Learning Between the Lines:

A Qualitative Analysis of Focus Groups

on School Safety

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Executive Summary
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As part of the evaluation of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, a study was conducted in order to gain information regarding the experience of safety in the schools as perceived by students, staff, and parents in Pinellas County. This information would serve to provide a better understanding of issues confronting students, and how these issues shaped their behavior. In addition, it was felt that the perceptions of teachers and parents may offer further insights into the experiences of students, particularly with regard to how their perceptions shape the opinions of the students themselves.

The current study involved obtaining information about the perceptions of these three groups through the use of focus groups. We conducted four focus groups of students, one from each of the third, fourth, fifth, and eight grades, three focus groups of parents drawn from School Advisory Committees, and two focus groups of teachers. The groups were convenience samples based on the interest and cooperation of the participants. Parents were paid for their participation. Questions in the focus groups centered on the experience of safety in the school with an emphasis on experiences or situations that contribute or compromise the feeling of safety.

Results suggest that the experience of safety for children of different ages is distinct, with younger children constructing their sense of safety from parents and teachers. These younger children expected and needed teachers and other adults to maintain a certain level of orderliness and control in order to feel safe. The lack of this perceived control led to uncertainty and fear for their safety. Results suggests that

teacher behaviors and school policies, such as lock downs, contributed more to a sense of fear and lack of safety for young students than any other element in the school setting.

Older children, and to some degree parents, perceived safety as a social conveyance. For older students, safety emerged from understanding and interacting appropriately with peers. For both parents and students, getting along with others, and the ramifications when failing to do so, determines safety.

Finally, the results identify disparities between parents and teachers in the perceived responsibility for safety in the schools. Both groups acknowledge the importance of having parents support teachers in their disciplinary role, and both groups speak of the inconsistencies between parent and teacher attitudes about appropriate behavior and of the responsibilities of parents. The uneasy relationship between parents and teachers appeared to contribute to issues regarding discipline and control that help determine school safety.

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Introduction

During November and December of 2000 and the Spring of 2001, we conducted a series of focus groups with students, parents, and teachers about their perceptions of the safety of their school specifically and what constitutes safety in schools in general. Although at the time, discussions in the groups did not seem remarkable, we found that after we carefully analyzed what the groups had said, patterns began to emerge that were worth noting, patterns that raised questions we will spend the following year investigating.

Over all, we found important differences in how the students, parents, and teachers viewed questions of school safety, and safety in general, with emergent themes clarifying the expectations and experiences of students and adults alike. The qualitative analysis that emerges below is necessarily idiosyncratic, based on the samples available for participation in the focus groups and our interpretation of meaning.

Method

Participants

When we set about organizing the focus groups, we had not established *a priori* hypotheses. Accordingly, we decided to approach the focus groups with samples of convenience. Selection of participants was designed simply to give us a range of ages among students, and any available teachers and parents who were willing to participate.

We conducted four student focus groups, one each of third, fourth, fifth and eighth graders. The third, fourth and fifth grade samples came from one Pinellas County

Elementary School, while the group of eight graders came from a special middle school for students who have had difficulty in their regular school. The 35 students who participated ranged in age from nine to fifteen years old, with 13 female and 22 male participants. No attempt was made to mirror the ethnic or racial characteristics of the school or community. Voluntary identification of ethnicity/race indicated that white, African American, Hispanic, and multicultural students participated in the groups.

The eight grade participants also participated in a family-based service program organized and funded by the school system. The elementary school students were selected by their teachers as likely to be able to contribute to a discussion group. We assume that as a result, students chosen tended to be the brighter, more verbally adept, and probably more attuned to school life. Though the probability of such verbal bias is high, we do not know its effect on the data. The effects of biases in the samples will be discussed whenever we believe that we have plausible need to speak of them.

The adults in our focus groups were distributed in three parent focus groups and two teacher/staff groups. Twenty-six parents participated in the parent focus groups including one group made up of parents of the eight grade students, and two groups composed of parents active in school-community organizations. Parents were paid $25.00 for their participation. Voluntary identification of ethnicity/race indicated that White, African American, and multicultural parents participated in the groups.

The 17 teachers and staff comprised one group of administrators and teachers from the elementary school, and a second group of volunteers participating in a District training opportunity. Voluntary identification of ethnicity/race indicated that White, African American, and Hispanic teachers and staff participated in the groups.

Instrumentation

The following is a list of questions and probes we used to initiate the discussions. As will be seen, the questions elicited responses, but especially among the elementary school students, the responses sorted themselves into categories other than those represented by the questions.

Student Focus Group Questions

1. What is school like for you?
   Probe: What things do you like about being at your school? What things don't you like?

2. How safe do you think your school is?
   Probe   Times/places in your school that are safer than others? Do you think other kids would agree with you?

3. What does your school do to help you feel safe at school?
   Probe: What else could your school do?

4. What does your teacher do to help you feel safe at school?
   Probe: Other ideas for teachers to help kids feel safer?

5. What can families do to make school feel safer?

6. What would you change about school to make it feel safer?

7. What would the perfect school be?

We asked the adults somewhat different questions than were used with the children. Their question list follows. Their responses in many ways parallel those of the children, but in other, very significant ways, they diverge.

Adult Focus Group Questions

1. What was your experience of school safety as a child?

    Probe: Based on what you've seen and heard from your children, what do you think school safety in general is like today?

2. How safe do you believe your child's school to be?

    Probe: To what extent does your child agree with your view?
    Please give specific examples of incidents that have influenced your views.

3. What effect does the surrounding neighborhood have on safety in your child's school?

    Probe: What about families? How do they influence school safety?

4. What school programs/policies/procedures contribute to your child's safety at school?

    Probe: What else would help your child feel safe at school? Please give some examples.

    Transition: *Now that we've talked about those things that contribute to safety in schools, we'd like you to tell us what you know about the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative.*

5. Do any programs in the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative come to mind to accomplish what we have been talking about?

    Probe: Which programs are you familiar with?
    Are they provided in your child's school?
    Do the programs make a difference?

Results

The questions and probes in the boxes above were used to organize and prompt discussion for the four groups of students. From their responses, we have derived the following discussion. In our analysis, the responses to the questions resolved themselves into emergent categories or themes. These categories are not independent constructs, but crosscut each other at several points. Additionally, minor themes were identified for several of the major categories.

It should be clear that these categories are ours, and not those of the students. It should also be clear that while the information was given to us in the process of answering the above questions, it is not necessarily ordered by the questions or categories implied by them. This will become more obvious if we take each category and trace it back to the actual words of the students from which we derived the categories.

Conditions Affecting the Sense of Safety

Personal or Derived Power: The term "power" includes elements of ability, competence, efficiency, efficacy, effectuality, skill, and instrumentality. Each of these all express something of what the category label means. Age, ethnicity, sex, and parents also played some role in the experience of personal power. Fifth grade students spoke of it in the following ways:

> *Facilitator: Okay and what is it about the Student Council that makes you feel safe?*
>
> *Student: Well they solve problems, which I'm in. And they talk about what we may do for our school, like help our school. And we....*
>
> *Facilitator: And the student council... so it's made up of students and the students make the decisions?*
>
> *Student: Ah-ha*

Facilitator: Okay. And then you think that's pretty effective? Does it work?
Student:Um-hum.

This student says the Student Council makes him feel safe. He is a member of the Student Council and says that he is confident that the Student Council is able to solve problems that arise for students. Another student says that the safety patrols help make him feel safe, but not for the reason one might expect:

Facilitator: Okay and what about the patrols help you feel safe?
Student: Oh, cause I'm a patrol and I help the others.

The student seems to be saying that it makes him feel safe when he is helping the other students. If we are reading this correctly, then the sense of having some power over the situation helps one feel safe in itself. However, being on the receiving end of the safety patrol's power does not feel so good, according to these fourth graders:

Facilitator: Why don't you like the patrols?

Student 1:   Well ..."Walk, walk. I am gonna report you for not ... "(gestures).

Student 2:   They are too bossy.

Facilitator: So you don't like people telling you what to do.

Student 1:   Yeah. They're annoying..."Walk!"

Age: Age partially translates into size. Larger students tend to be looked upon with some anxiety by smaller students. However, this also has something to do with experience and the sub-cultures of different level schools. Middle school students and high school students are believed to be confronted with more danger of violence than elementary school children. Also, students old enough to attend a higher level

school tend to become the "dangerous strangers" when they come on campus at the elementary school.

Ethnicity and Sex: According to what our students said, ethnicity itself does not reduce or increase one's power, unless one is in the minority in a given situation. However, racial or ethnic conflicts are seen as generating danger. Similarly, sex itself was not spoken of as making one vulnerable, but being in the minority was. Boys were seen as a threat because they fight, because the fights themselves were seen as disruptive. Fighting girls were also seen said to be a safety problem on one school bus.

Parents/Self-Concept: Without overreaching our limited data, several times students spoke of feeling safer because one or the other of their parents had intervened to thwart a bully or had otherwise leant their support to make the child feel protected. The connection between this and self-concept is speculative. One student spoke of the importance of "the way you carry yourself" as making them feel safe, and others warned against being "too nice" because it would invite bullying. This seems to connect with statements by parents about the importance they place on instilling in a child the willingness to defend himself or herself.

Likelihood of Injury: Although the eighth graders said emphatically that safety was about freedom from injury, the younger children appeared to define safety more subtly and to grade risk of injury, a component of safety, by its likelihood and its source or agent. High likelihood of intentional injury (attack) appeared to be the most frightening combination, followed by high probability of random (accidental) injury. Low likelihood of intentional and random injury were in third and fourth place, respectively. The children did not seem to regard injury resulting from their own risk taking as especially

frightening, whether the probability was high or low, although in cases in which adult caretakers failed to prohibit high risk, high probability behavior was regarded as wrongful neglect.

Attack (Intentional Injury): The most frightening injury situation described was the high probability of being deliberately attacked. From what the children said, it was the interplay of both factors, but being the victim of cruelty seemed to add to the anxiety carried by the image of the situation.

Random Accidents: In some ways, the students seemed fairly sanguine about anticipating random accidents. Here the high or low probability made a more important difference. Another factor was introduced in the school setting, however, because several students blamed teachers for not recognizing the high probability situation and taking action to lower the risk. A child injured while running on a rain-slick sidewalk, or injured while getting on or off of a school bus at the front of the school, would be considered the result of neglect, not truly a random accident. As an example, when asked what he disliked most about school, one fourth grade boy said:

> *In school, what I really don't like is that all the board walk out by right out*
>
> *beside us it would be...going into the rainy season we got quite a bit of rain and*
>
> *every ahh and the board gets slippery every time it rains. And ahh one time I*
>
> *almost slipped...I slipped, I lost my balance. I almost fell over and broke my*
>
> *neck.*

> *Child's Own Risk Taking*: Injuries which took place due to the child's risk taking
>
> were barely mentioned as such, except to indicate that the teacher or other
>
> responsible adult should have prevented the risky behavior.

Student: Well yeah. Mostly because it's kids getting hurt. And everything else and because… they say they want kids to come to school and not be sick, but all they are doing is making things. They are saying something…they are not even going by what they say. They are like going behind what they say. They want kids to come to school, but then do something to what kids. They're going to get sick out in the rain. They are going to get a cold and then they won't come to school. It's their fault though.

Facilitator: So then they are telling you two things?
Student: Yeah. Like half and half.

Facilitator: So you don't know what to believe.

Student: Yeah.

Quality of Adult Behavior:

   All the student groups reported that adult behavior affects their sense of well-being

and safety. Because we were focusing on the schools, teachers received the most

attention.

   Teachers: The younger children especially tended to express a dependency on

teachers.   This effect waned with the older groups who were more likely to talk about

their own efficacy or power.   For all ages, teachers were not only bringers of order, quiet,

and reduction of risk in the best of situations, but they were also seen as liable for the

ambiance of the setting, keeping it safe or degrading it by their own behavior.   This was

particularly true when a teacher lost his or her temper or broke implicit or explicit rules.

Facilitator: It's safe. Oh really? So what makes your school safe?

Student: Cause like there's a lot of teachers. Like when they have like fire drills, they ask us like to line up outside, to go outside,

Facilitator: um-hum

Student: And we get a lockdown or something. We gotta go in a classroom and close the doors and stuff to like protect us.

Facilitator: Right. So you feel secure?

Student: Yes.

Facilitator: Okay.

Nevertheless, not all the teachers come up to expectations of the students:

Facilitator: Does that [weird teachers] make you feel unsafe?

Student: Ahh yeah. Cause like when a fight bust out, he [the teacher] just stands there watching and giggling, sometimes ….You know he's weird.

Most disconcerting to the students is the teacher who reacts emotionally to the daily

events:

Student1: When they get too mad at someone else, they still get cranky,

Student2: Makes me scared.

Student1:…because they're still mad at someone else.

Studen2: Yeah and I go up to my teacher and she's like.. when she has a problem she's like, "Go sit down!" (said in a stern voice).

Nevertheless, for the younger students especially, only the teacher is capable of

resolving conflicts and restoring equilibrium:

Student: But make sure like ahh with the teachers make sure everybody's comfortable with going in the classroom like ahh solve conflicts that have gone on and stuff like that. And ahh get to know your teacher better.

Facilitator: Okay. So getting to know your teacher better. Make sure there's someone in the classroom to solve conflicts. Okay. Has that … tended to be a problem for anyone- conflicts or something going in the school while they're there?.

Student: Yeah, and sometimes it's also the teachers that cause problems.

(other students giggle)

Facilitator: Can you explain to me about that?

Student: Yeah. Ahh, teachers can be in the school for a certain amount of time and it just gets too much for them too handle or something and they start breaking down. They can't handle it any longer. So they just start getting really mad at kids, don't help them out anymore, or start causing problems.

Parents: Parents were seen as potentially contributory to the child's sense of well-being.

The older students especially express a clear set of notions about what parents could

contribute to the student's well-being. This is less surprising if one considers that the

parents of these children were required to be involved in the child's school life. Asked

what parents could do to make school safer, the eight graders had the following

exchange:

> *Student: They could actually come to school and get involved.*
>
> *Facilitator: Come to school and get involved? Get involved in what ways?*
>
> *Student: They could always go and talk to the teachers and see what's going on and go and talk with the principal, see what they're doing.*
>
> *Student2: They can go to the bus stop and cuss out the bullies that are beating up their son.*

Fifth Graders, presumably less exposed to material about good parenting, presented a

similar list:

> *Facilitator: Is there anything that your families could do? What do you think families could do to help students feel safe while they're at school?*
>
> *Student: Come to school with them. Sit with them. Littler kids had to walk home by their selves. Parents come and help them. Like I know most parents do but some parents don't. First day of school there's like a whole bunch of parents and they just leave their kids off. How do the kids supposed to know where to go?*
>
> *Facilitator: Okay, so you're saying more parents come to school with the children, especially small children?*
>
> *Student: Yeah.*
>
> *Facilitator: And you're saying maybe they can come sometime and sit in with the children?*
>
> *Student: Um-hum.*

On the other hand, the school administrators and teachers spoke of angry parents as a

threat to safety, and these third graders obviously have internalized some of those images,

as they reveal possible reasons for having a "Lockdown."[1]

> *Facilitator: When else would you do a lockdown?*
>
> *Student: You have to wait for somebody to come*
>
> *Student: Like a mad parent would come …*

Fanciful Dread

The younger students often expressed what we are calling "fanciful dread," meaning

fear of events seen on the television news or in movies, rather than in their own direct

experience.

> *Student: Somebody that ahh we don't know might walk in. Their face might look familiar like one of my friends, but it's not. They might ahh pull a trigger on a gun and shoot somebody ahh … somebody a try to they'll like try to the cops.…*
>
> *Facilitator: Um-hum.*
>
> *Student: …scary movies, had killed somebody and ahh he tried to…(giggles)*
>
> *Facilitator: Oh, like in a movie. Okay.*
>
> *Student: My favorite part of the scary movie is when he chops off the girl's head and he goes: 'oh I'mma bare head.' Ahh … Then he sticks her in the lost and found box.*

Perceived Order/Disorder

The younger children, especially, were sensitive to the orderliness of the ambience.

More than one student said that order and quiet were desirable because they make it

possible to recognize potentially unsafe activity. Asked when she felt safe, this third

grader replied:

> *Student: Whenever we're in globe village.*
>
> *Facilitator: In the global village. Why?*

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[1] "Lockdowns" are procedures during which teachers close and lock the classroom door and turn off the lights. Children hide under their desks until an all clear signal is received. Younger children almost uniformly reported that these events are frightening. As far as we could determine, no real lockdown had ever taken place, only practice drills.

Student: Because there's nothing that could go wrong.

Facilitator: What about global village makes you feel safe?

Student: There is... it's really quiet and if anything were to happen there would be a lot of noise and we would know something's going wrong.

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Paradoxical Beliefs

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Weaving through all these conditions of safety are a series of paradoxes, which have a way of turning safety touchstones into a maze of mirrors. Because much real and imagined threat is perceived as coming from the uncontrolled and strange, the outside is an area of risk. Nevertheless, the claustrophobic inside is frightening too. Openness and enclosure are another aspect in this duality. The campus of the elementary school is open. This makes it difficult to keep out unauthorized visitors ranging from older children on their way home from school to the almost mythical angry parent or the imagined perpetrator of on-campus massacres. At the opposite extreme are the classroom lockdowns that are practiced periodically. These lockdowns, practiced in much the same manner as fire drills, have taken their place along with storm drills and the historical nuclear attack drills of the Cold War. Unfortunately, they appear to be much more frightening. Order depends on supervision and restriction of noise and movement. While these ideals have always been associated with safety, freedom of movement and spontaneity, symbols of childhood, are constantly on the verge of eruption.

In vs. Out:

Some children expressed a greater sense of safety inside than outside, in that they considered themselves less vulnerable to predations of strangers. However, in strictly controlled situations such as lockdowns, they reported feeling frightened for fear that the planning would go wrong -- that they would not know what was going on outside; that

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marauders would come and find them, or that teachers could not be allowed back into the room.

Open vs. Closed:

The campus of the elementary school is open, and access could not be totally controlled without fences. Children and adults both see this as a source of danger, but the parents, at least, also want to maintain the openness, as does this parent of an elementary school child:

> *Parent: Cause you really would not want to totally enclose the school. Then it would not be a friendly place. It's a balance between the openness of the campus against a barbwire compound. You know what I mean?*

Restricted vs. Unbound:

The children liked being free to move about, play, etc. However, they said that they disliked being allowed to engage in harmful behavior. Reasonable restrictions brought them comfort.

Order vs. Disorder:

The order-disorder dyad is related to the first three. What is interesting is that the children liked order and disliked disorder, at least because disorder could be seen as increasing the likelihood of accidental injury and because it made noise that could mask signs of danger. Nevertheless, whenever the opportunity arose, the majority of the students took advantage of the situation and gloried in being disorderly.

The Neighborhood and the School

The children saw the neighborhood in a variety of ways, both positively and not so positively. Traffic around the school was seen as a danger, as was the problem of teasing and bullying on the way to and from school. Some of the younger children said that they

liked the school better because there were rules supporting equality and diversity, which did not exist or were more weakly enforced in the neighborhood.

Coping Strategies

It was our impression that the children did not regard themselves as passive in the school setting. However, it appeared very important for some students to be able to affect their environment, or to find an adult who was able to do so. In general their coping strategies or contingency plans appeared to be well grounded, though quite fanciful in some of the dramatized Fanciful Dread Situations.

Adults

For adults, the responses to questions resolved themselves into different categories.

Safety as Order and Control

Most of the adult group members remember their own schools as scenes of muted threat, with outright violence limited generally to the actions of the boys and the teachers. The harshness of discipline received was almost treated as a badge of honor. One parent remembers her own school experience in this way:

> *Parent: I went to a Catholic school so it was pretty much you know. We didn't worry about violence. Mainly only from the Nuns, you know. (much laughter)*

However, not only did parents focus on the coerciveness of their schools, but also reflected soberly on their school experiences in order to look for ideas about how to improve the present situation. One woman talked about the use of prefects in her school.

> *Parent: Ahh there's another thing, too, I think that would be good. The older children in high school, when I was going to high school, we had and those are the ones who run the school, the older students. They would be watching prefects the younger ones and making sure that everything was followed through*

correctly. And they would wear a different colored uniform and those are the ones who would stand in the hallway and make sure everything is running smoothly and make sure everybody is getting into class on time and there's no slip up. Give them the job instead of the teachers being out there. Let them be responsible. Let them follow through on doing something that they should be doing. And that's what we used to do. And ahh that worked very well. Even walking down the hall and our socks were down, we had to pull them up. You know cause they would say: 'Hey your socks down.' And they would make sure everybody was walking on the right side of the hallway and so nobody's hurting anybody and they would assist. They would help.

In this view, the older students serve as surrogate adults, buying into and maintaining the sense of order that they had learned from adults. Teachers and administrators strongly insisted on their ability to control the situation at school, but almost paradoxically spoke of their need for parental support in ways that made one wonder if they were not still looking for prefects, but this time from among the parents. Here is an administrator talking about support she would like to see parents give her.

> *Administrator: I think parents ahh can help with it too by supporting like especially when you have a special behavior plan. If there is some type of follow through at home, we seem to find that it's a whole lot more successful than the ones that don't have to go home because Mom never signs or that type of thing. So coming from the background of having so many different kids on special behavior plans when there's that support at home, they tend to be a whole lot more successful.*

The Danger of Student Violence

Although the students talk about students fighting, it does not hold center stage for the elementary children. Bullying and ridicule are a greater concern. With the older children and their parents, the larger concern is that many students are perceived to be armed with guns or knives. The adults, parents, and educators alike, seem to define the problem of school safety almost exclusively in terms of student violence.

> *Parent: …well, he went to high school where they trampled him in the hallway and stepped all over his back. And he ended up in the hospital. And then I took*

him out of there and moved him to Central Christian. And that was scary because it was his first year. I say never again.

(many say) Yeah.

Parent: Oh yeah. Exactly. I think it's making sure you fit in with the right group who's gonna actually protect you if anything happens because you're not fitting in and your not in the right group. But then you're getting beat up. That's pretty much what it is.

Drugs, Death, and Disrespect

Drugs, of course, are viewed as the scourge of the past several generations in our society, and are credited with the disrespect shown parents and teachers, as well as much of the violence alleged to take place on campus, especially the use of lethal weapons.

Parent: I hear my son and his friends in the bedroom talk and you catch wind and it's like wow wow wow wow wait a minute. What was that? ... There was kids at school that had knives. There was one that was gonna bring a gun. Ahh you start hearing about some of the kids that brought drugs and stuff like that and it's like: 'Why didn't you tell me?" Oh no, you don't talk about. We don't tell anybody.

Parent 2: It's just like a power thing. And I don't remember having that pecking orders and stuff. But we never had that power struggle. Who was on top and who was first and who was the best and who was the baddest? You know we have the class clown. You know and that was about it. You know, but that's what I hear and it's scary when you hear the kids talking what they did in school. Not what they did in the classrooms but what goes on in between classes ... I mean almost everybody is a bully now because somebody's always picking on somebody because you're always getting picked on by somebody else. Like I said it's a circle and it doesn't stop.

The Blaming of Parents

Adults and children participate in a kind of ritual return to criticism of the failure of parents, which goes like this: Parents have failed and abdicated to teachers to raise their children. But the inability or unwillingness of parents to discipline their children (a condition sometimes blamed on laws, sometimes on teen pregnancy, sometimes on parental or child drug use), makes it impossible for teachers to teach or maintain control.

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Criticism of parenting by parents was far more direct and condemnatory than when it came from educators. Consider the following extended exchange by parents of the eight grade children who, it will be recalled, have had their own struggles with their children's school situation:

Parent: I'd beat my son. I would come in there and beat his butt if he pulled that. I would.

Parent: Yeah, but you're one out of a million that would do that.

Parent: I don't know I see….

Parent: Some of those children… yeah, but you see some .. if they don't have the discipline like we did when we were growing and say they're young parents that don't have … or they have ahh parents before and their parents don't want to be bothered because they didn't want to listen and blah blah blah, then they're on their own. And the parents don't know what else to do.

Parent: Yeah, they don't.

Parent: So they're [children] trying to be parents, which are either on drugs or on alcohol or abuse families they're into and these kids are suffering because they don't know what to do. I mean they're looking for love. They're looking for the attention.

Parent: Attention.

Parent: But to me it still comes down to the laws. If they don't start changing the laws to stop tying the parents' hands, we're not gonna get it back in school. My stepsister has got three children, fifteen year old, an eleven year old and a six year old little girl, -two boys one girl. The fifteen year old, my nephew, she's done everything. She has tried programs, counseling, begged the judges to put him in lockdown facilities, drugs, ahh running away. She's physically not allowed to keep him in the house. She's not allowed to keep him out of the house. He can break in the house, steal everything, vandalize the house, she can't keep him out. She can't keep him in. Police won't pick him up. It's just a never ending thing. They have tied the parent's hands so bad that …and he's called HRS on her because she can't have him around her two other kids. Now HRS comes in and she's got to do whatever they want, not because she's beat her kid or done anything wrong but because he's got the control now. And that leaves the two other children that desparately want their mom and their dad but then here comes their brother doing all this. Now I told my son you ever pull that, I don't have other kids. I'll hand cuff your butt in the house. I don't care. They can take me to jail cause if they take me to jail, you go too. But she can't do that. And when you've got other kids, you can't do that. I told mine I'll come in there. I'll come in there …… I will beat you. If I can't beat you I will find somebody who will. But when you've got other kids you can't do that. And

when it comes down to it, the parents, a lot of them have tried. They just can't control them. And the laws have changed so bad that we're not allowed to control them anymore, which spills over into the school.

Parent: And in school, well, if we can't control them, what makes you think the teachers are gonna control them. And until all of that changes back, and I'm not saying back in the old days everything was great. I think they supressed a lot of abuse and things that were going on, but until we find a happy medium from what was old to what's new, I think we're always gonna have some problems that's gonna get worse.

Parent: And really what it should be is a mutual working process. I mean I know if something happens at Alex's school, there were teachers that would call me. Some would call me when there's something good. Some of them would call me when there were things that were bad, but what I learned from the teachers is some were good, some were bad. But you deal all kinds of people in this world so get used to it kid.

Contradictions between Parental and School Views

Administrator: I'll have kids come to the office for fighting and the kid that retaliated, not the kid that hit first, but the kid that retaliated will say my dad or my mom says when somebody hits me I can hit 'em back. And I think that's a way that what parents tell their children, come to school and we have to explain it's a little bit different in school than when you're out playing by yourself. When there's one hundred adults here, you don't have to fight back and we talk about how you do it without fighting. Many times when I call parents they say yes and that's the way it's gonna be. If my kid gets in trouble for fighting so be it. But he's gonna defend himself. And it's usually it's usually boys, it's not girls. (laughing) But that's one way that we're still in odds with how you discipline.

It was quite clear that the teachers' notions of appropriate discipline and behavioral standards for the students was quite different from that of many of the parents, who seemed to be proud of their willingness to be tough with their children and to resort quickly to corporal punishment, both of which responses were condemned by the teachers. More severely criticized by the administrator was the cultural value, which many parents seemed to adhere to -- that their children should be ready and willing to defend themselves. The teachers' position on this was that they, the teachers, were

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capable of controlling violence, and that for the students to take justice into their own hands was unacceptable.

The depth and strange equanimity with which these conflicting views are maintained is evident in the following exchange between two parents in the elementary school group. It will be recalled that this group contained educators as well as parents, so that the muted defiance of these statements betrays the fact that what is being stated is for the benefit of the educators in the group, forming one side of a disagreement which could not be acknowledged, but was pursued obliquely throughout the discussion.

> *Parent 1: And if you're gonna hit, you're responsible for what your hand does.*
>
> *Parent 2: But I won't punish my son if he comes back and he say he got in trouble because a kid hit him and he hit him back.*
>
> *Parent: 1 Yeah*
>
> *Parent 2: I'm not gonna punish him for that.*
>
> *Parent 1: But he'll get punished at school.*
>
> *Parent 2: That's good, that's all right. But when he comes home: 'Dad he hit me I hit him back.' That's how it is.*

Discussion

In the analysis of the focus groups used here are we have found a series of interesting viewpoints on definitions of safety and its constituent conditions. The reality that has been brought home to us is that safety is a state of mind, a cognitive/emotional construct, rather than a set of empirical facts. The sense of safety, or its opposite, seems clearly fashioned from the socio-cultural contexts and idiosyncratic histories of the makers of the constructs. It is a projection of the age, experiences, and life roles of the holders. This renders safety evanescent -- difficult to frame and classify.

We found important differences in how the students, parents, and teachers viewed questions of school safety, and safety in general, with the older children (eight grade) sounding more like the adults. The adults tended to give more importance to fighting among children than the younger children did. The teachers tended to be especially concerned with control and the ways in which parents could help them maintain control at school. Interestingly enough, the students also were concerned with order and control, and said that they felt safer when the environment was orderly and quiet. However, they tended to see adults as both bringers of order, and causes of disorder (or the fear of disorder). Both children and adults were concerned with the ability of adults to maintain control, but the children expressed misgivings about the ability of the adults to control themselves and each other.

Especially intriguing is the subtlety and complexity with which the younger children reported constructing a sense of safety. As we listened carefully to their words and reread the transcripts, safety, as described by the younger children came to feel more and more like a mood, a comfortable emotional ambience within which they could act freely without fear or vigilance. The eighth grade students make an imperfect comparison group because more than age separates them from the elementary school students. All the eighth graders have passed through difficult times in their various schools, before finally finding what appears to be a school in which they can do well. While aware of the likely effects of natural cognitive maturation, we do not know whether it is adolescence or hard experience or some combination that makes the eighth graders simplify the notion of safety to a bare set of conditions. Looked at carefully, the

words with which they describe safety do not evoke anything like the comfort of the younger children claim to desire.

We have also gained some new perspectives on the dynamics of interaction between parents, children, and teachers, and a definite divergence of beliefs and values in each of the three groups. The student groups, moreover, vary in perception at least by age, as could be expected, but perhaps by experience as well. These disparate findings may best be expressed in the following statements, most of them based on a key assumption of the analyst, that a sense of safety or danger is a mental construct emergent from and sustained by groups and individuals who share it.

- Children of different ages appear to construct a sense of safety in different ways, although we do not know whether this is strictly because of age differences or because of the experiences of the older students.

- Safety, as described by the young students, evokes a sense of softness and care. Adults are critical factors in this construct, and are severely criticized for losing control of situations or themselves, for neglecting to protect children from themselves and each other, and for breaking the rules that children must adhere to. A sense of safety emerges from orderliness, control, and respect for rules.

- The sense of safety for the older students in our groups was addressed in much less complex terms than those used by the younger students, and being safe was cast as an externally directed set of conditions, basically having the function of reducing the likelihood of injury. Only the younger children gave safety an interactive face. For older children, safety emerges from social interactions with others, and lack of safety from an inability to get along with others.

- Not surprisingly, the younger children, with their complex constructions, worked both sides of a series of conceptual paradoxes, in-out, restricted-unbound, open-closed, order-disorder, which cut across one another on many dimensions.

- Adult views tended to be quite distinct from the students' views, the adults being more simplistic even than the older children.

- Teachers and parents held conflicting views, especially of parenting and control of children. These conflicts were articulated in such a way that they were never openly engaged, or even acknowledged in so many words, by the two sets of adults.

- Adults tended to define danger in the schools in terms of the behavior of children. Children tended to define danger in terms of unruly peers, older children, misbehaving teachers and parents, and strangers of all ages.

- The teachers seemed to blame behavior problems of students on parental failure and parental disabilities brought on by early reproduction and drugs. The parents seemed to agree with the teachers, but to blame their own failure to discipline their children effectively on drugs and intrusive laws.

- Parents overall tended to recall their own schools as having a certain amount of violence, but more respect for authority and fewer extremes of drug use and intentional injury.

- No one in any of the groups suggested that schools are safer now than they were when they were children.