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University Scholar Proposal/00

Moral Commitment in Late Childhood: A Survey of Violence Intervention and Prevention Programs

I. Introduction

The Columbine seed has been sowed and is flourishing. School incidences reaping violence continue to emerge. High profile and dramatic outbursts of violence such as these have left our nation in a quandary, asking why? Elementary schools have committed themselves to implementing violence prevention initiatives to educate students about violence, anti-social behavior, and help them develop skills and strategies for avoiding it. The American School Health Association states that “... schools are both a living and learning setting for children and youth and provide a practical venue for violence prevention campaigns and provide an effective, central site for students, school personnel, parents and the public to raise awareness to violence and violence related issues”.

As a parent, PTA president, recreation director, school assistant and volunteer, I have had substantial exposure in an elementary school setting. Recently, serving as an Americorp Vista Member and volunteer coordinator for America Reads with Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), I was afforded the opportunity to design and implement a reading program in five schools within Litchfield County. My sponsor organization was the Northwest Center for Family Services and Mental Health located in Lakeville, Torrington and Winsted, Connecticut. Currently, I am doing an independent study under the direction of Professor Charlotte Madison, Executive Director, Child

Development Laboratories in the School of Family Studies, based on this meaningful experience.

My background and studies have stimulated a keen interest in the area of child development in the context of school. From a Human Development and Family Relations perspective, the elementary school child is at a developmental level where the child is separating from parent. Schools have traditionally played an instrumental role in moving the child to autonomy. The underlining foundation for this transition is the family's trust in the school as a safe environment and the children's trust in school as a context where they can function with a sense of self control. I believe it is paramount that children feel safe in school and parents know that their children are safe in school. The issue of school violence undermines this trust completely.

As a University Scholar I will be able to include an interdisciplinary approach to my studies that is challenging and relevant to my project. My goal is to gain knowledge and contribute to critical information that assesses and addresses violence and conflict in schools.

My project will examine:

- 1.) the developmental issues related to the child in the context of culture, school, family and violence (as noted in method section);
- 2.) different initiatives elementary school communities are taking to address violence;
- 3.) the obstacles and support observed in terms of implementing these;
- 4.) successes and failures they have noted and;
- 5.) the impact of these initiatives on parents and other caregivers.

II. Methods

A sample of elementary schools will be selected that reflect diverse dimensions (race/ethnicity, class, size, rural/suburban/urban, etc.). The methodology will rely on surveys and a few interviews with parents and key school personnel. The family and school surveys will explore the levels of satisfaction with current procedures. They will in turn probe explanations regarding the contributions of the larger culture, school context, and family context on the phenomenon of school violence. Research suggests that both parents and schools will agree upon the negative influence of larger cultural factors such as, violence in the media. However, while parents will emphasize a growing distrust and lack of confidence in the school context, the school is more likely to explain violence in the school as an outcome of disturbed family functioning.

Key problems with previous intervention programs (1980s drug programs) are that they appear to be ineffective. Part of the explanation for that has been their failure to address developmental characteristics and issues of the target population. Therefore, in addition to describing the variables addressed in this project, additional variables known to be of developmental significance during the elementary school years will be examined.

Toward this end, I will include information related to the developmental characteristics of children between the ages of eight to ten years who generally are sufficiently developed cognitively to fully understand the rules of school community. The survey questions will be based on developmental literature and related to: patterns of friendship (Hartup, 1994), (Maccoby, 1996), patterns of friendship in respect to moral reasoning with respect to the understanding of fairness and rules (Kohlberg, 1996), (Selman, 1978), the development of personal causation (dCharman, 1980), (Rotter,

1996), the development of a sense of industry versus inferiority (Eriksson, 1968). I will also use a Bronfenbrenner contextual model to evaluate the mutual evaluations of family and school context as each ascribe explanations for the emergence of acts of violence in the context of school. I finally, will examine the work of Joyce Epstein, the sociologist at Johns Hopkins, who has developed programs on family/school involvement.

I will use an independent study, as an opportunity to work with mental health professionals, who have dealt directly with children, violence and schools. Under the auspices of The Northwest Center for Family Services and Mental Health, with locations in Lakeville, Winsted and Torrington, Connecticut I will be provided with an on-site location for further study and research with agency professionals. I would also like to work directly under school social workers who are currently implementing models of conflict resolution and school violence to gain a better understanding of the dynamics in incorporating preventative measures within a school setting. Through these avenues I will be able to investigate the relationship between schools, agencies and families as they address school violence.

All of this data would be sorted and analyzed to assess the types of things that are happening in the schools selected in the study, how they are affecting children and families.

The guidance and supervision of several faculty members both at Storrs and Torrington, along with a relevant course of study will provide me with a vital knowledge base for developing my project. The committee members who have agreed to work with me are: Dr. Tracy Laszloffy, a family therapist and new faculty member in the School of Family Studies, Dr. Nan Balser, Professor of Psychology at Torrington, Dr. John

Mauceri, Professor of Human Development at Torrington and Dr. James Boster Professor of Anthropology and Irene Q. Brown, Family Studies at Storrs.

III. Course Selection/Plan of Study

My responsibilities of work and family require me to proceed my studies as a part-time student. I plan to take three to four classes per semester. The following tentative plan of study incorporates summer classes and classes offered at other campuses. My expected graduation date will be Fall semester of 2001. My proposed course of study will provide a relevant means to realizing my project and encompasses many of my major requirements.

HDFR 266 Introduction to Counseling (3 credits)
ANTH 298 Research Practicum In Social Cognition (3 credits)
SPAN 184 Intermediate Spanish II (4 credits)
(Spring of 1999 – 10 Credits)

These courses will introduce me to theories and techniques used in research and intervention systems as they relate to families. I would also like to continue with my studies in Spanish as a means of developing a survey in Spanish as part of this project.

STAT 110V Elementary Concepts of Statistics (4 credits)
HDFR 273 Family Interaction Processes (3 credits)
(Summer of 2000 – 7 credits)

My project entails the collection and manipulation of data, learning to do statistical analysis will be beneficial. Understanding family interaction processes, in particular management of conflict and aggression, relate to my project.

HDFR 202 Human Development: Infancy through Adolescence (3 credits)
HDFR 269 Family Violence (3 credits)
HDFR 289 Fieldwork in Community Settings (Northwest Center /School Placement) (3 credits)
(Fall 2000 – 9 credits)

Understanding the development of my age group identified in my project would be addressed in the above along with issues of family violence. The field placement will be an important and exciting time to progress with my project and accumulate data.

HDFR 204 Human Development: Adulthood and Aging (3 credits)
HDFR 278 Family in Society (3 credits)
HDFR 275 Family Pathology (3 credits)
(Spring 2001 – 9 credits)

These courses will continue my studies in understanding and researching individual development and its relationship to family and families under stress all which are factors in my project.

SOCI 107 Introduction to Sociology (3 credits)
HDFR 274 Public Policy and the Family (3 credits)
HDFR 299 Independent Study
(Fall 2001 – 9 credits)

Public policy on issues such as violence often shape models of education within the school system which directly relates to my project. The sociology class as a requirement will relate to my project by examining schools as an institution that implements social change. The independent study will allow me to complete my project, bringing my goal as a University Scholar to fruition. I would like to include the following classes in my plan of study pending departmental approval and availability:

Education: Curriculum and Instruction (EDCI) 233 Social and Community Issues In Education (1 credit), Anthropology (ANTH) 240 Cross Cultural Perspectives in Education, SPTP 318 Understanding and Working With Violent Youth (offered at the School of Social Work).

IV. Conclusion

The plan of this project is to identify and describe several different programs related to school violence and how these projects are implemented and evaluated. The goals of the survey will be expanded to generate additional data relevant to the target population and the context in which they function. Ultimately, what all this means in terms of designating initiatives that have the greatest chance of systematically educating all students and members of the school community about violence and ultimately preventing it. The University Scholar Program will afford me with the necessary support to obtain my goals for this project.

Partial Works Cited

1. Journal of School Health, May 1999, *Report of the ASHA National Injury and Violence Prevention Task Force: Executive Summary*.
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3. W. Hartup, 1996, *Company they Keep : Friendships in Childhood and Adolescence* edited by William M. Bukowski, Andrew F. Newcomb, Willard.
4. W. Hartup, 1975, *Determinants and Origins of Aggressive Behavior*.
5. Kohlberg, Lawrence, 1984, *Dimensions of Moral Education*.
6. Epstein, Joyce Levy, *Friends in School: Patterns of Selection and Influence in Secondary Schools*, New York : Academic Press, 1983.