Discipline ranks as one of the major concerns expressed by the public about schools and
the education system. These concerns are mirrored in the often dramatic coverage by the
media of stories of unruly students, bullying, and violence in classrooms and on playgrounds
around the country. Many are left with the impression that schools are in a state of crisis and
teachers are losing the battle to maintain order.

This paper examines the question of whether there is a crisis in discipline in Australian
schools. It does so within the context of an international perspective on discipline in schools,
and with particular attention to the role of the media in creating and fostering a distorted view
of the situation.

Along with literacy and numeracy achievement levels, school discipline ranks as one of the
major concerns voiced by the public about schools and the school system (House of
Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education & Training, 1994; Slee,
1992; Slee, Owens, Flaherty & Laybourne, 1997). These concerns are echoed in frequent
and often dramatic media reports of disruptive students, bullying, and violence in classrooms
and playgrounds across the country (Carbon, 1993; Fitzclarence & Kenway, 1994; McCraith,
1994; Maslen, 1994; O’Chee, 1998). There is a continuing, and some would say, growing
perception that behaviour problems are endemic in schools, that teachers are struggling to
maintain order, and that school authorities are unable to guarantee the safety of students (McCarthy,
Johnson, Oswald & Lock, 1992).
The Global Picture

Concern for discipline is evident in many Western countries and increasingly in Asian countries as well (Spice, 1997). This concern is reinforced by surveys of public opinion, research on the problems faced by teachers in their day to day work, reported levels of teacher stress, and evidence of the growing number of disaffected and alienated youth in society at large. The annual Gallup Poll of community attitudes toward the public schools in the United States has consistently found discipline to be a major concern, in company with drugs, smoking, teenage pregnancy, fighting, and gangs (Gallup, 1998). A similar national survey of teachers found that fifty-eight percent of respondents reported their lessons were regularly disrupted by student misbehaviour (Langdon, 1997).

In Britain, the figures are very similar, with forty-eight percent of nursery school teachers, fifty percent of primary school teachers, and fifty-five percent of secondary school teachers reporting that they spend an inordinate amount of time on matters of order and control (Merrett & Taylor, 1994). In England and Wales, public anxiety about discipline in schools was so great the government felt it necessary to conduct a major inquiry (Department of Education & Science, 1989), and successive British governments have acted to introduce tougher controls to curb school violence and other forms of disruptive behaviour (Whitehead, 1997).

Concern about disruptive and anti-social behaviour in schools is fuelled by media coverage of incidents of gun-carrying students in U.S. schools, and of recent "thrill" and "revenge" shootings by students as young as eleven years; a recent incident in middle class Littleton, Colorado, resulting in the death of fourteen students and a teacher (Weller, 1999). Since 1993, 173 students have been violently killed in schools across America (Jackman & Parnell, 1999). While it is acknowledged that these incidents are atypical, sporadic and largely unpredictable in nature, media reporting has left the public with the strong impression that all is not well in the nation's schools. The U.S. media has chosen to link the shootings of the past several years as a trend, with throw-away lines such as "an-all-too-familiar story", and "another in a recent trend" exacerbating the fears of many parents about the safety of their children at school (Donohue, Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 1999).

There is a similar feeling of disquiet about student behaviour in Australian schools as evidenced by the findings of the Federal Government's inquiry and report on violence in schools (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education & Training, 1994). The data for Western Australia drawn from the report is indicative of the situation in other states and territories. Over four thousand seven hundred teachers reported having experienced in their career incidences of verbal assault. Over one thousand three hundred teachers had experienced physical violence, and just over six hundred cases of damage to teacher property were reported. Union and public concern about discipline has prompted State Departments of Education to move quickly to develop and institute behaviour management policies and plans to support schools in their efforts to create environments where both teachers and students can function without impediment or intimidation (Izard & Evans, 1996). While these actions are positive and constructive, discipline is still ranked as a major problem by teachers (Smith, 1996), and is widely viewed as a significant contributing factor to teacher stress (Rogers, 1992).

A Closer Look at Discipline Problems in Schools

The emotionally charged and highly politicized reaction to discipline problems in schools has, for many observers, contributed to a distorted view of the situation which exists in schools today:
Public discussion and debate is frequently characterised by comments based on popular opinion, hearsay, and isolated incidents of a dramatic and newsworthy nature, rather than informed knowledge regarding the types of discipline issues which prevent learning from taking place in schools. (Johnson, Oswald & Adey, 1993, p. 289)

While acknowledging that there are problems, many commentators and researchers have set out to examine more closely the specific nature of the problem confronting schools, and teachers in particular. The picture presented by these investigations and analyses is a very different one to that which captures news headlines and which motivates politicians and the public to call for action. A brief review of some of these investigations, both in Australia and abroad, follows.

The so-called Elton Report on discipline in schools in England and Wales was the product of a national inquiry set up in response to growing public dissatisfaction about discipline in schools (Department of Education & Science, 1989). The findings of that report were enlightening, and for many, surprising. While there was evidence of widespread concern among teachers about disruptive student behaviour, and instances of violent and otherwise criminal behaviour were reported, the problems which confronted most teachers were relatively minor in nature. It was the continuous nature and cumulative effect of these problems, rather than their magnitude, which irritated, frustrated, and ultimately exhausted teachers (Department of Education & Science, 1989). This inquiry confirmed the findings of earlier small scale investigations of the kinds of student behaviour problems teachers encountered in their day to day work in the classroom. Across these studies, the types of behaviours identified as troublesome to teachers were: "talking out of turn”, "not listening”, "poor concentration”, "hindering others”, lack of manners, rudeness”, "clowning”, and "restlessness" (Houghton, Wheldall & Merrett, 1988; Jones, Charlton & Wilkin, 1995; Lawrence & Stead, 1986; Merrett & Wheldall, 1984; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). None of these behaviours in themselves would be considered seriously disruptive by most authorities, and even their collective impact would hardly be headline news.

The data which is often used to dramatise the state of discipline in U.S. schools can, when analyzed objectively, provide a more moderate assessment of the severity of behaviour problems in schools in that country. This is particularly the case with the results of the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of community attitudes towards the public schools (Gallup, 1998). While in 1998, as in preceding years, discipline was viewed as a problem by over three-quarters of respondents, it was just one of many problems the public sees as besetting schools. Discipline was rated as the most serious problem by just fourteen percent of those surveyed. Likewise, fighting, violence, and gangs were considered by only fifteen percent of respondents as the biggest challenge facing schools.
The findings from teacher surveys are even more informative. The Fourth Phi Delta Kappa Poll of teachers’ attitudes towards the public schools found that just two percent of teachers reported physical attacks on themselves, colleagues, or students; two percent reported theft of property by force or the use of weapons; five percent indicated that they had experience of students carrying weapons; and fifteen percent reported drug use by students at school (Langdon, 1997). The poll concluded that the more dramatic, news-making incidences of violence and crime in schools were relatively uncommon and tended to be isolated to urban, disadvantaged schools, where such incidents were also prevalent in the broader community. For the vast majority of teachers in U.S. schools, first-hand experience of weapon carrying students, assault, theft, extortion, and drug use is very rare.

It is interesting to note that the Phi Delta Kappa survey of teachers has actually shown a decrease in many of the areas which have been a concern to teachers and parents. The level of truancy, vandalism, theft of school property, sexual activity and alcohol consumption at school has dropped since 1984. There has also been a reported decrease in the theft of personal property and in the selling of drugs at school since 1989 (Langdon, 1997).

**Discipline in Australian Schools**

Three Australian studies have directly focussed on the prevalence and nature of behaviour problems in primary schools. Unfortunately there is a dearth of information about the situation in secondary schools.

Fields (1986) surveyed thirty teachers in a Queensland provincial city. The teachers were asked to identify and describe the student from their class who presented the most difficulty in respect of discipline and control. Each teacher then completed a teacher rating scale, the Walker Problem Behaviour Identification Checklist (WPBIC) (Walker, 1970), on the selected student. In addition to the rating scale, the teachers were asked to list the specific behaviours which the child exhibited and which were of most concern to them in the classroom. Nine of the thirty students selected as presenting troublesome behaviour were found to be behaviour disordered based on the criteria employed in the WPBIC instrument. However, across the entire sample, the behaviours found to be of most concern to teachers were:

- Needs constant supervision.
- Does not listen to directions/instructions.
- Continually plays with pens, pencils, and other items of equipment.
- Needs to be "pushed" to get started on lesson tasks.
- Talking, whispering, giggling, laughing.
- Unmotivated.
- Easily distracted.
- Continually seeks attention.

Fields concluded that despite focussing on the most troublesome student in the class, a procedure which would bias the findings towards more serious types of inappropriate behaviour, the results of the investigation supported the view that:

...the great majority of disruptive behaviour in primary classrooms is of a mild nature relating to poor attention, persistent infringement of class rules and procedures and inconsistent on-task
behaviour. (Fields, 1986, p. 56)

In a study of preschool and primary school teachers in the northern suburbs of Brisbane, Burke, Jarman & Whitmore (1994) gathered information about the frequency of occurrence and severity of ten key "incidents" of disruptive and anti-social behaviour in the classroom and in the playground. The incidents specific to the classroom environment were: verbal disruption, physical disruption, unwelcomed teasing, displays of inadequacy, and verbal and physical resistance. The most frequently occurring disruptive behaviour reported by the teachers in this study were verbal disruptions, defined as "inappropriate student talk" and "interrupting the teacher or another student". The second most frequently occurring behaviour was physical disruption, followed by verbal or physical resistance and unwelcomed teasing. The study's authors noted the similarity of their findings to studies in Britain on teacher reported troublesome behaviour (see earlier discussion). They also made the point that none of the most frequently occurring disruptive and anti-social behaviours in the classroom were in any way physically threatening to the teacher or students in the classroom.

An extensive survey of teacher perceptions of discipline problems in South Australian primary schools was conducted in 1990 (Johnson, Oswald & Adey, 1993). One thousand two hundred teachers in Adelaide were surveyed. These teachers were asked to report the occurrence of specific types of discipline problems in their classrooms. Using the data for problems occurring daily or almost daily, it was found that both verbal abuse and physical aggression to teachers was very rare. Physical aggression directed at teachers by students was reported by 0.0 percent of junior primary teachers (Grades 1 - 3), and 0.3 percent of primary teachers (Grades 4 - 7). Verbal abuse of teachers was reported by 0.7 percent of the junior primary teachers surveyed, and by 1.8 percent of the primary teachers. Physical aggression was evident in the schools used in the study but it was directed at other students and occurred mostly outside of the classroom.

The discipline problems most often reported by junior primary teachers as occurring on a daily or almost daily basis were: hindering other pupils (34.2%), idleness and work avoidance (30.1%), talking out of turn (28.1%), infringing class rules (25.8%), not being punctual (25.2%), and making unnecessary noise (25.2%). The findings for primary teachers were very similar, with hindering other pupils reported most frequently (39.3%), followed by idleness and work avoidance (33.1%), talking out of turn (30.5%), infringing class rules (28.7%), making unnecessary noise (27.7%), and getting out of seat (25.9%).

The most telling statistic from the research, however, was that about 80 percent of teachers reported that discipline problems both inside and outside the classroom were not very serious or not a problem at all. In line with British investigations and the studies by Fields (1986) and Burke et al (1994) the problems encountered by most teachers were "relatively minor" in nature and by and large manageable (Johnson et al. 1993, p 300). Johnson and his fellow researchers concluded with the following observation about discipline in Australian schools:

...it is reasonable to suggest that the perceptions of these teachers are more positive than those represented in the popular media and in some academic circles ... While teachers report difficulties with some individuals and
classes, they do not generalise these problems
to the entire school system in ways that the media
often does. This study ...can serve to reassure
the wider community of the continued orderly
functioning of government primary and junior
primary schools. (Johnson, Oswald & Adey,
1993, pp . 303 - 304)

One other Australian study of relevance to our understanding of student behaviour is worthy
of mention here. A study by Hart, Wearing & Conn (1995) looked at the evaluation
conducted on the Whole School Approach to Discipline & Student Welfare (WSADSW)
program which was implemented in Victorian schools between 1989 and 1991. The program
was based on the assumption that student misbehaviour was a major contributing factor to
teacher stress. It aimed to institute, in schools, comprehensive discipline policies and plans
which were the product of collaboration between all stakeholders in the broad school
community. It was believed that the development and implementation of such policies and
plans would act to reduce discipline problems in schools and in turn have a positive impact
on teacher stress levels.

A total of 4,072 primary and secondary teachers participated in the evaluation of WSADSW.
Along with a number of other data gathering measures the teachers were asked to indicate
on a 100-point scale the percentage of time they spent dealing with student discipline.
Responses ranged from 0 to 80 percent with a mean of 24.5 percent, a figure which is
considerably less than for similar investigations conducted in Britain and in the United States
(Langdon, 1997; Merrett & Taylor, 1994).

While it is generally believed that student misbehaviour is one of the major causes of
psychological distress experienced by teachers (Borg, 1990), the Hart et al. (1995) findings
did not support this view. Hart and his colleagues showed that stressors due to student
misbehaviour accounted for less than 10 percent of the variance in teachers' levels of
psychological distress. They concluded that while student misbehaviour may make teachers
feel anxious, uncomfortable, and even distressed, most teachers were able to cope with
these experiences and that these feelings would have little long-term impact on overall
levels of psychological distress.

The above picture of the status of discipline in schools presented by these studies is not the
one which is most often conveyed by the media in this country, in the United Kingdom, and
in the United States. While we have come to expect and to some extent to accept media
hype and sensationalist reporting, there are very real dangers in allowing distorted images of
the schools and schooling to be promulgated unchallenged. The influence of the media in
relation to educational issues, and in particular in relation to the issue of school discipline, is
discussed in the final section of this paper.
Media Influence

In a recent article in "The School Administrator" David Berliner and Bruce Biddle were critical of what they say is the often distorted and biased view of public schools presented in the media (Berliner & Biddle, 1998). In the opinion of these educators the press, in particular, is:

- Biased, and reports only the negative side of news stories.
- Presents a too simplistic and incomplete view of educational problems and issues.
- Is more critical of schools in its editorial policies than it is complementary.
- Displays a lack of understanding of the complexity of the educational process in contemporary society.
- Shows an "abysmal" lack of understanding of statistics and research, and as a result is limited in its capacity to accurately interpret data produced by and about the education system.

While the Berliner and Biddle report was specifically directed at the media in the U.S., there is nothing to suggest that similar criticisms should not be leveled at the Australian media.

Given the influence of the media in informing and shaping public opinion, it should be a major concern to educators that the press and other elements of the media are seemingly so ill-prepared to fully, accurately, and fairly report on educational events and issues.

One of the implications of distorted reporting by the media is that politicians and policymakers may be pressured into actions which are ultimately not in the best interests of constituents. Media coverage of the recent student shootings in U.S. schools is a good example of the impact of the media on public perceptions and on public policy making. Ignoring other sources of data about crime and violence in the nation's public schools, U.S. policy makers have reacted to public fears about the safety of students with a range of measures, many of which can best be described as poorly conceived, some even potentially harmful. Three measures stand out as being particularly problematic. These include Federal government funding for more police officers in schools, the axing of after-school programs, and the broadening of parameters for school expulsions and suspensions.

The police presence in schools is premised on the understanding that schools are unsafe environments and that such a presence will act as a deterrent to the possession of weapons and to violence on the school campus. This initiative has been taken despite the knowledge that ninety-nine percent of juvenile homicides occur outside the school grounds, and that there is a one in a million chance of U.S. students suffering a school-associated violent death (interpreted as a homicide or a suicide) ((Donohue, Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 1998).

While the presence of police officers in schools provides an increased measure of security and safety to students and teachers, a better grasp of the available data for juvenile deaths and crime would suggest resources might be better allocated elsewhere. Ninety percent of all childhood deaths occur in and around the home - not at school (Hinelang Criminal Justice Research Center, 1997). Juvenile homicide is more likely to be perpetrated by adults, not fellow students; and peak hours for juvenile shootings, delinquency, and other forms of criminal behaviour are the four hours following the end of the school day, rarely are such crimes committed during school hours (Donohue et al. 1998). Little wonder then that many educators and community workers are perplexed at calls to end after-school programs, programs that provide both recreational and academic activities, and a safe haven for students who would, in many instances, be without parental supervision and wandering the streets. The capacity of after-school programs to prevent juvenile delinquency is widely recognized by school and welfare agencies, but seemingly has little appeal to the media,
and is not viewed by politicians as a strategy which would allay the fears of the community about student safety.

Several commentators have noticed the broadening of expulsion and suspension criteria in many U.S. schools in recent years (Donohue et al. 1998). Normally restricted to the most serious forms of misbehaviour, including criminal behaviour, principals are being pressured to exclude students for relatively trivial matters such as pranks and hoaxes, to placate parents, many of whom have irrational fears about the dangers posed to their children by other students. These responses are not confined to the U.S. Twelve high school students were suspended from N.S.W. schools for making death threats against teachers and classmates in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings (Nason, 1999). While the N.S.W. Education Minister, John Aquilina, admitted that the incidents were most likely pranks and that the students had no intentions of carrying out their threats, he had no regrets that the suspensions were imposed (Harris, 1999).

Criminologists warn against the use of exclusions for crime control unless there is evidence of a real threat. Outside the school environment and often unsupervised, expelled or suspended students can see themselves as social misfits and victims of an authoritarian regime. Resentment may build up, increasing the likelihood of participation in more serious forms of delinquency and anti-social behaviour (Donohue et al. 1998).

Despite the very real and justifiable concern the public, educators, and legislators have expressed about the shooting incidents in American schools, many observers in the U.S. and elsewhere are troubled by the heavy-handed tactics of authorities in response to the problem. The use of police and security guards during school hours, and the installation of metal detectors have been reluctantly accepted as necessary in many schools in the U.S. More controversial, intrusive, and potentially abusive, are procedures such as random bag searches, strip searches, and the use of undercover agents in schools to control weapons and to stem the trafficking of drugs. Fear of a breakdown in law and order in schools underpins the continued legality of corporal punishment in twenty-three states in the U.S. The same fear creates an environment where tacit approval is given to verbal assaults on students by teachers and other school personnel; actions which in many instances constitutes psychological maltreatment (Hyman, Irwin & Perone, 1998). The American Civil Liberties Union has begun to express concern about what it perceives as a conservative backlash against "subversive" elements in the nation's schools (Lusetich, 1999, p 15). Targeted are disaffected school children who are subjected to interrogation, reprimand, and suspension, for their lack of conformity in the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, the literature they read, and the opinions they express.

In an article entitled "Give Us This Day Our Daily Dread - Manufacturing Crises in Education" Gregory Cizek provides a sobering account of how educational issues are often framed as crises (Cizek, 1999). There are those who subscribe to this process in the belief that this is the only way to ensure an audience for their concerns and the promise of speedy action. There are others whose motives are more malevolent, neoconservative groups who dismiss genuine research, and who misuse evidence to further their agendas. Often these groups are unwittingly or unwittingly abetted by the media who are seemingly attracted to extremist and more dramatic interpretations of social issues and problems (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). In the middle is the public who are both puzzled and disturbed about what is happening in the schools.

**Conclusion**

In highlighting the more dramatic but less widespread and less frequently occurring types of student misbehaviour, the media has pressured politicians and policy makers to direct
attention and resources to crisis management strategies involving expulsions, and the creation of segregated educational facilities to house and presumably rehabilitate the worst offenders (Griffith, 1997). These responses are arguably necessary for some students, but are inappropriate for the majority of problem behaviour students. Further, they help foster a mindset that behaviour management is best achieved by withdrawal, exclusion, and segregation at a time when so much of the education system and the curriculum in this country is focussed on inclusion and the recognition and accommodation of students from diverse backgrounds and with a great variety of social and educational needs.

Australia is a relatively safe country and its schools have been spared much of the violence and unrest that we have witnessed in U.S. and British schools over the past several decades. We have the opportunity to learn from the experiences abroad and to avoid inappropriate, hastily conceived, and excessive responses to educational and social problems. To do this, educators, policy makers, politicians, and the media, need to see problems in our schools less as crises and more as challenges which can be successfully worked through.
References


Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools', *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80 (1), 41 - 58.


