CHAPTER

13

VISIONARY – A EUROPEAN INTERNET PORTAL ON VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract: The VISIONARY project is a European Commission-sponsored activity involving five European countries to create international and country-specific Internet portals on violence prevention in schools. This paper describes the structure of the Internet portals, which contain information on definitions, prevalence and sources of violence in schools in participating countries, a database of links to Web sites, current news and a discussion forum. It also describes a publication on the VISIONARY project, which presents an overview of Internet sources on violence and violence prevention in schools.

Introduction

In many countries, violence in schools and juvenile violence and crime have become major concerns. Incidents such as the massacre in Erfurt, Germany in 2002, in which 18 people were killed, and teenage suicides due to bullying in Scotland in 2002, have increased public awareness of these issues.

In recent years, substantial efforts have been made – by the European Commission (EC), national governments, communities, public institutions, schools and others – to develop and implement programmes and activities that address school bullying and violence. International initiatives include the EC CONNECT UK-001 project on violence in schools (see Smith in this publication; Smith, 2003) and the Nature and Prevention of Bullying project by the European Training and Mobility of Researchers Programme (TMR) (Goldsmiths College, 1998). A number of national programmes have also been launched. Practitioners now have access to a wide range of approaches, materials and experience in this area.

The Internet adds another dimension to the issue. It not only provides greater access to information and materials, but also allows users to interact with one another through the use of discussion forums, mailing lists and chat rooms. The challenge is *not* to locate information, but rather to synthesise the huge range of concepts, programmes and materials available.

VISIONARY project

The VISIONARY project was supported by the EC as part of the Socrates/Minerva programme (The Minerva Action, n.d.). The purpose of the project was to create an international Internet portal for violence prevention in schools in each country participating in the project: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

The objective of this project was to collect and structure information available on the Internet and to facilitate the search for relevant information, *not* to develop new concepts or approaches on violence in schools. A book on violence and violence prevention in schools in all five participating countries was also published, with a focus on resources available on the Internet (Jäger, Bradley and Rasmussen, 2003). The VISIONARY Internet portal and publication are two complementary components of a dissemination strategy. While Web sites are scanned for information and can be regularly updated and accessed by a number of users, books can provide a useful springboard for further research into relevant areas.

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The broad aim of the project is to use these two media to create an environment that enables users and readers in different countries and with different experiences to learn from one other. The Web site provides users with a comprehensive collection of information, which can serve as a starting point for their own work or further searches of information. National and international dialogue and interaction are also encouraged through discussion forums and mailing lists.

VISIONARY Internet portal

The international VISIONARY portal is available at the following addresses:

- *www.violence-in-school.info.*

- *www.violence-prevention-in-school.info.*

Country-specific URLs are:

- *www.mobs.dk* (Danish site).

- *www.gewalt-in-der-schule.info* (German site).

- *www.violence-in-school-uk.info* (United Kingdom site).

The VISIONARY portal is divided into four main sections – background, information, communication and VISIONARY – each of which comprise several sub-sections. The principal areas of the site are available in Danish, Finnish, German and Portuguese, and contain links that enable users to browse easily from one language to another. Table 13.1 presents an overview of the Web site's structure.

Table 13.1. Structure of the VISIONARY Internet portal

Background	Information	Communication	VISIONARY
Violence in schools	News	Discussion forum	Project
	Link collection	Mailing list	Partners
	Categories	Contact us	Evaluation report
	Search engine		Sponsors
	The VISIONARY book		

A description of some of the sections and sub-sections of the Web site are presented in greater detail below.

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Background

The "Background" section reveals the differences and similarities between the five participating countries. It presents an overview of common tendencies in terms of the definitions, prevalence and sources of violence in schools based on national and international studies (*e.g.* Pfeiffer, 1998; Schäfer and Korn, 2001), as discussed in greater detail below. Excerpts from the articles are presented in the "International" sub-section of the background section (Figure 13.1).

Figure 13.1. "Background" section of the VISIONARY Web site
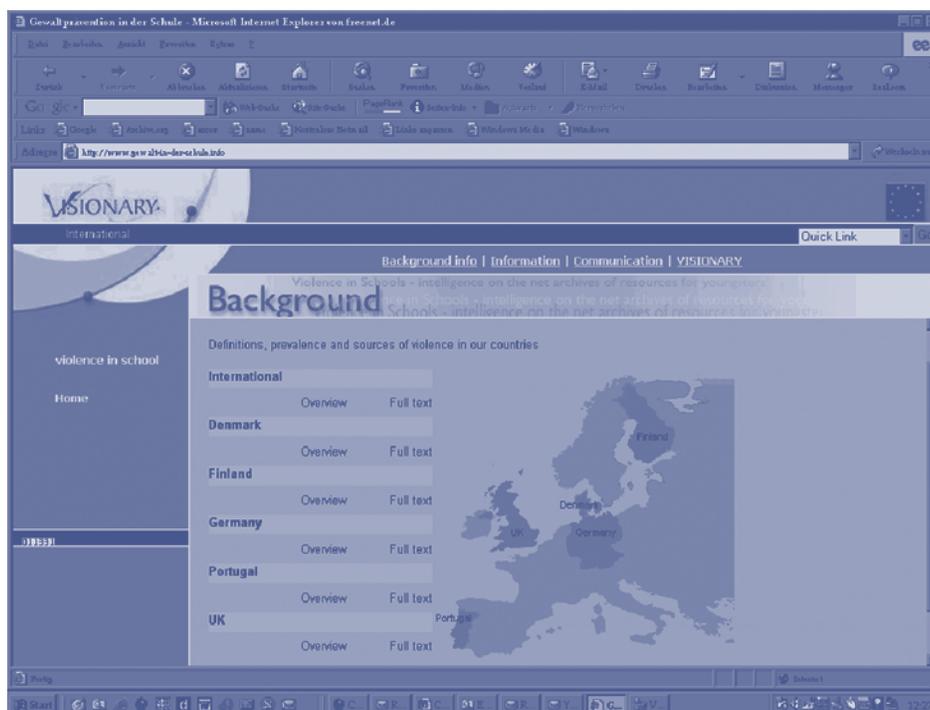
Definition of violence in schools

● There is no common definition of violence in schools in participating countries.

● "Violence" is often used with other terms describing similar phenomena, such as "bullying" or "aggression". It represents a specific kind of disciplinary problem in schools; many problems emerge in a pedagogical context and are related to rules, teaching methodologies and group management.

Prevalence of violence in schools

- National differences concerning definitions, instruments and methodologies permit few comparisons between countries.

- Although there has been a clear increase in juvenile violence, the level of violence in schools has only slightly increased, if at all.

- The most typical form of violence in schools is verbal aggression, and serious incidents rarely occur.

Sources of violence in schools

- A number of studies reveal that the development of both violent behaviour and behaviour that puts students at risk of victimisation do not derive from one but several sources that interact in a complex way. Thus, programmes or activities that combat aggressive or violent behaviour in schools should focus on multiple rather than single sources.

- Violent behaviour is associated with such factors as parental violence, a low socio-economic background, violent peer groups and ineffective schools.

- Common characteristics of potential victims include restrictive education, isolation in class and defensive behaviour.
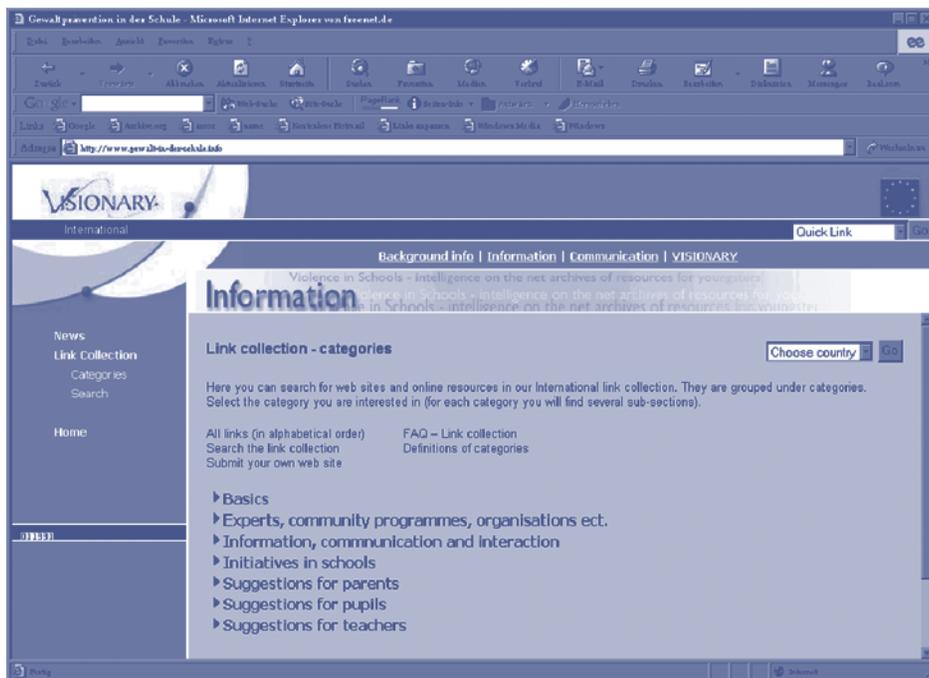
Link collection

The international and national link collections (Figure 13.2) contain links to Web sites on violence and violence prevention in schools. Users can locate information using a search engine, which scans international and national databases, or using a system of categories.

The number of Web sites on this topic is constantly growing, making it increasingly difficult to obtain an overview of the projects, materials and practical advice available. To present links in a coherent way, a system of categories was developed. Although these categories are not exhaustive, six top-level categories serve to orientate the user. Lower-level categories and other country-specific categories are also used.

The national link collection contains links to Web sites in each country's national language. The international link collection contains links to selected Web sites from all over the world; it is available in English and at least one other language.

The following categories are available in the international link (IL) and national link (NL) collections:

- *Basics*. Research and science (IL), interviews (NL) and other introductory texts (NL).

- *Experts, community programmes, organisations*. Conferences (IL), organisations/ associations/charities (IL), community programmes (for specific regions/cities) (NL), experts (NL) and integrated approaches (NL).

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Figure 13.2. "Link collection" sub-section of the VISIONARY Web site

- *Information, communication and interaction.* Audio-visual materials (IL), link collections (IL), portals (IL), publications and literature (IL), calendar of events (NL), communication channels (NL), games (NL) and news (NL).

- *Initiatives in schools.* Measures to enhance the school climate (IL), mediation (IL), networking (IL), whole-school projects (IL), monitoring and supervision (NL), rules and sanctions (NL), surveys (NL), advice for bullies (NL), advice for students in high-risk groups (NL) and advice for victims of violence (NL).

- *Suggestions for parents.* Literature and materials (IL), help and advice (NL), communication channels and on-line sources of information (NL), and courses and training (NL).

- *Suggestions for pupils.* Literature and materials (IL), help and advice (IL), communication channels and on-line sources of information, and courses and training (NL).

- *Suggestions for teachers.* Literature and materials (IL), help and advice (IL), communication channels and on-line sources of information (IL), lesson plans and teaching concepts (IL), and courses and training (NL).

News

The "News" sub-section (Figure 13.3) includes the latest news items on violence and bullying in schools, juvenile violence, crime, and related fields from the search results of international news portals such as Yahoo!, Worldnews.com, Reuters, BBC and CNN, and of national news portals such as idw-online in Germany. It thus presents current national and world-wide discussions and trends in violence prevention. The "News" sub-section also has an on-line registration form so that users can post their own contributions.

**Figure 13.3. "News" sub-section of the VISIONARY Web site**
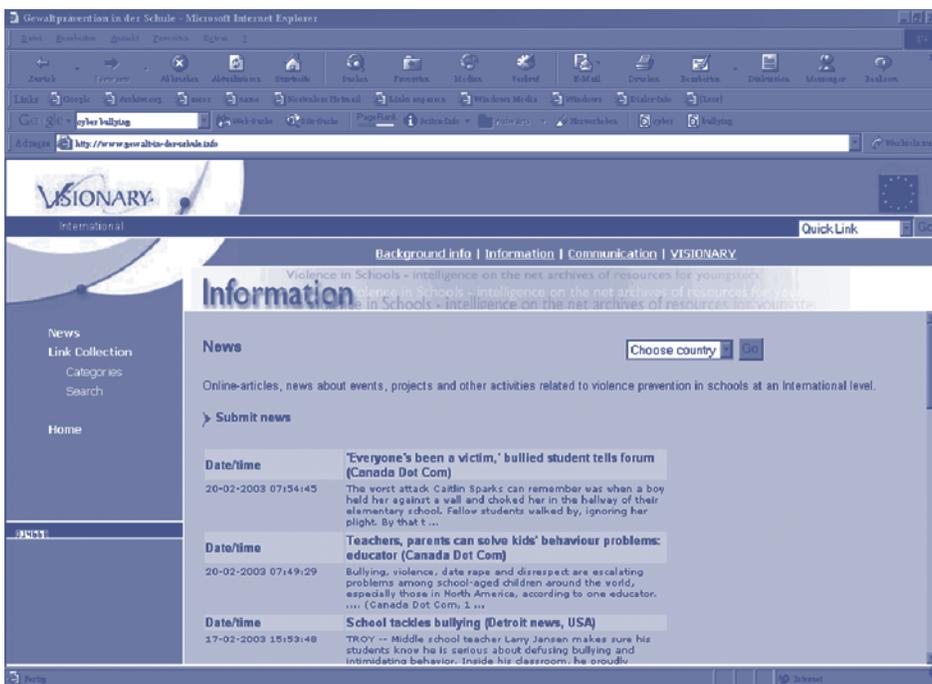
Discussion forum

A discussion forum was set up on both international and national Web sites (Figure 13.4). The concept, target group and issues discussed in the different national forums vary across countries, depending on such factors as users' needs and the existence of other forums in the country. For example, the German forum addresses teachers, as a number of forums already exist for students. It also directs users wanting to discuss more specific problems to other discussion forums.

Other sections of the Web site

Figure 13.4. "Discussion forum" sub-section of the VISIONARY Web site
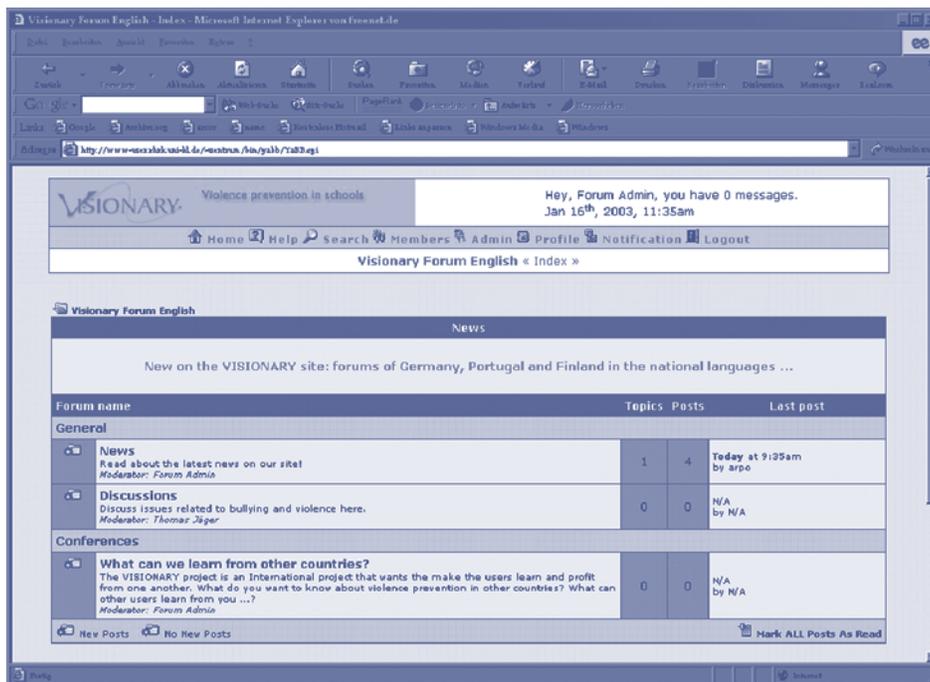
The main VISIONARY portal comprises the following sub-sections:

• A mailing list is available for all registered users.

• "Project" describes the background, aims and future work of the project.

• "Partners" provides information about the institutes involved in the project and other project members.

• "VISIONARY book" provides a short description of the publication's contents, in addition to a list of all links mentioned in the book. As existing Web sites are constantly changing, new sites are created and others are taken off-line, this sub-section is updated regularly and often archived.

VISIONARY book

A sub-section of the VISIONARY Web site is dedicated to the book *Violence Prevention in Schools Using the Internet: A European Perspective*. The VISIONARY publication (Figure 13.5) provides an overview of violence and violence prevention in schools in

participating countries, with an emphasis on sources that can be found on the Internet. The aim of the book is to provide readers with a starting point and to stimulate them to continue their research on violence prevention in schools on the Internet, preferably on the VISIONARY Web site. As mentioned above, in each chapter of the book, links to the national and international collections are cited.

Users of the portal

Since its release in autumn 2002, the sites of the VISIONARY portal have had more than 300 000 hits from users from more than 100 countries. The majority of users are from English-speaking countries (mainly the United States) and the five partner countries, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom. In fact, the German version of the VISIONARY portal is one of the most important and successful Web sites on violence prevention in schools (Weber, 2003).

Feedback from users and evaluation data indicate that the VISIONARY portal is mainly used by teachers, parents, students, researchers and experts. Tracking data also reveal that the portal is widely used by universities, national and local governments, schools, and companies.

An on-line questionnaire of 139 users was also conducted. When asked about their primary motivations for using the VISIONARY portal, 86 users responded that they did so to "get a general overview about the topic",

Figure 13.5. The VISIONARY publication

Thomas Jäger,
Claire Bradley &
Marlene Rasmussen (Eds.)
Violence Prevention in School
using the Internet: A European Perspective

49 replied to "search for specific information/concepts/materials etc.", 39 responded to "find up-to-date news about events, new publications, etc.", 38 to "communicate with other users" and 32 to "find concrete help and advice in order to solve problems".

Tracking data also revealed that most users – of both international and national link collections – are interested in the link collection and the news sections. Other sections of the portal, such as the mailing lists, and the on-line-registration form, have not been visited often. The areas most frequented tend to be those to which national teams have devoted the most time and energy. In the German version of the VISIONARY portal, for example, the most visited sections are the German link collection and the news section. Other teams, such as Denmark and Finland, have focused their work on encouraging

communication between users. Therefore, in the Danish and the Finnish versions of the VISIONARY portal, forums are more frequently used than the news section.

In summary, the VISIONARY portal serves most often as an information platform for users searching for links to Web sites or news on violence prevention in schools. A considerable number of users – especially in Denmark and Finland – are also interested in using the portal as a communication tool.

One of the most interesting user issues concerned the use of national versions of the VISIONARY portal by other countries. Tracking data revealed that users of the Danish and Finnish portals mainly come from countries where the respective language is spoken or understood. The German portal is mainly accessed by people from Austria, Germany and Switzerland, although a considerable number of users were from Denmark, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The Portuguese portal was mostly accessed by users in Portugal, and some from Brazil. The United Kingdom and international portals (in English) were accessed by people from all over the world.

Tracking data and feedback from users suggest that a broad international audience is interested in learning more about other countries' approaches. An important long-term goal of the VISIONARY project is to include more countries and make the portal available in other languages. A Spanish or French version of the VISIONARY portal, for example, would create an even larger audience.

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