Analyzing Children's Perception of Violence Through Their Writing

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Abstract Direct exposure to violence affects approximately three out of every five children in America. Using data available from the “*Do the Write Thing*” (DtWT) Challenge, this study explored children’s views of violence using 1,165 essays written by students from 13 middle schools in nine districts within Region V of Texas. Data analysis from students’ writing found that students wrote more about bullying than other forms of violence. Most children identified themselves as indirect observers or witnesses rather than victims or perpetrators during such instances of bullying. Pairing the anti-bullying campaigns with violence prevention programs could better inform and educate students about the risks and consequences of violence, particularly as they move into late adolescence and adulthood.

Keywords Exposure · Bullying · Narrative approach · “*Do the Write Thing*” · Children’s self-reports · Children’s poem

Recent research reports that three out of five children in our society have been directly exposed to violence, and violence will impact the lives of an estimated 46 million children in the coming year (Finkelhor et al. 2009; Kaufman et al. 2011; Listenbee et al. 2012). Whether in their homes, schools, or communities, daily exposure to violence threatens children’s

health, security, and happiness (Cook et al. 2005; Finkelhor et al. 2007). Though all races, cultures, and socioeconomic demographics are exposed to domestic and media-related violence (Osofsky 1999), children living in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods are the most likely to be exposed to weapons, drugs, and random violence within their communities (Resnick et al. 2004). Researchers estimate that approximately 15.5 million children in the United States live in families where domestic violence has occurred (McDonald et al. 2006). Maxfield and Babbie (2014) acknowledge that, for better understanding of a marginalized population or aberrant phenomenon, it is most effective to gather data and information directly from the source. In order to address the recommendations of the Report of the Attorney General’s National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence (Listenbee et al. 2012), the concerns and needs of populations impacted by violence must be understood. By understanding children’s perspective on the violence they experience in everyday life, professionals can design comprehensive prevention and intervention programs for children who have previously not been identified as victims of violence.

Children’s written experience of their exposure to violence is critical in better understanding of the impact of violence on the lives of children. Written narratives not only serve as a means of communication, but also as a way of interpreting experiences (Baumeister and Newman 1994). Examining stories by authors within a community can offer insight into the ways that the selected population expresses their emotions and experiences (Bohanek and Fivush 2010). As middle school students are accustomed to writing as a daily form of expression (in academic assignments and personal communication), it stands to reason that their written assignments offer a unique platform to examine the cognitive and emotional processes associated with any given topic. Extensive research indicates that narratives become a natural part of the emotional

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regulation process as stories reveal an individual's subjective evaluation of the subject matter (Pennebaker 1997).

Research demonstrates that children who are victimized face multiple challenges, including emotional and psychological problems (Kaufman et al. 2011; Krug et al. 2002; Saunders 2003); lower academic performance (Harris et al. 2007); social difficulties (Kaufman et al. 2011; Shavers 2013); substance abuse (Kaufman et al. 2011; Kilpatrick et al. 2000; Shavers 2013); a higher risk of becoming a victimizer or violent offender (Finkelhor et al. 2007; McIntyre and Widom 2011); and a higher likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system (Harris et al. 2007; Listenbee et al. 2012). Unfortunately, these consequences lead the majority of victimized children to be relegated to institutional systems such as child protection, criminal justice, and treatment centers. In these environments, only the most palpable issues are generally addressed, and their difficulties related to victimization are often left unrecognized and untreated (Harris et al. 2007).

Children's Written Narratives on Violence: the Media of Expression

Research indicates that writing not only reflects an individual's thinking and understanding, but also sheds light on how one can reflect emotion from written activities (Gortner et al. 2006; James and Owens 2005; Pennebaker 2012; Slivinske and Slivinske 2014). In fact, a well-organized writing assignment can illuminate the way in which beliefs and behaviors shape the individual's reasoning (Hudd et al. 2007). Writing about an emotional or stressful topic, in particular, serves to help the author make sense of an incident and generally leads to increased self-disclosure (Brewin and Lennard 1999; Smyth et al. 2008).

Research on children's written narratives has been grounded in the therapeutic effectiveness of writing. In the narrative therapeutic approach, change is sought through the exploration of how written language is used to formulate problems. The written samples provide a tool for understanding the client and for constructing change (Etchison and Kleist 2000). Examining the effectiveness of this technique, one study found that the use of narratives was helpful in reducing ongoing parent-child conflict in six families with 8–17 year olds (Besa 1994); however, much like other research involving children, the focus of the intervention was primarily on the parents. Similarly, an ethnographic study involving families with various presenting issues, such as family violence, oppositional behaviors, divorce, and death, found that the narrative therapy was instrumental in the family's commitment to change (O'Connor et al. 1997).

While the narrative writing technique has been evaluated, few studies have focused specifically on the writing content.

Studies of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), domestic violence, and other social issues have traditionally focused on adult narratives (Combs and Freedman 2012; Gortner et al. 2006; Smyth et al. 2008; Vromans and Schweitzer 2011), thus leaving a significant gap in the literature on children's views. Research examining children's writings on the topic of violence is particularly needed.

In Flint, Michigan, a study of 389 submitted DtWT essays explored the causes of violence identified in middle-school children's essays (Zimmerman et al. 2004). Their results found that peer, societal, individual, and family factors were the most common causes of violence in children's lives. However, their research did not summarize the children's lived experiences of violence. Another study in South Australia used note-writing assignments to examine female peer conflicts, in which 39 girls between the ages of 15 and 16 were asked to write letters to a peer about conflicts with other girls. Results revealed that the narrative methodology was effective in generating detailed information related to teens' victimization and ways in which they resolved peer conflict (James and Owens 2005). Since research about children's lived experience of violence has generally focused on a specific domain, the study reported below will analyze how children's perception of violence can be reflected through their own writing.

Method

Do the Write Thing (DtWT) is the hallmark initiative of the National Campaign to Stop Violence (NCSV) in which participating students engage in classroom discussions about violence and write essays addressing personal perspectives on violence. In 1996, the NCSV was established by bringing together business, community, and government leaders to focus efforts on reducing youth violence in society. Founders of this campaign sought to understand the issue of youth violence as seen through the eyes of the children involved by implementing DtWT in schools. Students are invited to respond to three prompts in their essays: (1) How has violence affected my life? (2) What are the causes of violence? (3) What can I do to reduce violence? (National Campaign to Stop Violence 2013). Prior to the essay writing, teachers engage their students in a discussion on the meaning of violence within the context of the students' lives. Students then compose a written response to all three prompts.

Local and regional chapters of DtWT follow a standardized set of guidelines established by the NCSV. First, a panel of volunteers, recruited and trained by the local DtWT committee, reviews the essays. Writings are evaluated based on the responsive and dynamic content of the material rather than the format and structure. Outstanding students are then named the School Ambassadors, and their essays are evaluated at the

regional level. Each region selects one male and one female as its National Ambassadors, who are then honored for their commitment to reducing violence at the annual National Recognition Week in Washington, DC. Finally, the essays are compiled in a book, which is published by the NCSV and placed in the Library of Congress. During the 2012–2013 school year, 30 communities across the nation participated in the DtWT Challenge with approximately 210,000 essays submitted (National Campaign to Stop Violence 2013).

This study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. Data came from the submissions collected by the local chapter of the DtWT Challenge in Region V of Southeast Texas during the 2014–2015 school year. To enter the contest, participants were encouraged by their teachers to submit writing in the form of essays, poems, or songs. Since the vast majority of submissions were written in an essay format, the student submissions will be referred to as *essays* throughout this research. This research analyzed secondary data to answer two research questions: (1) What are the dimensions of violence present in the children's essays? and (2) How do children define violence within the context of their everyday life?

Data Collection

Thirteen middle schools in nine of the 36 Region V school districts voluntarily participated in the 2014–2015 challenge. Each of the 1165 essays was submitted with a parent consent form. In order to protect anonymity, personal identifiers were removed and each essay was labeled with a number linked to a record for the DtWT coordinator to announce the winners. Each participant school labeled their essays by school name and district with basic demographic information (gender, age, grade-level, and race/ethnicity) of the author on each essay. Data were analyzed for themes related to the children's perspective toward violence.

Data Analysis

Student essays were initially coded for overarching themes by two of 20 trained coders (faculty and students in social work, criminal justice, education, and nursing). The coding instrument contained a checklist in six sections: 1) prompts/personal encounter, 2) student role in violence, 3) type(s) of violence present, 4) external factors, 5) protective factors, and 6) solutions. In addition, seven types of protective factors were also coded: 1) family support, 2) cultural identity, 3) stable environment, 4) economic stability, 5) social support, 6) connection with a faith based community, and 7) personal factors - including empathy, problems solving skills, and temperament (Holden 2003; Luthar et al. 2000; Masten and Obradović 2006).

To ensure interrater reliability, the principal investigator (PI) randomly selected 45 essays and independently coded them using the content form. A minimum of two essays were selected from each coder, and three essays were selected from five coders who reviewed more essays. Of the 45 selected essays, 87% (38) coding themes were matched between the coding from the original coder and the PI. The PI recoded the essays to ensure a higher inter-rater consistency. Since this study focused on the definition and meaning of violence, frequencies of related word use were recorded for descriptive analyses. The phi coefficient was selected as the best measure for effect size since most variables reported were dichotomous (Green and Salkind 2011).

Results

The 1165 contestants came from 13 middle schools where the number of participants per school ranged from four to 349 students. Seventh grade had the highest number of submissions (565), followed by 8th grade (403) and sixth grade (195). More females ($n = 686$; 58.9%) than males ($n = 479$; 41.1%) submitted essays. A typical contestant was a 7th grade, 12.5 years old female (see Table 1).

Types of Violence

All contestants mentioned they had been affected by violence. More than half (51.1%) discussed being indirectly exposed to violence and 48.9% reported having a direct and personal encounter with violence. As many as 91 students at one school and as few as 62 in another school reported direct encounters. "Indirect violence" in this analysis refers to violence not directly witnessed or experienced by the individual and includes watching it through the media, hearing it from others, or mentioning it without specifying a direct involvement.

From those reporting a direct encounter ($n = 538$), more students were involved in the role of a witness (38%) than the role of a victim (33%) or a perpetrator (4%). Some students identified violence in a general way without mentioning a direct involvement, for example (with typos not corrected):

I have violence but the bullying violence. So far it has a medium affect on me and my life. When I write about it, it makes me cry 'cause I don't why I get bullied. When they bully me I act like I don't care when I actually do I try to live my life and do I need to do, because life is too short to worry, but I cant help, but think about it at times.

After coding, the types of violence explored were grouped into six categories: 1) personal, 2) interpersonal, 3) bullying, 4) family, 5) community, and 6) media. Although bullying is considered an interpersonal type of violence, the term *bullying*

Table 1 Participating schools and demographics

School code	N	Gender		Grade			Age					Age not given	Sub-group ^a
		Male	Female	6	7	8	11	12	13	14	15		
ALL	1165	479	686	195	565	403	138	404	465	113	3	42	
		41%	59%	17%	48%	35%	12%	34%	40%	10%	<1%	4%	
01A	62	28	34	0	0	^b 60	0	0	37	22	^b 1	2	D
		45%	55%	0%	0%	97%	0%	0%	60%	36%	2%	3%	
02A	349	147	202	93	113	143	66	106	136	32	0	9	M/D
		42%	58%	27%	32%	41%	19%	30%	39%	9%	0%	3%	
02B	73	26	47	72	0	1	53	13	3	0	0	4	M
		36%	64%	99%	0%	1%	73%	18%	4%	0%	0%	6%	
02C	4	2	2	0	4	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	M/D
		50%	50%	0%	100%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%	0%	
02D	91	27	64	0	91	0	0	55	31	3	0	2	M/D
		30%	70%	0%	100%	0%	0%	60%	34%	3%	0%	2%	
03A	26	12	14	0	10	16	0	8	15	2	0	1	
		46%	54%	0%	39%	62%	0%	31%	58%	8%	0%	4%	
04A	51	22	29	3	20	28	1	13	27	5	0	5	M/D
		43%	57%	6%	39%	55%	2%	26%	53%	10%	0%	10%	
04B	41	18	23	0	41	0	0	24	15	1	0	1	M/D
		44%	56%	0%	100%	0%	0%	59%	37%	2%	0%	2%	
05A	20	9	11	0	19	1	0	12	6	0	0	2	
		45%	55%	0%	95%	5%	0%	60%	30%	0%	0%	10%	
06A	245	111	134	0	132	113	0	79	122	35	1	8	
		45%	55%	0%	54%	46%	0%	32%	50%	14%	0%	3%	
07A	11	5	6	0	9	2	0	8	2	1	0	0	D
		46%	55%	0%	82%	18%	0%	73%	18%	9%	0%	0%	
08A	108	34	74	27	42	39	18	37	39	9	1	4	D
		32%	69%	25%	39%	36%	17%	34%	36%	8%	1%	4%	
09A	84	38	46	0	84	0	0	46	31	3	0	4	
		45%	55%	0%	100%	0%	0%	55%	37%	4%	0%	5%	

^b 2 students did not report grade level^a M = Minority School (50% African/Latino students); D = Economically Disadvantaged School (60% free/reduced lunch qualified students)

Bold signifies the total participants per group

(48.8%) was expressed frequently at a higher rate than other types of interpersonal violence (< 20%), and therefore, the PI decided to treat bullying a separate category (See Tables 2 and 3). According to other research, bullying is best categorized independently of other forms of interpersonal violence due to the power differentials and perceptions of the students (Goldbaum et al. 2003; Pergolizzi et al. 2011; Wang and Holcombe 2010).

Within the essays, bullying was the most highly discussed form of violence with nearly half (48.8%; 569) of the students addressing some type of bullying. Nearly one-fourth (23.3%; 271) of the students discussed family violence in their essays, and one-fifth (20.5%; 239) of the students addressed media violence. Interpersonal violence (such as fights with peers, dating violence, gang related violence, etc.) was discussed in 13.5% (157) of the essays. Community violence was addressed in

Table 2 Student roles and violence encounters

Student's roles	Violence encounters		Total N (%)
	Direct N (%)	Indirect N (%)	
Witness	203 (37.9%)	38 (6.8%)	241 (22%)
Victim	175 (32.6%)	8 (1.4%)	183 (16.7%)
No Role	140 (26.1%)	512 (91.4%)	652 (59.5%)
Perpetrator	18 (3.4%)	2 (0.4%)	20 (1.8%)
Total	536 (48.9%)	560 (51.1%)	1096 (94.1%)
Missing			69 (5.9%)
Overall			1165 (100%)

Table 3 Relationship between victim role and types of violence

Types of violence	Victim (<i>n</i> = 183)	Non-victim (<i>n</i> = 982)	χ^2	Cramer's V
Bullying	139 (76%)	430 (43.8%)	63.88**	.234
Family	37 (20.2%)	234 (23.8%)	1.126	.031
Interpersonal	37 (20.2%)	120 (12.2%)	8.46**	.085
Media	30 (16.4%)	209 (21.3%)	2.262	.044
Personal	16 (8.8%)	101 (10.3)	.406	.019
Community	14 (7.7%)	116 (11.8%)	2.696*	.048

***p* < .01; **p* < .05

11.2% (130) of the essays, and personal violence was discussed the least of the recorded types of violence at 10% (117).

The roles of violence were cross-tabulated with the six categories of violence to evaluate any significant relationships. Since students discussed the role of perpetrator in only 20 essays, the numbers were not sufficient for examining this role in relation to the types of violence. Only the roles of victim (183) and witness (241) were evaluated by type of violence (see Table 3 and Table 4). When writing about bullying as the type of violence, significantly more students identified themselves in the role of victim rather than witness or perpetrator. Students identified themselves as the victim of bullying in 76% of the student essays about bullying. Similarly, in other types of interpersonal violence, students identified as the victim significantly more than other identified roles. In the role of witness, students were more likely to discuss witnessing family violence and less likely to address media violence.

Following bullying, the next most frequently discussed types of violence in the student essays were family violence and media violence. Family violence was present in nearly one-fourth (23.3%) of the students' essays with students identifying most often with the role of witness. This finding suggests that students witness family violence more often than other forms of violence and are keenly aware of the violence within their homes (even if they are not actively involved). Media violence was present in one-fifth of the essays (20.5%), but students did not identify with any particular role in media violence, which is likely related to the many ways in which media violence touches their lives. For example, students who choose to play violent video games do not clearly

identify themselves in any one role (not a victim because of their willing engagement, not a witness because of the role as a participant, not a perpetrator because of not creating or distributing the game), but nevertheless are exposed to the violence.

A gender comparison of the data indicated that males were more likely to discuss bullying and community violence within the context of their essays than females. On the other hand, females were more likely to discuss family violence and personal violence. These results make sense in light of other research indicating that boys are more likely to relate to externalized behaviors and violence (such as peer fights or gangs) while girls are more likely to identify with internalized violence both within self (personal harm) and within the family (Moylan et al. 2010; Sternberg et al. 2006; Widom 2000). Boys discussed the presence of weapons in their essays more often than girls did. Females were more likely to discuss protective factors, particularly social support, which aligns with the social development of middle school girls who rely heavily on peers for support and validation (Rose and Rudolph 2006).

Theme 1: Defining Violence in Terms of Bullying

Bullying and violence were interchangeably used in many essays. When defining violence, students often used the terms bullying and violence to define and describe one another, and often shifted back and forth between the two terms. In many of these examples, a student would begin to define and discuss violence, but moved to the topic of bullying when personalizing the issue. In the following example, the student began talking about violence in general and then shifted to bullying,

Table 4 Relationship between witness role and types of violence

	Witness (<i>n</i> = 241)	Non-witness (<i>n</i> = 924)	χ^2	Cramer's V
Bullying	117 (48.5%)	452 (48.9%)	.010	.003
Family	88 (36.5%)	183 (19.8%)	29.9**	.160
Interpersonal	32 (13.3%)	125 (13.5%)	.010	.003
Media	29 (12%)	210 (22.7%)	13.4**	.107
Community	29 (12%)	101 (10.9%)	.234	.014
Personal	20 (8.3%)	97 (10.5%)	1.023	.030

***p* < .01

saying, “People do violence because that person doesn’t like that person. He/she would bully the person he/she doesn’t like....” This quote provides one example among many in which students switched one term for another, indicating that students equate the terms bullying and violence.

By interchanging the term bullying with violence (or vice versa), students may have mislabeled an experience. For example, the student who stated, “my parents bully me” may have actually been discussing an episode of child abuse or aggression. It was clear that students used the term bullying to define or describe other forms of violence, indicating that they lack the terminology and knowledge to clearly articulate their experiences. For example, one student used the definition, “Violence is a type of bullying” while another student stated, “Violence is just like bullying.” Such statements suggest that children ascribe meaning to violence by interchanging a familiar term or experience (bullying) with another (violence). The following student, a 12-year-old female, demonstrates how many students connect violence and bullying:

When I hear the word violence, bullying comes to mind. I think that victims feel tormented and alone with no one to stand up for them. To me, violence means teasing, insulting, and fighting. I define violence as a behavior involving physical force or hurtful words.

The manner in which the students correlate these two concepts suggests a distorted understanding of their definitions, which may be reflective of their experiences. It appears that the students have operationalized these definitions within the framework of their worlds, thus blending the two terms and blurring their distinctions. As illustrated in many of the submitted essays, students applied characteristics of a familiar term (i.e., the teasing and offensive features of bullying) to a similar term (violence). In doing this, students both discounted and highlighted the critical features of bullying. By equating bullying to violence in general, students revealed their ignorance of the differential power as a defining characteristic in bullying. On the other hand, students reinforced the element of bullying as an experience of childhood especially within the school system (Wang et al. 2009). The excessive referencing of bullying throughout the students’ texts reveals clearly that it is an issue on the forefront of both their minds and their experiences. For many students, bullying may be the only form of violence which they have experienced or discussed within the context of their lives. This information is consistent with previous research which indicates that students actively misuse the term bullying and therefore mislabel the related behaviors (Vaillancourt et al. 2008). Perhaps much of this can be related to the increase in bullying awareness over the past decade.

Theme 2: Complex Emotions Related to Violence

It is also clear from this study that middle school students attribute multiple complex emotions to the experience of violence and are likely to respond emotionally to the event. Students discussed their emotional experience most frequently within their personal stories, indicating that their definition, meaning, and experience of violence are founded in the emotive experience. Furthermore, students generally expressed multiple emotions (pain, fear, hurt, anger, etc.) within one concept, thus complicating the emotional experience. For example, one student remarked, “The world, to me at least, is just one big violence and hate-filled rock floating around other rocks in the middle of nothing.” Similarly, a 12-year-old girl described complex emotions when stating, “...violence is a terrible thing that has gotten out of hand. It causes so much pain in peoples lives. It makes me sad...having to deal with violence.” Perhaps the most poignant example comes from another 12-year-old girl who described her emotional response to a tragic and violent event:

I gently lifted my dad’s head and I saw a gun. I cried when I realized that my dad had not only taken his own life and the life of my step mom, but also the life of my unborn baby brother. I was filled with loneliness and fear.

Theme 3: Cycle of Violence

Throughout the essays, the students wrote that violence is part of a cycle continuously promoting the perpetuation of more violence. The highest coded cause of violence was other acts of violence, indicating that many students believe in the concept that violence begets violence. For example, a 13-year-old girl stated, “People nowadays don’t think that they are being violent because thats what there used to. But that’s just the thing, they are hurting people because they have been hurt before!” Similarly, a 12-year-old boy from another district stated, “Youth violence comes from kids that have been bullied themselves. Then these people don’t know how to handle it and bully other kids so then they don’t feel bad.” One perceptive 11-year-old girl noted, “When someone’s heart is hearting [hurting] they don’t know how to react so they act out in negative ways, they tend to try to make others feel bad about themselves because they do not have confidence in themselves.”

Examples such as the previous ones were found throughout the reviewed essays, illustrating that many students held the opinion that violence is a learned behavior. When discussing their own engagement in violent or aggressive behavior, students verbalized intriguing and insightful comments revealing how they assign meaning to the cycle of violence. A 13-year-

old boy stated, “I’ve always tried to stay away from violence, but when people make fun of me I always get mad, and start shouting or fighting.” Another example, from a 12-year-old girl in another district, reflected:

Violence has affected my life by bullying. I was going through a rough time when I was little and I knew I was never the nicest kid around. I didn’t know how I felt exactly. I was upset, angry, and confused. I didn’t even realize what I was doing.

Within this framework of the cycle of violence, students repeatedly looked to past experiences to better understand and make sense of violent behavior. They explicated and justified the actions of the aggressor by outlining a history of earlier exposure to violence. For example, a 12-year-old girl writes, “Kids are getting abused at home and bottling up anger that their parents won’t let them release so they go and take it out on other children at school which is bullying.” In their essays, students recognized that violence is not only the cause of further violence, but also that exposure to violence is a consequence of violence. In the following example, a 13-year-old girl sums up the full cycle of violence from her viewpoint:

When people get confused because there used to be violence and hurt in their lives they think that it’s normal to that’s who they grow up and marry somebody who beats them and forces them to do things.... People nowadays don’t think that they are being violent because that’s what there used to be. But that’s just the thing, they are hurting people because they have been hurt before!

Limitations

The current study was limited to students who participated in DtWT in Region V of Texas. While the perceptions and experiences of the students in this study may not represent middle school students in other regions, the information gathered may instruct future efforts. First, the data provided for this research consists of the essays written by middle school students ages 11–15, which presents several issues for analysis. The essays were submitted directly to the DtWT Challenge, without revisions or formal grading by the teacher. As such, many essays contain spelling and grammatical errors which may impact the message. For example, one of the essays contained the following sentence:

They have all this anger built up inside them so they take it out on people they have sterth over people.

While it appears that the underlined words were intended to be anger and strength, this is not entirely certain.

Grammatical and spelling errors (such as the word *bulling* for *bullying* or interchanging *affected* and *effected*) not only lead to incorrect analysis with the software, but also made the interpretation challenging at times. In addition, many of the submitted essays are handwritten, which can be difficult to read. After being photocopied, these handwritten essays often did not produce clear images, which may have excluded pertinent information.

Another possible limitation, which may also be an important implication, is the inconsistency in students’ personal definitions of violence and bullying. Anti-bullying campaigns and educational programs used within the schools and have significantly raised awareness among students; however, students seem to have generalized the term “bullying” to include other forms of violence (Children’s Safety Network 2011). Within their essays, students commonly referred to mistreatment by parents, family violence, and generalized peer conflicts as bullying.

Third, classroom discussions and the school environment may have influenced the content of the essays since the assignment was given by the classroom teacher. For example, students who discussed suicide in the classroom may be more likely to write about suicide as a form of violence. Procedures and guidelines for writing the essay might have varied by classroom or teacher. During the coding process, it was observed that some classes had distinct formatting and themes within the essays. For example, nearly all the students in one school used two literary references (generally movies and books) to describe and support their examples of violence. Another class included a paragraph which discussed how the world would be different without violence, and each essay ended with a thought-provoking question. These examples indicate that the classroom directions and discussion had an impact on the format, structure, and content of the essays submitted for this study.

Implications

A clear strength of this research project is the intense and powerful information available in the data. This study offers a unique perspective about the experience of violence through the stories of children. The qualitative data allows researchers and professionals to examine the incidence, language, and meaning of violence from in the language of children. The manifest content analysis in this study offered demographic descriptions of the information in the data and gave an overall picture of the ways in which children write about their experience with violence. The qualitative analysis then explored topics and issues in further detail. The end result provides information which will help inform prevention programs and interventions that are specifically relevant to the children involved.

Students in their middle school years are prone to heightened emotions and increased sensitivity (Kagiticbasi 2013), which is consistent with the emotional undertones present throughout the essays. As middle school students respond to the violence with many emotions (including fear, pain, hurt, confusion, anger, etc.), it is important to assess the emotional state of the child in order to most effectively intervene. Fisher (2006) found that a “professional approach” is the most important response so that a child’s essay with violence disclosure is recognized through offering available help (p.65). An essay contest is a way to engage both students and teachers to bring awareness to professional services that aim to help children deal with traumatic events in their lives.

The presence of multiple emotions expressed within one sentence or thought indicate that many of these students struggle with a multitude of emotions surrounding violence and violent events. Fear and anger were two of the most prevalent emotions, and students rarely expressed these feelings independently of other emotions. Pain, hurt, hatred, and despair echoed throughout the students’ emotional expressions as they attempted to make sense of the violence in their lives. This information is critical for social workers when intervening after exposure to violence. Research on evidence-based practice and strength-based practice indicates that a key component to healing is to “begin where the client is” (Hepworth et al. 2013; Howard et al. 2007). In order to effectively do this with children who have been exposed to violence, practitioners need to better understand the complexity of the emotions the children experience. For example, fear may be complicated by feelings of anger and hurt toward the aggressor.

Results from this study add to the growing body of literature examining children’s exposure to violence. As one of the few studies to use children’s voices directly, this study offers unique and distinctive insight into how children perceive the violence to which they are exposed. By understanding this viewpoint, practitioners and educators could better help students articulate and understand their experiences related to violence particularly in relation to bullying experiences. While defining bullying as a form of violence is not a misuse of the terms, defining violence solely within the scope of bullying is. The use of the term bullying to define violence suggests that bullying is ever-present in the lives of middle school students.

Conclusion

The current study was not designed to determine the prevalence of violence within a specific demographic, but rather to examine ways in which middle-school students experience and make sense of the violence surrounding them. Information gleaned from the manifest content analysis directed the thematic qualitative analysis, which examined students’

inferred values, attitudes, and beliefs toward the cycle of violence. This study supports prior research addressing the exposure of children to violence (Finkelhor et al. 2009; Osofsky 1999), the children’s understanding of violence (Buckley et al. 2007; Quinn et al. 2007; Zimmerman et al. 2004), and strengthening both the response to violence and the children’s resiliency when exposed (Finkelhor et al. 2012; Masten 2014; Zolkoski and Bullock 2012). A follow-up phase of this research could use the themes outlined in this study to guide further analysis of the remaining essays for a more comprehensive qualitative review of the data. As many essays responded to directive prompts, further qualitative analysis could use alternate prompts that focus primarily on the causes of and solutions to violence, external or predictive factors, and/or consequences identified by the students. As this DtWT challenge is done annually, results could be evaluated and compared with subsequent years. In the future, a more complex research design using a control group and intervention group could measure the effectiveness of an intervention on the middle school population. With such information about violence as expressed directly by the youth, social workers can more effectively plan interventions for preventing the spillover effect of trauma over to a child’s future life.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure of Interest Authors Ginger Gummelt and Monit Cheung declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report.

Ethical Standards and Informed Consent This study used secondary data from a writing contest. All identifiers were removed prior to the study. Informed Consent was not required. We received IRB approval from both University of Houston (Protocol Number: 14,355–01) and Lamar University (Number: 73,414,139).

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