multiple stressors in these students'
lives, school violence may contribute to the development of further problems (Morrison & Furlong, 1994).

Students who receive special education services may not have access to the same kind of reinforcement as their peers. Violent or aggressive behavior may be their preferred way of getting reinforcement from peers or faculty (Larson, 1998).

The typical prosocial reinforcement properties of the high school setting (e.g., timely progress towards graduation, positive adult interactions, and athletic or extra-curricular opportunities) must be accessible in order to have an influence on students behavior. If such prosocial reinforcers for school attendance are unavailable to a portion of students due to a lack of academic or interpersonal skills, these students may find alternative, antisocial reinforcement in disruptive behavior. (Larson, 1998, p.287)

Poor social skills can adversely impact the students’ lives in numerous ways. Research has indicated a relationship between social skills deficits and a number of negative developmental outcomes, including low self-esteem, poor achievement, school dropout, delinquency, teacher and peer rejection, vocational adjustment problems and interpersonal conflicts (Gresham, Lane, Macmillan & Bocian, 1999; Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Green, 1992; Pope, Bierman & Mumma, 1991; Walker et al., 1995). This lack of social skills can lead to rejection by peers and isolation at school.

Without friends and a sense of belonging, such students are at a greater risk for becoming victims (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). Peer rejection and social isolation can lead to victimization which can sometimes lead to violent retaliation (Jones, 2002). Students may have learned to use violent behavior as retaliation to harassment and
bullying at school. Morrison and Furlong (1994) found that students in the special day class (those receiving special education services) experienced higher rates of bullying than other students in the high school.

The participants in the present study have struggled academically and socially for many years. The violent behavior they have exhibited has served a function for them. Maag (1999) stated “all behavior is purposeful and serves a function for a student” (p.100). This behavior has occurred in a context. The next two sections will review what other researchers have found in regards to students perspectives of school violence as well as the function and contexts of violent behavior.

**Views on School Violence**

Researchers have conducted many studies on school violence and violence prevention (Thornton, 2002; Willert, 2002). However, much of this research focuses on the issue from the perspectives of the administration, teachers and parents. As a result, the students’ voices are often left out. “High school students are seldom invited to discuss their views on school violence or school climate. When school districts or researchers decide to address such issues, they tend to rely on adults in the community--parents, agency representatives, and school personnel” (Wilert, 2002, pg.2)

Thornton (2002) examined school violence through the eyes of middle school students and revealed important insights into the needs of students and the reasons they felt violence occurred in their schools. Her study describes the responses of students from four different focus group interviews which took place in the southern United States. The focus groups were comprised of students as well as other major stake holders in the school, including teachers, administrators and parents. When students were asked
what they thought caused violence in school, their number one answer was "being picked on." Students believed that their teachers were either unaware of these situations or consciously choosing to ignore them. Students reported that sometimes they did not know how to control their anger, and stated that as the second cause of violence in school. Trouble at home was reported to be the third cause of violence. The final reason given by the students when asked about the causes of violence at school, was an inability to communicate effectively and solve disagreements that could lead to misunderstandings and violence (Thornton, 2002).

Thornton (2002) also emphasized the need to include the students' perspectives in violence prevention research. She also illuminated an interesting dichotomy between what students saw as causes for violence and what teachers saw. Students viewed violence as a problem that was definitely within the school itself. Teachers, on the other hand viewed violence as a problem that resulted from factors outside the school. They felt that violence was brought into the school from external factors such as problems in the home, violence in the media or difficulty with peers (Thornton, 2002). Regardless of where the violence originates from, it is important that all members of the school community acknowledge the role they play in contributing to and diminishing violence on campus.

If teachers choose not take responsibility for violent events that occur on campus, it could send the message to the students that the teacher's only concern is for academic skills. Students need to know that their teacher's roles extend beyond testing and grading. In a study conducted by Astor, Meyer and Behre (1999), the consensus among the students was that caring teachers were the ones who saw their role as transcending the
walls of the classroom to all areas of the school, surrounding community and into the children’s home lives.

Another study by Dear (1995) reported and analyzed the results of sixty focus group interviews that included students, teachers, parents, administrators, support staff, law enforcement, and representatives from the community. Dear (1995) found that fights and gangs were the most frequently encountered forms of violence. He also found that bullying and verbal intimidation occurred with some frequency but were only seen by 2 to 3% of the educators as being problems (as cited in Willert, 2002). That statistic is alarming because it suggests that 97% of the educators surveyed were either unaware or choosing to ignore a very real problem. Preventative measures cannot be undertaken until the problem is first accepted by all individuals involved.

Willert (2002) conducted a focus group interview with eleven high school students, five females and six males, which was held in the Niagara Falls area. The two hour focus group took place after the students had participated in a violence prevention conference which had been held on the previous day. This study provided additional information about students’ views of their school’s climate. These students expressed the need for proactive, preventative measures. They supported long term solutions to violence prevention in their schools, and realized that punitive measures after a tragedy already occurred were unlikely to have much impact. The group felt that it was important for school officials and parent groups to avoid overreacting to school violence by adopting more severe punitive restrictions, and they did not believe that surveillance and security systems could improve school safety (Willert, 2002).
Overall, the students interviewed by Willert (2002) felt that it was important for officials not to overreact to school violence by placing more restrictions on students’ personal freedoms. They also felt that increasing security measures would have little effect on the occurrences of violence on campus. The students stated that bullying and fighting were common occurrences, and that adults should hold students more responsible for safety in schools. The schools were also highly criticized by the students for not having proactive programs that would promote a sense of community and belonging to discourage teasing, bullying and assaults.

Educators can make a difference in school safety by teaching skills such as self-management and self-determination to their students. These skills can be taught at an early age and work to prevent violent situations in the future. Violence prevention education needs to begin in the elementary schools so that students have a solid foundation when they reach the upper grades. The students in Willert’s focus group agreed that violence prevention is “something you have to work at; it is not instantaneous—it takes time” (2002, p.9).

**Contexts in which Violence Occurs**

Behavior serves a function and does not occur in a void; rather it is a reaction to contexts. Maag (1999) stated that “behavior does not occur in a random or unorganized fashion. Individuals’ actions attain meaning as a function of the context-situation or circumstances-that exist in a particular environment” (p.99). It is important that the behavior matches the context in which it occurs since behaviors are deemed appropriate or inappropriate depending upon that particular context. For example, running and
pushing, considered inappropriate in a classroom, may be encouraged during a game of football.

In terms of context, it is essential that students correctly read and interpret social cues. Students must be able to distinguish between what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior at any given time. "Teaching social behavior to students includes teaching them to recognize the appropriate match of behavior to context as well as the behavior itself" (Maag, 1999, p.29).

By considering the contexts and functions of a student’s behavior, one can see that the school has a great deal of opportunity to intervene. If “school violence” is the term used in discussing the problem, rather than “violence that happens at school” our attention may become refocused on the role that the school as a physical, educational, and social environment plays in the violence that occurs there (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Researchers have shown that there are certain physical areas of the school where violence is more likely to occur (Astor, Meyer & Behre, 1999; Furlong & Morrison, 2000).

The National Institute of Education (1978) found that most of the violence and disruption usually occurred in areas such as stairways, hallways, and cafeterias, and that the risk of violent encounters was greatest during transition periods. The study conducted by Astor, et al., (1999) found that violence tends to occur during times when teachers are not with students (e.g., teachers taking a break or eating lunch in a separate location). These findings seem to indicate that students are somewhat aware of appropriate and inappropriate behavior, since they often chose not to engage in violent behavior in locations and during times when teachers were present.
The study by Astor, et al., (1999) also found that the majority of teachers did not feel it was part of their professional role to intervene in situations occurring outside their own classrooms. The school staff members were very concerned about the unsafe areas and violent events that occurred within their schools. Yet, these researchers found that a majority of the teachers did not see it as their professional role to intervene or stop violent events when they occurred or to help secure those areas that were unsafe (Astor, et al., 1999). The students interviewed in the study were very concerned about this issue. They felt that teachers held some responsibility for student safety regardless of the location (Astor, et al., 1999).

The findings of this particular study led the researchers to ask the questions: "why didn’t violence occur in the classrooms when teachers were present? As well as, why did many school administrators and teachers choose not to actively prevent violence outside the classroom?" (Astor, et al., 1999). These questions have important implications in regards to school safety. If teachers are not responsible for the safety of their students on and around campus, then who is? In the study, Astor et al., emphasized the role of teachers because they found that "other adults in undefined school space such as, hall monitors, security guards, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and noon aides-- did not appear to significantly reduce violence" (1999, p.34).

There may be numerous reasons why students engage in violent behavior at school. Researchers have shown that the students themselves see bullying and teasing as frequent occurrences at school (Astor et al.; Furlong & Morrison, 2002; Thornton, 2002). So it is possible that violence is used in retaliation to this kind of treatment from peers. Furlong and Morrison (2000) stated “a student may react in a violent or aggressive
manner in response to bullying, social rejection, public humiliation, perceived lack of
fairness in disciplinary actions, and stress. These situations are all tied to contexts,
actions, and policies that schools as organizations can affect”(p.76).

In order to understand more about the function of certain behavior, it is important
to look at some of the current policies in place that attempt to address violent behavior at
school. Larson (1998) stated that “strategies to manage aggressive student behavior
including that of students with repeated incidents, relies heavily on attempts to initiate
punishment contingencies” (p.285). The possible problem with these plans is that
punishment is related to context and what is seen as punishment by some, may not be
considered punishment by others. Consider a student who does not want to be in the
classroom. This student chooses to behave in an inappropriate way and is then sent to the
principals’ office. To the teacher this is punishment, but the students’ behavior is
actually being negatively reinforced, because what they saw as an aversive (being in the
classroom) has now been removed.

To students who have struggled through school year after year, the school itself
may be an aversive they want to avoid. So it is possible that the inappropriate behavior
they exhibit functions as a way to avoid that aversive. Researchers suggest that
suspension and expulsion are still the most common disciplinary actions used in school to
handle violent behavior (Astor, et al., 1999). Even if these measures are viewed as
punishment by the students, it is important to remember that punishment is only a short
term solution. The goal of punishment is only to extinguish behavior. It in no way
attempts to build new behaviors to replace the inappropriate ones.
Research has consistently shown the need to implement skills training early on in a student's educational career in order to effectively prevent violence from occurring (Larson 1998). Without early interventions and education about violence prevention, some school disciplinary procedures may be ineffective. Larson and Dodge (1994) stated that "for those students without potentially adequate anger management and interpersonal problem solving competencies that are both salient as cognitive response choices and behavioral within their repertoires, the expectation that they will inhibit aggression is naive, at best" (as cited in Larson, 1998, p.287). Even though punishment for inappropriate behavior is the most common form of discipline in schools, it has not been shown to improve school safety (Larson 1998, p.287). Even though punishment for inappropriate behavior is the most based solely on antecedent punishment consequences is naive, at best" (as cited in Larson 1998, p.287). Even though punishment for inappropriate behavior is the most based solely on antecedent punishment consequences is naive, at best" (as cited in Larson 1998, p.287). Even though punishment for inappropriate behavior is the most common form of discipline in schools, it has not been shown to improve school safety (Larson 1998, p.287). Even though punishment for inappropriate behavior is the most
all of the literature reviewed was the need to be proactive in terms of violence prevention. Early interventions can perhaps eliminate the need for drastic reactionary measures once a violent outburst has already occurred.

If violence prevention programs in schools are to be effective, then all members of the school community must participate. Perhaps teachers feel that their authority and professional role is limited to within the walls of their classrooms. Yet, in order to improve the safety of the school, all of the areas on campus must be owned by all parties involved. Support staff, administrators and even students need to acknowledge ownership and responsibility for school safety. It is essential that the students who make up the largest population within the school community have their voices validated and heard. By looking at school violence from their perspectives and seeing it through the lens in which it is most directly experienced, some new doors may open for violence prevention in the future.

The studies conducted by Thornton (2002) and Willert (2002) both served as guides for the methods utilized in this study. Both of these researchers felt compelled to include the students' voices through the use of focus group interviews. These focus groups allowed for dynamic interaction among participants which resulted in unique data. The authors both acknowledged the focus groups' abilities to produce rich, unique data that is qualitative in nature. I chose to use these particular studies as guides in the development and implementation of this particular study on students' perspectives of high school violence.
Participants

The 12 students who participated in this study were all receiving special education services at a high school on the island of Oahu. They were nominated for this study through the recommendations of two special education teachers and one student services coordinator at this school. The students were also selected after the researcher reviewed their cumulative files which documented a history of violent behavior at school. Each student met the criteria for this study by having been referred to the principal’s office at least three or more times throughout junior high and at least twice during high school for violent behavior towards peers or staff.

The first focus group interviewed had six students; four females and one male. The students have all been assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. Isa, a 17 year-old female with learning disabilities was a member of a gang for three years. Both Cara and Diana, 18 year-old females with learning disabilities, had been involved in numerous physical fights at school. Beth, a 17 year-old female with learning disabilities had also been involved in numerous fights at school, beginning in elementary. Alberto and Kimo were both 17 year-old males with learning disabilities who had a history of violence at school.

The second focus group was also comprised of six students; five males and one female. Justin is a 17 year-old male student with learning disabilities who was referred to the office twice in junior high for bullying other students, and has been involved in several fights throughout high school. Hank is an 18 year-old male with emotional and
behavioral disabilities who was placed in a psychiatric hospital and then foster care three years ago after stabbing his mother. Lou is an eighteen year-old male with emotional and behavioral disabilities who has recently returned from a residential treatment facility. Greg is a 17 year-old male with a learning disability, who is currently being brought up on charges of assault and battery against his stepfather. Ella is an eighteen year-old female with learning disabilities who has been involved in numerous fights throughout high school. During her sophomore year, Ella had two temporary restraining orders issued against her. Frank is a 17 year-old male with learning disabilities who was involved in numerous fights in both junior high and during his first two years in high school. During the fall of 2003, Frank participated in a two day peer mediation program at school.

The ethnicity of the students in this study is predominately Hawaiian / Pacific Islander. One of the males is of Latino decent and two females and one male are of Japanese decent. Seven out of the 12 students in the study are from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are receiving free or reduced lunch. A table of participants is provided below (see Table 1).
Table 1. Gender, Age, Ethnicity and Referral Reasons of Student Participants

Focus Group 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Referral Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus Group 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Referral Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Tongan</td>
<td>Bullying/ Fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Fighting/ Stabbing mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Fighting/ Assault of step father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Fighting/ Temporary restraining orders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Fighting/ Peer mediation training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>Fighting/ Treatment facility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to recruit participants, the study was first briefly explained to the students. Then the researcher provided the consent forms for the students and their parents/guardians to sign. Finally, the students were told that the focus groups would be held during a lunch hour and the researcher would provide pizza and soda as compensation for their participation. Out of the 25 students who met the criteria for the study, 12 students agreed to participate. All ten of these students knew the researcher and had worked with her as their student teacher during the previous semester.

**Setting**

The focus group interviews were held in the conference room on the first floor of the high school. The groups were each held on separate days, one on Wednesday the next on Thursday. The room was air conditioned, and had 12 brown wooden chairs which were arranged in a circle for the group. The walls were painted white and are free from any decorations. There was a white dry erase board on one of the walls and a window on the wall opposite the door. This setting was selected because it was a comfortable environment that was quite and secluded. There was minimal distraction from outside noise, and confidentiality was more secure in the non-partitioned room with closed windows.

**Instrumentation**

Since this is a qualitative study, I facilitated the focus group interviews. I used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure that all research questions were answered, while still allowing for flexibility to gain more information from participants. There were two separate audiotapes used to record the interviews, which were transcribed immediately upon completion.
Questions for the focus group were generated from previous research findings as well as teacher information. The questions were constructed to allow for elaboration on the part of the participants. The idea of flexibility was also used in constructing the questions to allow the discussion to flow more freely. The first questions were designed to be easy and non-threatening, whereas the later questions became more difficult and personal (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). The questions for the focus group were as follows:

1. Do you feel the school is a safe place/environment?
2. What does the school do to discourage bullying/fighting?
3. What should the school do to make campus safer and to improve school safety?
4. What do teachers and other faculty members do when there is a fight?
5. Are there specific places where fights tend to occur? Who supervises those areas?
6. What is the school's policy for discipline when it comes to fighting and bullying? Do you think that suspensions/expulsions are effective ways to deter violent behavior at school?
7. Why do you think students behave violently at school? What are the predominant reasons for fights at school?
8. What factors escalate a situation or push a person over the edge?
9. Was there ever a time when any of you personally held back from fighting? Why? What would you need in order to do that the next time as well?
10. What do you think students can do to improve school safety?
A study of this nature cannot be conducted without some form of bias. I view the phenomenon of school violence through a particular lens. It is my belief that students choose to act violently in high school to achieve various goals. When violent behavior occurs in the classroom, the goal of the behavior could be avoidance. Perhaps the student wants to be removed from that setting. If the behavior occurs on school grounds it may become a matter of pleasing ones peers who often encourage the fights. It has been my experience that the atmosphere which surrounds fights in high schools is one of excitement and entertainment.

For other students, fighting may be the only way they know how to deal with a difficult situation. The behavior may be in retaliation for teasing, bullying or harassment. Students may also adopt the role of the bully themselves as a way to avoid mistreatment from their peers. These are some of the assumptions about the purposes of violence in high school that will influence this study. Therefore the questions for the focus group were based not only on prior research, but also on the personal assumptions and biases of the researcher.

**Procedures**

In order to conduct research in the Public School System, verbal consent was first required from the superintendents’ office. Prior to forming the focus groups, approval from the Committee for Human Studies at the University of Hawaii was also required. Next, verbal consent was obtained from the high schools’ Vice Principal. Then the study was explained to the students and the consent forms distributed with instructions to return the forms to their English teacher within one week. Students who were 18 years of age or
older, signed their own consent forms. Minors obtained written consent from their parents and signed their own consent forms. A moderators' guide was created which outlines all the procedures for the focus group interview and worked as a map to guide the researcher through the interview process (see appendix A).

**Data Analysis**

To aid in data analysis, extensive notes were taken during the focus group interviews. These notes documented both the verbal and nonverbal messages as well as emotional messages that were generated in response to the topics. I frequently conducted checks for clarification throughout the focus group. I also checked with each member individually throughout the interviews to see how they felt about the key issues. General themes and ideas that presented themselves during the focus group were identified during the interview as well as immediately upon its completion. Near the end of the focus group, I identified the key ideas that had been generated, and checked with each member individually to see how they felt about them.

Member checks were also used to help identify individual students’ overall feelings towards particular themes or ideas which were presented during the interview. They were also used to understand the extent to which individual students supported or did not support these themes and ideas. The member checks were conducted one week after the group was held.

In order to summarize the key ideas from the group the researcher looked for patterns in what was said throughout the interview. Consideration was also given to the meaning and choice of words used by the participants. The context in which these
statements were made and the consistency of responses from the participants was also taken into consideration (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

There are four basic steps that were followed when conducting the data analysis for this study (Vaughn et al., 1996). First, the big ideas that were represented throughout the interview were identified. Next the data was unitized. This was the process of identifying units of information that would later become the basis for defining categories. After dividing the information into units, those units were categorized. The general themes were then identified as well as how the categories supported those themes. Individual statements were also used to identify and to illustrate the themes. Finally, some theory and intuition were used to aid in the interpretation of the findings.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Synopsis of Study and Participants

This study examined high school students', who were receiving special education services, perspectives on school violence. Data were collected during two focus group interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. The student participants in this study were all between the ages of 17 and 18. There were five females and seven males. The primary ethnicity of the students was Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, with the exception of three students of Japanese descent and one of Latino descent.

The students had very strong opinions and ideas about school violence. As a result I felt it was important to hold a focus group of special educators at the school to ascertain whether their ideas and opinions supported or differed from the students. There were six teachers who participated in the separate teacher focus group; four females and two males. The teachers had all taught special education at the secondary level for at least three years. The ethnicity of three of the teachers was Caucasian. Two teachers were of Japanese descent and one teacher was of Hawaiian descent.

Research Questions

1. Do you feel school is a safe environment? Why?
2. How does the school discourage bullying and fighting?
3. What should the school do to make campus safer?
4. What do teachers and faculty do when there is a fight?
5. Are there specific places where fights tend to occur? Who supervises these areas?
6. What does the school do when people are involved in a fight? Do you think these things are effective ways to deter violent behavior at school?

7. Why do you think students get into fights or behave violently at school?

8. What factors escalate a situation or push someone over the edge?

9. Was there ever a time when you personally held back from fighting? Why?
   What would you need in order to be able to do that again?

10. What can students do to improve school safety?

   With the exception of question number nine, teachers were asked the preceding questions as well as the following:

   1. Do you see instances of bullying at school?

   2. How do you think the school treats special education students compared to general education students in regards to fighting and bullying?

   3. Do you feel that the school tries to establish a sense of community for students and staff?

   4. Are there people who students can talk to when they are having trouble?

   5. What are your feelings about campus security? Do you feel campus would be a safer place if more security guards were employed?

**Findings**

Throughout this study several overarching themes were identified. These themes were, (a) students and teachers view school as an unsafe environment, (b) reasons for engaging in fights as well as reasons for refraining, (c) students and teachers view bullying and harassment as common occurrences, (d) students and teachers thoughts on
what the school can do to make campus safer, (e) thoughts on what students can do to improve school safety, (f) classroom conditions, and (g) the needs of students.

A. School as an Unsafe Environment.

When the students in both focus groups were asked if they felt school was a safe environment, they answered in loud, unison “NO!” The students stated that there were many instances of fighting, bullying, sexual harassment, and assault that took place at school. Isa, who had been sexually harassed at school during her freshman year stated, “you never know what is going to happen” and Alberto stated that school, “is not as safe as your parent’s think it is!”

The only exception to this belief was Lou, who viewed schools in Hawaii as being safer than mainland schools. This particular student is a tall, muscular Hawaiian male who receives special education services under the category of emotional disturbance and has a long history of behavior problems. Lou has recently returned from a residential treatment facility, where he was placed due to excessive fighting both on and off campus. Lou is a self-proclaimed bully and fighter. This may have been why he was the only one out of both focus groups who felt safe on campus.

When teachers were asked about their feelings of security on campus, all the female teachers agreed they did not feel safe on campus due to inadequate security. They agreed that the school lacked a visible presence of both security and administration. Several teachers stated that their previous schools had a constant visible presence of both administration and security. They said that every student in the school was aware of this presence because the security as well as the administration was always walking the campus.
The male teachers indicated that they felt safe but also agreed that security was not only lax but also a part of the problem. When asked about the safety of the campus, all of the teachers acknowledged the problem of bullying. Mr. D stated, “I think there is a real problem with cliques in this school that bully other kids, I think that is a problem that is not being dealt with from the administrative level.” The other teachers agreed and stated that the issue was not addressed by the administration or the school security. The teachers all agreed that security actually contributed to the problem, by showing favoritism to students who were their relatives or to those who had supplied the guards with bribes.

B. Reasons students engage in and refrain from fighting.

The number one reason students gave for engaging in fights at school was disrespect. They felt that when peers were extremely disrespectful, it was important to force them to respect you. Frank stated “if that person doesn’t respect you then you try to beat it into em!” When asked what factors escalate a situation Ella stated “it’s the yelling and the disrespect, when someone is yelling in my face and disrespecting me, I can’t take it, I just go crazy!”

Both focus groups agreed that there were peers who were constantly talking negatively about others. They felt that fighting was one way to get them to stop. Other students stated rumors and jealousy as reasons for fighting. Many of the students agreed that when people pushed them emotionally, they could only take so much.

Several students did not indicate the initial reasons for fighting, but stated that if they got “jumped”, or attacked, or if they got “falsed” (e.g., punched), they had no choice but to fight back. Those same students also believed that it was unrealistic for adults to
think that they would just stand there and get hit. Even though adults recommended that they just “let it go” or “walk away,” they agreed that was unlikely to happen in most situations.

The students in both focus groups also agreed that there was a heavy peer influence which caused many situations to escalate. Lou stated “plus you get that peer influence eh, they tell you that da kine, you going to take that from him? He was talking shit about you and your gonna let em?” They agreed that many students wanted to see fights and that their friends would often be the instigators. Students also stated that frequently fights were started as a result of untrue stories generated by peers.

The student participants also stated that the crowds which surrounded fights were a large part of the problem. Instead of a conflict simply being between the two individuals, the surrounding students would become involved. The crowds exacerbated the problems by yelling and taunting the two individuals. Kimo spoke to this when he stated, “Cause every time you got people in the background yelling, HO! Just whack em already!!”

According to the students, the crowds not only became involved in the disputes themselves, they made every attempt to keep security and teachers away from the scene. Ella stated, “Most people fight in front of the crowds and when all those people are there they will do whatever they can to stop every security or every teacher from breaking it up, it happens all the time, yeah they even tell em to go the other way.”

Another aspect of fighting discussed by the students was the preplanning that frequently takes place. Students in both focus groups agreed that fights are usually planned out ahead of time and everyone knows when and where the event is to take
place. Alberto stated, “it’s planned out, yeah they always plan it eh.” Hank supported this idea when he stated, “yeah and fights are usually planned out so that security will all go to one place and then everyone else can scrap and not get into trouble.” Ella supported these statements as well when she said “yeah well most people plan out where they are going to do it (fight) so they can make sure security is not there.”

When asked why they felt students behaved violently at school, the consensus among teachers was that students needed to “save face” in front of their peers. Mrs. A stated, “If any kind of intimidation happens at any point, they feel they have to save face with all the rest of the kids, because otherwise the rest of the kids are going to pick on them too.” Several teachers also stated that they believed students learned violent behavior at home. They felt that many of the students involved in altercations at school were brought up with the idea that violence was the way to solve problems.

The teachers also supported the students’ statements that there is peer influence which encourages fighting at their school. There was a discussion about a fight that almost occurred in Mr. C’s class on the previous day. Mrs. A explained that she had found out after school about a group of kids, not related to the incident, who were encouraging the boy to fight saying, “what you gonna take that from him? You gonna let him do that to you? You had better go do something about it!” She explained that these were senior boys encouraging a freshman to fight. They knew that the boy would probably get beaten up, but they were instigating, simply because they wanted to see a fight.

When students were asked about a time in which they held back from fighting, many students talked about instances in which they had refrained. Their answers fell into
one of three categories. Either the students refrained from fighting because they had matured, or they had finally accepted what their parents had taught them early on. Or, the students refrained from fighting because they had already faced serious consequences with the law, the school or their families.

Ella explained that she was able to refrain from fighting only after she had two TRO’s (temporary restraining orders) issued against her, and after the school had threatened to cut her from the graduation ceremonies. After Lou’s extensive experiences with the court system he explained that he has no choice but to refrain from fighting for now. Lou stated,

“I tell myself it's not worth it, yeah cause if I was like how I was before, I wouldn’t take nothing, I would just react eh, but now with the consequences brah it makes me think what’s gonna happen if I do this, I am gonna get arrested, end up going to jail or something all kine stuff, you don’t know what can happen, you go to court and it is all up to the judge yeah, and I been there plenty times, I learned the hard way, yeah?”

Two other students explained that they held back from fighting because their parents told them if they got into another fight they would be kicked out of the house. Several students stated that they had finally matured and realized that fighting wasn’t worth the trouble anymore. Diana said that she was recently involved in an altercation with another girl and she remembered what her mom had told her. She realized that even if the girl was talking badly about her she could now let it go and walk away. Frank explained that although he had previously been involved in numerous fights, he was now
able to let it go due to some maturity and the desire to not end up in jail one day. Frank stated,

"I did to (held back from fighting), um because of what my parents said eh, they told me to just let it go, walk away from it and just go someplace by myself. I also remembered what my mom said to a, that if I keep fighting in high school I am gonna end up in jail one day."

Interestingly, when teachers were asked about the reasons they felt students refrained from fighting, there was a short period of silence. The teachers appeared perplexed by the question and took a few moments to answer. One teacher laughed and said, that in his opinion students didn’t ever seem to hold back, that they simply had to fight when confronted by a peer. While one teacher said that she felt a student might hold back if aware of the consequences they might face afterwards

C. Bullying and Harassment as Common Occurrences.

According to students in both focus groups, bullying and harassment occur on a regular basis. When the first focus group was asked if they had personally seen or been involved in instances of bullying or harassment at school, there was a long period of silence. When the researcher probed further and asked if they thought it happened a lot in high school, several students in the group answered in unison “Yes!” In support of this idea Frank stated, “yeah that happens a lot, I would say it is pretty consistent throughout school, like everyday I see it.”

Several students in each of the focus groups commented on the fact that bullying happens in the classroom as well and the teachers ignore it. Frank explained that a certain student is bullied in one of his classes daily. According to Frank this occurs right
in front of the teacher and the teacher ignores it. Cara supported this when she said, "teachers just ignore it when they see it."

In the middle of the first focus group interview, Alberto stated that there were lots of drugs on campus which could lead to violence. Beth then said, "that it (the drugs) also leads to getting raped and getting beaten up, like sexually assaulted, or molested." The researcher then asked if the school faculty was aware of sexual assaults on campus. Isa said, "yeah (pause) like in one case the teacher liked all the boys that were in that class and she had seen what was going on and she had seen what the boys were doing to the girl and she didn’t do nothing." After another pause, Isa continued:

Cause when I was a freshman, I had these two senior boys and one junior that did that to me, and like they did it in front of the teacher too and the teacher wouldn’t say stop or nothing she just laughed and they did it to her too and she didn’t do nothing. Finally I couldn’t hold it in any longer and I told, I told the office and they arrested the boys, two of the boys my dad knew and he was pissed, my mom came to the school and they tried to get the teacher fired because she favored the boys. A few months later the teacher did get fired, then the boys came back to school and were like oh you messed up my future and stuff like that, and we went to court, but I was scared because you know I am in school with those boys, cause now they’re back, but like the teachers, I don’t know, some of them are not stable enough to be teachers.

Other students felt that some teachers actually thought the bullying was funny and laughed at the students who were being bullied. Several students thought that certain teachers bullied students as well. Beth explained that she had been present when a
teacher told a student, "I hope someone beats you up." There was a discrepancy between some of the students' views of their teachers' awareness of bullying. Some felt that the teachers were simply unaware of what was happening at school, while others felt the teachers were aware of the situations but did not care.

When asked about the type of students who were likely to be bullied or harassed, students in both focus groups agreed that it was usually an individual who didn't have many or any friends. They felt that students who were alienated or isolated were much more likely to be a victim. They agreed that if you had friends they would help you and protect you, Isa stated that "if that person had friends then they would get up and be like a gang or something and protect that person."

The one student, who had admitted to bullying others, explained that he grew up with three older brothers who constantly harassed him. His brothers bullied him and beat him up regularly. According to the student, that was how he was raised, and he learned those behaviors from his older brothers.

Although the students agreed that bullying happened frequently in high school, they all agreed that it happened more frequently in elementary and intermediate. According to Alberto, "it evolved over there." The students felt that bullying happened more frequently in the lower grades because the schools were more lenient with younger students. Beth shared one of her personal experiences with the group:

"I think it (bullying) happened more in elementary school, yeah cause kids are really mean to each other, I actually got jumped by five boys, just because they didn’t like me, and like two would hold my hands down and the others would hold my legs, and then one would punch me, I actually got a tooth knocked out
(probe: what happened? Did the teachers know about this?) no, cause they weren’t there (probe: where did it happen?) in the hallway while everyone was on top of the black top and the field, there were lots of other kids around, but they didn’t want to help because they didn’t know who I was, and I didn’t have any friends, I looked a lot different then, I had braces, and I had short, short hair, and I looked like a boy…..they just pick on you and then they follow you after school…..”

After other students shared the experiences of people they knew who had been bullied, the researcher asked again if the students as a group felt that this kind of thing happened more in the lower grades. Beth answered once again:

“Yeah, you can get away with a lot more because you are young and they will just let you go and if you tell the teachers they will talk to them and let them know but then afterwards they will still lock you in the boys bathroom, and then they punched me and pushed me into the walls and everything, and the teachers well…..it just got worse.”

When teachers were asked about the overall safety of the school environment in the beginning of the focus group, they indicated that bullying was a major concern that needed to be addressed. The teachers supported what the students said about the presence of bullying right in class. The teachers indicated that they were aware of which students bullied others, but that because of research they had read, they did not confront those students in front of the class.

The teachers explained that they had also tried to discuss the situations with the parents of the bullies. They explained that the result was either denial or the explanation
that bullying was just what kids did, and the indication that they saw nothing wrong with it. The teachers felt that bullying was due in part to certain cliques that had come up from the middle schools, and who continued to pick on certain students for various reasons. The teachers felt that bullying was an issue that needed to be addressed at the lower level where it was happening, not just in terms of policy by the administration.

D. What the School Can Do to Make Campus Safer

Both focus groups were asked about what the school itself does to discourage bullying and fighting. Several students mentioned that the school had held several assemblies that discussed the issues and that they had been shown pictures and films of what can happen. One student who participated in the focus group had been through peer mediation training for two days in the fall of 2003.

According to Frank, 35 juniors and seniors were selected to participate in the peer mediation group after completing an interview process. He explained that the training encouraged the group to first, physically break up the fight by getting in the middle of it and pulling the two people apart. They were also told to try to stay out of the way of the punches. After the fighting, students were separated they were given a period of time to cool down, usually one or two days. Then the peer mediator would talk to the students and try to help them to resolve their conflicts.

When asked if he thought the training was helpful, Frank said yes, reluctantly. He said that other members of the peer mediation group including him had used the techniques they had been taught. He explained that the students still held grudges, but that if the team knew the situation would not escalate again, then they felt they had done their job. The researcher then asked if he thought it would help to teach all students those
skills he again reluctantly stated “yeah, I think people would think twice about fighting then.” One of his fellow group members was very unimpressed with the peer mediation training. She explained that most of the students in the peer mediation group were related to many of the students who frequently got into fights. She felt that because of the family relation that the peer mediators often encouraged certain fights instead of breaking them up.

When asked about the schools disciplinary system for students who engage in fights, they stated that suspension and ISS (in school suspension) were the forms of punishment used by the school. When I asked if they felt these things discouraged fighting, both groups unanimously stated “No!” Many students commented on the ineffectiveness of the system.

Although students agreed that ISS was much worse than being suspended off campus, several students explained that it could actually exacerbate the problem. Beth stated, “The kids just get more mad in ISS, like it builds up when they are inside that room, they really think about how they can hurt that person even more.” Other students explained that students who were involved in a fight together were often sent to ISS on the same day. They also stated that the school did not allow the students to talk to each other and that lack of communication usually made the problem worse.

In regards to off-campus suspension, several students saw it as reward. Frank made this point when he exclaimed, “Ho! I would so much rather get suspended, then I can stay home and sleep all day!” Several students explained that if students don’t care about school initially, then off-campus suspension was ineffective. Other students
commented that off-campus suspensions left students without supervision and they often got into more trouble.

Through the duration of both focus groups, students shared numerous ideas on how the school could improve safety on campus. They all agreed that the school administration should do more. They explained that it needed to be a group effort on the part of all the adults in the school. Several students mentioned the principal and expressed that they felt he did not address the problem of school violence. Isa explained, "The principal doesn’t do anything about it and most people don’t even know who the principal is, because we never see him, I don’t even know who the principal is!"

Some students thought teachers could help prevent fights by talking to the students before it took place. Other students thought that the issues of bullying and fighting should be discussed in class. Kimo stated, “Teachers should have something in their subjects to talk about that bullying.” Several students talked about the importance of involving parents in programs for school safety. Yet, one reoccurring theme throughout their suggestions was that schools need to increase security personnel. The students repeatedly stated the school needed more security guards yet, ironically they also stated repeatedly that the security guards currently employed did nothing. When asked what the school can do to improve school safety, Ella stated, “the school should make the security guards do their job instead of just standing still and doing nothing, and they even encourage people to fight, well one encouraged me to fight this girl.” According to Ella, “the security at this school is corrupt.”

Hank also supported this statement by adding, “yeah, some of the security guards if you know them will step back and let you fight, sometimes they will just stay there and
watch until someone else comes.....then they will try to look like they were breaking it up.” Several other students also mentioned that security would discipline students completely differently if they knew them or were related to them. The students repeatedly stated that security was lazy, did nothing and allowed fights to happen. Yet, when asked what the school could do to improve school safety, the consensus among the students in both focus groups was to employ more security guards.

When teachers were asked what the school could do to improve school safety, the first comment was from Mr. D who stated, “Fire the security staff!” The teachers then went on to explain that the new head of security had tried to make changes in personnel and policies when he was first hired. He was unable to make these changes because the current security guards were “so well connected.” Besides improving the security on campus, the teachers all agreed that they needed to have not only security, but the administration visible to the students and teachers. They strongly believed that the visible presence of school administrators and security around campus could improve school safety.

In regards to what the teachers themselves did to stop fights on campus, they all agreed upon the essential need to remove the crowd from the scene. Mrs. E stated, “Remove the audience first, my thing is that if the students are interfering or inciting then they get the same punishment as the students who were fighting.” The teachers also agreed it was important to get somebody bigger to break up the fights. One of the male teachers said he usually called the PE staff and they were very helpful in separating the fighting students.
In terms of proactive initiatives to deter fighting, the teachers stated they needed more training for themselves in how to defuse crisis situations. They felt that special education students had so many nonacademic needs, that their teachers should have courses and training in counseling. They also indicated the need for special education students to participate in extracurricular activities that they enjoyed. In order for students to participate in those activities, they needed to keep their grades up and exhibit appropriate behavior. They felt that the requirements for teams such as football, basketball and tennis were extremely helpful in promoting appropriate behavior for their students. They did indicate however, that too few special education students were involved in these types of activities.

E. Students thoughts on what they could do to improve School Safety.

The students had many ideas and opinions regarding what the school should do to increase safety. However, when they were asked the question; what can students do to improve school safety? There was a long silence in both of the focus groups. The first respondent was Lou who laughed and said, “I don’t know, ha ha ha, I don’t know.” He said this with a puzzled expression and inquisitive look; it appeared as though most of the students felt similarly.

Eventually, one student made a suggestion. He thought that the older students could serve as models of appropriate behavior for the younger students in the school. He explained that when the crowds gathered around a fight, the two people could talk it out in front of everybody. The younger students would then see talking as a better means of conflict resolution than fighting.
The students agreed that they felt it was the job of the adults on campus to protect them. Diana stated, “as an adult worker in this school, that is what they are there for, they should do anything to try and stop fights and stuff, because the parents are trusting that their kids are safe, but that is not always how it is.” Most of the group did not appear to acknowledge or accept the role they played in contributing to school safety issues.

When the researcher repeated the question concerning what students could do to improve school safety, Frank stated,

“I don’t know, cause students, in one way they want to call for help, but in another way they want to see the fight, they want to see the fight carry out and who is gonna win, so it’s a tough decision as to what the students can do.”

When teachers were asked what they thought the Students could do to improve school safety; they also had a difficult time answering. One comment that was stated was that the students should think before they act. Another teacher said that the students should speak up when they see something happening. The teacher’s conversation then led into what they could do to help the students learn how to handle the situations better. They indicated a strong need for social skills training and the need to help the students develop better communication skills.

F. Classroom Conditions

When teachers were asked the question regarding the safety of the school campus, one teacher stated that the physical structure of her classroom was unsafe. Mrs. E stated that several of the special education classrooms were located in portable buildings. She explained that the portables are termite ridden and that the floor is very unstable. She also stated that the chairs in which the students had to sit for 90 minute periods were broken
and cracked. She explained that a school in a prosperous area, like the one used in this study, should not have unsafe classroom conditions like the ones she was experiencing. She felt that the school placed special educations needs low on their list of priorities. She also commented on the message that was conveyed to her students as a result of these poor conditions.

The teacher’s focus group discussed the physical conditions of special education classrooms in regards to school safety. Whereas one of the students in the second focus group talked about an incident that pertained more to the mental and emotional conditions of these classrooms. Greg explained to the group that in elementary school he had thrown a chair at his teacher. When the I asked why he threw the chair his response was,

Why did I throw a chair at her?! Well she kept yelling at me to read louder, so I did, but she kept yelling, read louder, read louder, in front of the whole class, I was practically yelling in her ear!! Finally, I just said shut the hell up already and I just threw the chair at her!

I then asked if he was frustrated with her and with the reading and he responded, “Yeah! I read that same paragraph at least 25 times!!” Greg said that had been in fifth grade over seven years ago and it still made him angry.

G. The Needs of Students

Throughout the focus group interviews, students mentioned what they needed from the school. One comment stated by numerous students in both focus groups was that they needed someone to talk to. Isa stated, “We need someone to talk to yeah, kids our age it is much better if we talk about a problem instead of holding it in.” Other students
agreed and some stated that they felt the teachers should be the ones to converse with a student who has a problem.

When the researcher asked about the availability of school counselors, social workers or school psychologists, the consensus among the students was that those people would not talk to them. Both Ella and Frank explained that in order to be able to talk with a social worker or psychologist they needed to have that written in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Ella stated, “Yeah so you have to hope the IEP meeting goes well, but if it doesn’t then you won’t get it.”

When the researcher asked the two groups about talking with their counselors, the consensus among both groups was that counselors would only help them with their schedules. Kimo stated, “we need somebody that we can talk to, like I go to my counselors but they don’t have time to talk they say they can only help you with your schedules.” Frank reiterated this idea when he agreed that “counselors are just for schedules.”

Another theme that the students discussed was the fact that they felt the counselors really didn’t care about them. They explained that the counselors frequently told them that they could drop out of school since they were of age. Several students felt that the counselors actually encouraged students to drop out of school. Alberto stated, “Yeah, I really think they encourage it (dropping out of school) cause they don’t care if you stay in school.” The students were under the impression that the counselors were happy to get rid of “problem” students. Ella stated,

“They don’t even care, if you drop out, you drop out, you know if they really cared about the students, then as much as the student would want to get out of
school they would still encourage them to stay in school, but they don’t and there are a lot of really smart kids too that drop out, and its like nothing brah, they throw away their life and you see them on the street doing the regular thing, like doing drugs and stuff and the counselors don’t even care because its like oh we got one kid out, ok we got two more to go.”

Despite the students’ views of counselors as uncaring, and their lack of faith in their security guards, the students in both groups did agree that they had some wonderful, caring teachers. They explained that some of their teachers would go out of their way to help the students. Alberto stated,

“We need more teachers like that, the kind that are always there for the students and even if that is not your student, you know, they will still go out of their way to get the student where they need to be, like some teachers even if they are not your IEP teacher or whatevers, they will do anything to find help for us.”

In general, the teachers seemed aware of what the students needed. They also agreed that many times teachers were the only people available for the students to talk to. They agreed that the mental health services offered on campus were only available to students if it was written in their IEP, and that it posed a problem for students who needed help with a problem right away. The teachers were also aware that the counselors were extremely busy and rarely available for the students to talk with.

The consensus among the teachers was that students needed people they could trust and that sometimes it was important “to let them vent their frustrations in the class so they could get it out of their system.” They also felt that the feeling of ohana or community/family could be strengthened in the school through the increased visibility of
the administration, teachers and support staff. Mrs. E stated, “I think it improves the environment and the feeling of ohana for the kids when they start seeing us around and they become much more comfortable with us.” The teachers indicated that developing a stronger sense of community for both students and staff might improve school safety overall.

F. Summary

The students who participated in the two focus group interviews shared a lot of important insights with the researcher. They had strong opinions and thoughts on what should be changed in terms of not only school safety, but school community and climate as well. In general the students did not feel safe at school. They saw fighting and bullying as common occurrences, and therefore believed the school should increase the amount of security personnel. Only one student out of 12 spoke to the question; what can students do to improve school safety? This may suggest that the students had never thought about that concept before, or it could suggest that they believe the issue of school safety is the adult’s domain.

Throughout the interviews students repeatedly commented on their need to talk to someone. They all believed that was an essential element missing from their school experience. At the conclusion of the focus group interviews many students stated that they had not only enjoyed the experience but wanted to have more in the future. They stated that they were excited to know that people were interested in their thoughts and opinions.

The teachers who participated in the focus group interview for this study gave statements that were primarily consistent with that of their students. This indicates that
they are relatively aware of many of the issues their students face on a daily basis. This similarity in perceptions of school violence between students and teachers is actually inconsistent with the literature. This could be a result of the specific population that was targeted for this study.

Special education teachers have smaller class sizes which allow them to be more familiar with each student. Special education teachers also work closely with a team of professionals as well as with their colleagues to address their students' individual needs. Therefore it makes sense that they would have a more complete view of the student's daily life than perhaps general educators.

This study has touched on a number of ideas that may be influential not only in the further understanding of school violence but also in the construction of new programs and interventions. It has generated numerous questions for further research and supports the idea that focus group interviews are an effective means of data collection. Although this study cannot be generalized beyond these specific participants, it does give a detailed view into some of the perceptions of school violence that exist within this particular school.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study examined school violence from the perspectives of selected high school students and selected high school teachers. The student-participants were 12 high school students who qualified for special education services and who had a history of violent behavior in school. The teacher participants were special educators who had been teaching at the high school level for at least three years. I collected data by conducting three separate focus group interviews. Two focus groups included six students each. Another focus group included six teachers. The students who participated in this study were selected because of their history of violent behavior in school.

The majority of both student and teacher participants indicated that they did not feel that the school was a safe environment. The frequency of fights and the prevalence of bullying which occurs on campus were reported as factors that diminished feelings of safety among both students and teachers. This finding was consistent with the literature (Astor, Meyer & Behre, 1999; Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Thornton, 2002). Student participants and teacher participants cited inadequate security as one factor that contributed to their unsafe feelings on campus. Participants in all three focus groups agreed that more competent security guards were needed in order to improve school safety. While the student participants stated they felt more security guards were needed overall; teacher and student participants in this study also stated that a visible presence of administrative and security personnel were needed to improve campus safety.

Both student and teacher participants believed that the predominant reason for fights on campus was to demand respect and to save face in front of peers. All three
focus groups agreed that there is a heavy peer influence that encourages students to fight at school. The groups also agreed that the crowds which usually surround the fights serve to exacerbate the problem.

I chose to conduct this study in part because of the dichotomy between students' and teachers’ perceptions of school violence that was present in the review of the literature. The findings of this study appear inconsistent with the literature in that regard. The statements made by both the student and teacher participants were relatively consistent throughout all three focus groups. The fact that teacher participants in this study saw bullying as a large problem within the school was inconsistent with the findings of Dear (1995), who found that only 2% to 3% of teachers viewed bullying as a problem. The study conducted by Astor, Meyer and Behre (1999) showed that teachers did not feel it was their responsibility to break up fights outside their classroom. However, the teachers interviewed for this study definitely felt it was their responsibility to stop fights anywhere on campus. The consistency of both the students and teachers perceptions of school violence in this study may be a result of their close interaction with one another on a daily basis.

Special education is designed to address the individual needs of each student. These individual needs often expand beyond the academic realm. Therefore, special education teachers need to establish trusting relationships with their students. Smaller class size as well as frequent meetings with IEP team members and students may aid in the establishment of closer relationships. It is therefore, possible that the consistency of data between the student participants and their teachers resulted from this close interaction between the two groups. Astor, Meyer and Behre (1999) discussed the need
for teacher’s roles to extend beyond the walls of their classrooms. It was apparent from the responses in this study, that these particular special education teachers believed their roles extended to other areas of the student’s life.

In contrast to this study, the teachers interviewed in the literature were general educators. The students who participated in the focus groups from the literature were selected due to their leadership qualities, and superior academic performance (Thornton, 2002; Willert, 2002). These individuals appeared to have a distinctively different relationship with their teachers, than the student participants in this study.

There may be additional reasons for the consistency of responses generated by both student and teacher participants in this study. Special education teachers at the secondary level may be more aware of the need to promote appropriate social and interpersonal skills among their students. Therefore, by closely observing the behavior of their students, they may become more aware of the interpersonal conflicts that occur. Another possibility is that many of the incidences of bullying and fighting which occur on campus involve students who are receiving special education services. Therefore, the teachers of these students may become more involved in these situations.

One issue that student participants discussed throughout the focus groups, had to do with the way in which they were perceived and treated by school staff members. Many of the student participants discussed the fact that they had always been viewed by teachers and school personnel as “bad kids.” They stated that as a result, teachers and counselors were less willing to help them and viewed certain students as a hassle, rather than a responsibility. These findings were consistent with much of the literature which
also found that students viewed as difficult are often overlooked by teachers and staff (Smucket & Kaufman, 1996; Willert, 2002).

Both student and teacher participants agreed that it is essential for students to have some one to talk to. Yet, they also agreed that teachers were usually the most accessible adults, since counselors and psychologists were often unavailable, or inaccessible to certain students. Student participants stated that their counselors never had time for them, and were only concerned with their schedules. Several student participants explained that their counselors had actually encouraged them to drop out of school. They felt that their counselors didn’t care about students whom they saw as “difficult.” These findings indicate that there might be differential treatment for students who are viewed by teachers and school personnel as difficult. If this is true, it is possible that this differential treatment by adults, may contribute to the inappropriate behavior exhibited by these students. This is one issue that deserves further exploration.

The student participants also expressed a continued need for more caring teachers who are “willing to go out of their way to help.” The teachers themselves expressed a continued need to cultivate a sense of community belonging, support and ohana (e.g., family) throughout the school. Researchers have shown that one of the best methods for violence prevention is establishing a sense of community and support for students and staff (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Jones, 2002). The information gathered in this study from both the student and teacher participants supports this notion. Although neither students nor teachers indicated that they currently felt a sense of community at their school, they did have ideas on how it could be created. Having teachers, administration and security as a visible presence on campus was one suggestion made by
both student and teacher participants. This presence might make students and staff more comfortable with each other. It may also provide an opportunity for students and staff to develop supportive relationships.

**Discussion**

When I reviewed the data there seemed to be a consensus among both student and teacher participants that bullying and fighting were everyday occurrences. This led me to question whether this phenomenon was occurring with students in general education as well, or more specifically with students who are receiving special education services. The literature shows that students, who experience difficulty in school both academically and socially, are more likely to act out in inappropriate ways (Larson, 1998). This may have been the case for the student who threw the chair at his teacher. After having to read a paragraph 25 times in front of the class, his frustration and humiliation may have led to violent behavior. According to Furlong and Morrison (2000), violent behavior for some students may be a reaction to public humiliation and stress. This incident certainly appears to fall into that category.

The literature reviewed for this study also showed that students who experience social isolation and alienation at school are more likely to be victimized by their peers, (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Walker, et al., 2004). Data from this study appears consistent with these findings. When one student discussed her victimization by a group of boys throughout elementary school, she cited the fact that she had no friends as a predominate reason for the bullying. One might conclude then, that it is important for school staff members to be aware of these situations that possibly precipitate violent behavior and
victimization. It might also be helpful for school staff members to increase their awareness of individual students who might fall into one of these categories.

Throughout the two student focus group interviews, female student participants talked extensively about specific situations in which they had been victimized at school. I found it interesting that these situations involved females who had been victimized by members of the opposite sex, as opposed to members of their own. Several students in the focus groups explained that teachers and school staff did not interfere when it came to male/female relationships. This reluctance on the part of school staff is an area that needs to be addressed. It appears that bullying, fighting, and harassment occur on campus without regard to gender, or in some cases because of it. Those student participants who had previously been victimized at school had a serious distrust of all school personnel and of the system in general. In their eyes, a system that should have protected them, failed.

Another issue that is linked to the earlier idea of differential treatment for special education students pertains to the physical conditions of their classrooms. According to the teachers in this study, the only classes that are housed in the portables are special education classes. Researchers have shown that the physical appearance of campus can contribute to or diminish the feelings of safety for students as well as staff (Dwyer, Osher & Hoffman, 2002). The poor conditions of these special education classrooms send an unspoken message to everyone on campus. These conditions say something about the priorities of the school and where the special education students fit into those priorities.

In regards to the connection between school and society, the student participants made some interesting statements about discipline. The students all viewed suspension as
an ineffective form of discipline, some even viewed it as a reward. However, they did
talk extensively about the effectiveness of serious consequences for violent behavior.

When the student participants discussed the reasons for refraining from violence, many of
them stated serious consequences from either the law or their families as their reason for
holding back. If students with a history of violent behavior see legal consequences as a
deterrent to violent behavior, wouldn't it follow then, that these consequences would also
work as a deterrent for students without a violent history?

**Implications**

Overall, student and teacher participants generated numerous ideas and thoughts
about how to improve safety at their school. One student’s idea was for peers to model
appropriate behaviors for other students. While other students talked about the need to
discuss a problem before it escalated. Although I conducted a case study of student and
teacher perceptions of school violence in only one high school, results of this study might
generate some useful information, including recommendations that could improve safety
in other schools. Students and teachers in other schools, who are similar to the
participants in this study, may have had experiences similar to those of the participants in
these focus groups. Some of the themes generated in these groups may have practical
applicability. For example, the students indicated a strong need for someone to talk to.
This need may apply to many of their peers as well. Another example of an idea that
may have practical applicability is the teacher’s ideas about improving the sense of
community throughout the school. This notion of community as an effective way to deter
violence in school is supported by much of the current literature on violence prevention
(Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Jones, 2002).
When we look at our communities and our schools in terms of discipline, I believe there is a duality. In society, harassment is illegal and has serious consequences for those involved. Why then are these acts tolerated on a school campus and overlooked by personnel as the students in this study mentioned? Likewise, fighting is an illegal act when committed in public. Therefore why should it be tolerated or minimized when the act is committed on a school campus? According to the perpetrators themselves, they refrained from fighting for fear of serious legal consequences. Perhaps then, campus safety could be improved overall, by dissolving the protection given to students in these cases. This is in no way a recommendation for turning schools into police states. Rather it is questioning why schools accept and tolerate what society does not?

**Limitations**

There are numerous limitations inherent in this study. The participants were purposively selected by the researcher. The focus group interviews were only held one time each and only addressed a specific population at one specific school. Therefore, the specific findings of this study can in no way be generalized to a greater population.

The participants' statements may have been influenced by their peers. I did not have the opportunity to go back and talk to all of the participants individually about the comments they made in the focus groups. However, several of the participants did explain that they would have spoken more freely if certain members of the group had not been present.

The information that the students and teacher chose to share and chose not to share might have been influenced by several other factors. First, the students and teachers all knew me. Second, the students and teachers all knew each other. Third,
focus group interviews encourage interaction amongst participants however; the influence of what others say then becomes a factor. Fourth, although precautions were taken to ensure strict confidentiality of information, there is always a possibility that participants could disclose this confidential information to others. Therefore, students and teachers may have exercised caution in the fear that their peers would disclose to others what they shared.

Recommendations for Further Research

The idea of school community and support can be beneficial to everyone in the field of education and may serve to ameliorate some of the violent behavior that occurs both on and off campus. Although it may not be the business of schools to alleviate every problem faced by society, we as educators can at least attempt to add some of the pieces that may be missing from the lives of our students. One cannot deny the interconnectedness that exists between society’s problems and those experienced by the schools. Therefore, if there is a breakdown of family and community structure within society, schools can choose to incorporate some of these roles into their own. By addressing some of society’s needs within the school itself we begin to work proactively towards violence prevention, within schools and society.

The feedback I received from members of the various focus groups, in addition to the literature, suggests that there is a need for more studies of this nature. Both the subject of violence prevention and the focus group method that was used were seen as useful by both teacher and student participants. The students specifically stated that they hoped more focus groups would be held on various topics. The students also stated that
since people didn’t ask them for their opinions very often, they appreciated that someone valued what they had to say.

One portion of the study that I would change in the future is the mixed gender focus groups of students. The females in the first focus group discussed several important issues but did not go into extensive detail because of the intimate nature of those issues. One female in the second focus group admitted after the focus group, that she shared very little because problems existed between her and one of the boys in the group. It is true that men and women are affected by violence in different ways, which in some cases may be gender related. Therefore, in the future I would recommend forming same gender-all female and all male student focus groups due to the potentially sensitive nature of the topic.

The student participants discussed in depth some incidences of bullying and fighting that occurred in the lower grade levels. These findings are consistent with the literature (Jones, 2002; Larson, 1998; Olweus, 1996) and reaffirm the need to implement violence prevention programs beginning at the elementary level. Due to time constraints, these ideas could not be further explored in this study. Future studies may consider including focus groups comprised of elementary and middle school students in addition to the high school participants. Another topic that was addressed in the focus groups was the differential treatment of those students viewed as troubled or disruptive by teachers and school staff. A study of this topic could have some important implications for the field of special education.
Conclusion

My analysis of information provided by participants in this study suggests that students who are receiving special education services and their teachers are well aware of the incidences of violence on campus. We can also draw the conclusion from the data, that the students who participated in these focus groups are not only aware of the bullying and fighting that occurs at school but have also been a part of it, either as victim or perpetrator. These ideas are important to keep in mind when planning behavioral and educational interventions for these particular students.

In conclusion, I feel there is a real need for further research that explores the ideas, opinions and direct experiences of students. The field of education can be strengthened by the inclusion of the students’ voices in regards to decisions and policies made on their behalf. There is an invaluable fountain of knowledge and information within the students and schools themselves. Yet, these resources have often been overlooked. Students have numerous ideas, opinions and thoughts about how their needs can be met. They are eager to share their ideas with us; we need only to ask them.

In regards to violence prevention, the findings of this study have identified several factors that may contribute to the problem, as well as several factors that may help diminish the problems of violent behavior on campus. First, the students in this study see the issue of school violence as firmly within the school and amongst the students. These findings are consistent with the findings of other researchers (Larson, 1998; Thornton, 2002; Willert, 2002). According to the students there is an entire subculture and minisociety at work within the schools that perpetuates violence on campus. Furlong and Morrison (2002) discussed the notion that schools need to be aware of the role the school
plays as an environment in the violence that occurs there, on both a physical and social level. Results of this study strongly suggest that the violence which occurs at school has its roots within the society that exists on campus. The issue of peer influence in regards to violence is one area that has not been thoroughly explored and one that deserves a great deal of further attention.

Second, there is a strong need for a sense of community and belonging within the schools. The students desperately need to have the support of their peers and adults. This indicates that schools in general need to work diligently on establishing a support system for all students. This system of support can expand beyond academics and into the extracurricular activities to involve coaches, mentors, staff-cafeteria workers, maintenance custodians and positive peer models. The teacher participants discussed the positive influence that sports and extracurricular activities had on their students. This idea was supported by the literature which discussed the need for all students to have access to prosocial reinforcement (Larson, 1998). Lastly, the overwhelming majority of both students and teachers interviewed in these focus groups did not feel campus was a safe place. It is essential that this issue continue to be addressed throughout the field of education; not only in terms of policy but in terms of implementation as well.

Perhaps if we begin to view schools as the micro societies that they really are, we may be able to better understand the phenomenon that occurs there. Problems that exist within society are mirrored within our schools. The violence which permeates our world today will undoubtedly exist in the future as well if we do not work proactively to prevent it. Therefore, we owe it to ourselves as members of society and to our children, to create a sense of sanctuary in our schools. In the violent reality of our modern world there must
be at least one place of respite. Let it be those places that serve to educate our youth in order to bring about a more peaceful tomorrow, let it be the schools.
References


APPENDIX A
MODERATORS GUIDE

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Welcome: “Thank you all for participating in this focus group. You have each been selected because I value your opinions and your ideas. Your particular point of view is important to me, and I would like to thank you in advance for sharing this part of yourself with us. Please remember, this is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers. What we are looking for here is your thoughts and feelings, and if there are times when you do not feel like sharing with the group that is alright. Also please remember that anything said in here needs to remain strictly confidential. You guys know the saying whatever happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. That same concept applies here as well. The information you share in this group will be recorded and after I listen to it and transcribe what you said, I will destroy the tape.

B. Purpose: “The overall purpose of this focus group is to determine your ideas and opinions about high school violence.”

C. Guidelines: “There are a few guidelines I would like us to follow during the group. First, you guys don’t need to speak in any particular order, when you have something to share please do.
Second, please do not speak while someone else is talking or I will not be able to hear what is happening on the tape. The discussion may get intense at times and you may be tempted to jump in when someone else is talking, but I am going to ask that you please wait until they are finished. It is extremely important that we only speak one at a time. When I go back to listen to the tape I will not be able to understand what is being said if more than one person is speaking. Third, please remember there are 5 people in this group and we would like to hear from each of you. Fourth, by no means do you have to agree with what each other is saying, but please state your point of view without making negative comments or put downs.

Finally, there may be times when I need to stop and redirect the discussion since we only have 60 minutes. Are there any questions I can answer for you? .... Ok then let's get started........

II. WARM UP

A. Set the tone of the group and ask easy questions such as “will each of you please tell us your age and something you enjoy doing while not at school?”

B. Reassure participants that the information is confidential and I am the only person who will be able to listen to the tape.
III. CLAIRIFICATION OF TERMS

A. Violence: forcing your will upon someone else either physically mentally or emotionally, (bullying is a form of violence)

B. School: the campus and areas very near to it (across the street will still be considered at school)

C. Aggression: threats, or acts that aim to intimidate others

D. Fighting: arguing, yelling, screaming, physically harming others
   (fighting is not joking, slapping, pushing etc. among friends)

IV. EASY AND NON-THREATENING QUESTIONS

A. “Why do you think students behave violently at school?”

B. “What purpose do you think violence serves for students?”

C. “Do you feel suspensions and expulsions are effective in discouraging fighting at school?”

D. “How do you think the school discourages bullying?”

V. LT/PMORE DIFFICUERSONAL QUESTIONS

A. “If you are in a fight how does it usually get started?”

B. “What factors push you over the edge?”

C. “Was there ever a time when you held back from fighting?”

D. “What would you need in order to be able to do that next time?”

E. “What do you think students need in order to better control their own behavior?”
F. "Are there specific areas on campus (or around it) where fights tend to occur? Who supervises those areas?"

G. "What do you think the school should do in order to make it a safer place?"

VI. WRAP-UP

A. Organize themes from student responses and summarize discussion.

B. Ensure that any conversational points that were not completed are recognized.

VII. MEMBER CHECK

A. Identify big ideas and concepts that were generated by the group. Write these ideas on a flip chart to show the students.

B. Go around the circle to see how the group as a whole feels about a particular issue, not for further discussion, but just to get overall feelings.

VIII. CLOSING

"I just wanted to say thank you again and remind you that all the information shared in here is confidential. I will transcribe the audio tape and assign each of you a false name. Then the tape will be destroyed. Again I will ask that whatever we talked about in this room remains in this room once we leave. Please respect each others right to privacy when you do leave. Do you have any questions?"
APPENDIX B
Consent Forms

Agreement to Participate in
A Study of High School Students' Perspectives of School Violence

Corissa Stewart Mazurkiewicz,
P.O. Box 6276
Hilo, Hi 96720
(808) 968-0921

This research project is being conducted as a component of a thesis paper for a Masters degree. The purpose of the project is to gain an understanding of high school students’ perspectives of school violence. Participation in this project will consist of answering questions in a one time focus group interview.

Interview questions will focus on the reasons students get into fights at school. Data from the interview will be summarized into broad categories. No personal identifying information will be included with the research results. The focus group will last for one class period (90 minutes) and will be held in a private meeting room on campus. Approximately 10 students will participate in the study. Interviews will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription.

The researcher believes there is little or no risk to participating in this research project. However, in sharing your opinions with others there may be a loss of privacy. There are also no direct benefits to the students who participate in this study. However, the results from this study will hopefully contribute to improving school safety for all students.

Research data will be confidential to the extent allowed by law. Agencies with research oversight, such as the UH Committee on Human Studies, have the authority to review research data. All research records will be stored in a locked file in the primary investigators office for the duration of the research project. Audio tapes will be destroyed immediately following transcription. All other research records will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. Students are free to withdraw from participation at any time during the duration of the project with no penalty, or loss of benefit to which they would otherwise be entitled.

If you have any questions regarding this research project, please contact the researcher, Corissa Mazurkiewicz, at (808) 968-0921.
APPENDIX B
Consent Forms (Continued)

I certify that I have read and that I understand the foregoing, that I have been given satisfactory answers to my inquiries concerning project procedures and other matters and that I have been advised that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without prejudice.

I consent to the participation of my minor child in this project with the understanding that such consent does not waive any of my legal rights, nor does it release the principal Investigator or the institution or any employee or agent thereof from liability for negligence.

____________________________________
Name of student

____________________________________  __________________________
(Parents signature)                      (Date)

(If you cannot obtain satisfactory answers to your questions or have comments or complaints about your treatment in this study, contact: Committee on Human Studies, University of Hawaii, 2540 Maile Way, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822. Phone: (808) 956-5007.)
APPENDIX B
Consent Forms (Continued)

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APPENDIX B
Consent Forms (Continued)

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I consent to participation in this project with the understanding that such consent does not waive any of my legal rights, nor does it release the principal Investigator or the institution or any employee or agent thereof from liability for negligence.

__________________________
Name of student

__________________________  ________________
(Student signature)  (Date)

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