

Response to the Report to Birmingham LEA: Evaluation of Checkpoints for Schools (Shaughnessy & Jennifer, 2004)

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In setting the project in a context, the authors refer to the finding that '83 per cent of teachers thought that violence was a serious threat to staff morale and 40 per cent considered that schools were no longer safe places in which to work' (*Personal Safety and Violence in Schools*, Gill and Hearnshaw, 1997). That study implied a degree of anti-social attitudes and behaviour that any civilized society must consider unacceptable.

The *Report to Birmingham* (2004, p4) finds that "quantitative results suggest that *Checkpoints For Schools* is successfully addressing overt behaviours such as hitting, tripping or shouting, but is less successful in influencing emotions and internal processes such as feeling unhappy and acts as a springboard for action on practical issues such as self-auditing, raising and increasing self-awareness". The research was carried out in an LEA committed to a "continuum of support through inclusion", (p.6) entitling students to "a school experience free from disruption and bullying" (p.6): clearly a suitable test-bed for *Checkpoints*. A school is a community and, like any other social grouping, depends on the quality of its relationships to function well. Aggression, fear and physical or emotional harm to the individual endanger the community as a whole. For the purposes of the *Checkpoints* project, the definition of violence adopted was "behaviour which causes physical or psychological harm" and it is in the latter category that *Checkpoints* is seen to be less effective. The emphasis of *Checkpoints* is firmly on physical behaviour. However, since the *physical* and the *psychological* cannot be disassociated entirely, any attempt to measure the harm done in the name of either, must be an uncertain science.

The authors of the report, in drawing attention to the limitations of the study, also reveal the complexity of its construction and interpretation. Lengthening the 'relatively short cycle', for example, might suggest that it would be more productive to study the cohort – particularly if this spans Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 – rather than the school. Every school is unique and the 'baseline measures' might not suit every school. Criteria set by individual schools for their own purposes as described in *How to Stop Bullying* (Varnava, 2003, Chapter 4) have proved effective as a valuable self-auditing device, contrasting sharply with external, judgemental evaluations as formed, for example, by OfSTED. Although 'the study schools were invited to implement and use *Checkpoints* in an unspecified way' (p.23), the 'different approaches of each school' (p.78) are seen as a limitation of the study. Differences were predictable, given the non-prescriptive nature of *Checkpoints*. The possibility that 'other interventions and initiatives' (p.78) might affect the study, further supports an approach in which the exercise is customized to the individual school taking into account its particular circumstances. The study highlights the important factor of the 'readiness' of each school to undergo change, a factor which bears heavily on the effectiveness of *Checkpoints*. No doubt, levels of commitment to the process varied considerably. From case studies, it can also be concluded that continuity and internal monitoring were necessary.

The research set out to evaluate the effectiveness of *Checkpoints*, concluding that '*the analysis of the results from the My Life in School Checklist Arora, 1987) suggests that Checkpoints For Schools (Varnava, 2000) had a positive impact on bullying and aggressive behaviours in the study schools*' (p.23). This is a positive outcome in considering *Checkpoints* as an appropriate resource both for schools where standards of behaviour are an issue and schools prepared to address the issue to raise awareness of the wider social problem. In conclusion, the study is of considerable practical value in informing a revision of *Checkpoints*, particularly in respect of the guidance to users and the addition of suggestions for consolidation and further development.