

HOW SHOULD EDUCATORS THINK ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS?

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According to the report, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*, there were 31 homicides and 6 suicides of school-age youth in schools in the year 2012-2013. To put this in perspective, this is one death for every 1.5 million students (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016, p. 20). Of all homicides of children, only 2.6% occur in schools, and only 0.4% of suicides occur in schools (p. 21). Students were forty times less likely to be killed within school than outside of school. These statistics have been stable over the last twenty years (p. 21). In the year 2014, total victimization rates, a measure which includes theft and assault, declined substantially both within schools (a decline of 82%) and outside of schools (a decline of 86%) (p. 24). Some challenges do remain with respect to certain forms of violence, theft, bullying, and intimidation (Mayer & Furlong, 2010, p. 24). Still, schools remain one of the safest places for children to be.

At the same time, a particular type of violence has been gaining prominence over the past 50 years, a type of violence known to law enforcement as “targeted school shootings.” These are shootings in which a school is chosen deliberately as the place of gun violence rather than a shooting that coincidentally occurs on school grounds (e.g., gang violence that spills over onto a school playground). The locations of targeted school shootings are iconic and infamous in American culture: Jonesboro (1998), Columbine (1999), Virginia Tech (2007), Sandy Hook (2012), and so forth. According to a report that was co-authored by the U.S. Secret Service and the Department of Education, there were 5 incidents of targeted school shootings in the 1970s. In the 1990s, there were 28 (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). According to

the *Wikipedia* page that tracks school shootings, one can count 60 school shootings between 2000-2009, and 127 so far between 2010-2016. There could be many reasons for this apparent increase. No doubt, there is simply now more information, easily available, about these incidents than in decades past. This might account for some of the increase. Still, it is hard not to see this as a worrying trend.

In order to think clearly about school shootings, educators need to entertain two seemingly opposite ideas at the same time: first, that schools are among the safest places for youth and children to be, and, second, that one particular type of violence, targeted school gun violence, is a problem that should capture our attention.

It is serious, of course, because the loss of even one student is tragic, particularly when schools should be places of growth, nurture, and protection. It is not simply that youth are killed or maimed in these tragic but rare incidents, however; it is also the shadow these shootings cast across communities and public schools, generally. As the Secret Service report puts it, any school shooting has “a tremendous and lasting effect on the school in which it occurred, the surrounding community, and the nation as a whole” (Vossekuil et al, 2002, p. i). These shootings have a symbolic impact that transcend their still relatively rare occurrence.

In this report, I suggest how educators can think about school shootings in context with the larger goals, purposes, and lived experiences of American schooling. The purpose is to help teachers and administrators think about school shootings *as educators*, rather than from a standpoint outside of education. In other words, the

point is to explore how to think about school shootings within the realm of student learning and experiences -- a place that teachers and school administrators can shape directly. Before exploring an educator's approach, it is helpful to compare this to other approaches to schools shootings, namely, to the "public health" and "law enforcement" approaches.

A Public Health Approach

As one reads stories of various school shootings, one notices both the similarities among them and also the important differences. The young shooters seem to have vastly different family backgrounds and motivations, and very different school experiences. No compelling "profile" of a school shooter has yet to emerge (Borum, Cornell, & Jimerson, 2010). If we were to identify two commonalities among them, we could only say that they all involved a toxic combination of (1) an emotionally troubled youth and (2) access to at least one powerful firearm.

A public health approach would attempt to use public policy to address these two points. That is to say, we might attempt to enact policies that help emotionally troubled youth or cut their access to firearms. Tighter gun control and improving our mental health care system are, in fact, two important strategies to help reduce gun violence in schools (and outside of schools), and educators should certainly consider supporting such policies. There is some research to suggest that mandatory background checks and higher mental health spending are correlated with fewer school shootings (Kalesan et al, 2016).

Note, however, that this policy approach has little to do with schools themselves. Indeed, we could call these common features of school shootings the "external factors" contributing to school shootings. Little more will be said here about

these external factors for several reasons. First, such approaches are already much discussed in the public debate about school shootings. Second, American society unfortunately seems to have little appetite to do anything to strengthen public health policy in this regard. So, the question arises: Is there anything educators can do -- specifically, something that is more internal to the school, something that is more within the scope and influence of educators?

The Law Enforcement or "Target Hardening" Approach

This approach to school shootings focuses on what happens inside the school. The emphasis is on tightening school security strategies and technologies in an attempt to make students safer (i.e., to "harden" the target). These strategies may include lock-down drills and procedures; "run, hide, fight" instruction; metal detectors; security cameras; and arming teachers and school staff. Such strategies also focus on training teachers to profile potential shooters or to assess threatening behavior as it is manifest in classrooms. Some of these ideas are better than others. The school security literature on the subject largely endorses the threat-assessment approach, which examines threatening student behavior, usually with the use of checklists and decision trees (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekul, 2002; Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). The literature does not favor profiling, which tries to predict which types of students will turn violent based on more general factors.

While some of these security features may be necessary, educators should be wary of approaching school shootings exclusively in this way. These security strategies can begin to negatively transform the educational environment and shift the identities of educators. Some reasons to be wary of this approach are as follows: First, almost all of these security strategies lack empirical

evidence to support their effectiveness (Borum et al, 2010). Second, security technologies send the message that schools are unsafe, fearful places where violence occurs as a matter of course. This message may even unintentionally *contribute* to violence by suggesting to troubled students the idea that schools are places where violence is, in fact, expected. Third, security strategies conceptualize students as potential threats rather than youth engaged in learning. This is important because a teacher who conceptualizes students as potential shooters -- and is ever watchful of the signs indicating this potential -- has less time to think of their learning needs. Fourth, research shows that minority students in particular often feel threatened by such technologies. For example, while White students see cameras as protecting them, Black students see such technologies as monitoring them (Warnick, 2007). The negative effect of security technologies often has an unequal impact. Fifth, these technologies present an array of ethical difficulties involving student rights to privacy and due process (for an analysis specific to security cameras, see Warnick, 2007).

In the end, then, while these strategies are internal to schools, they are not educational responses. An educational response would be sensitive to the student experience and to the goals of education. If educators are going to respond as educators rather than informal security personnel, then, how might they respond?

An Approach for Educators

A targeted school shooting is, by definition, a situation in which a school is specifically chosen as a site to enact violence. A response to school shootings that comes from educators would ask how schools themselves might unintentionally promote gun violence. It would ask, why are schools sometimes

chosen as locations where gun violence seems appropriate to a troubled student? Why are schools interpreted as places for shootings to occur? Why would a school be chosen, over any other space where youth congregate, such as a shopping malls or movie theaters? How can we structure schools to work against this choice?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at the meanings we attach to schools. How do our youth experience schools? How are schools represented to us in popular culture? If we know why schools are chosen, we might be in a position to respond as educators in a way that decreases future shootings. Below, I suggest some perceived cultural meanings that might be relevant. This is not a complete list, but it suggests how educators might begin to think about this phenomenon. The list was constructed by reading published accounts of school shootings (e.g., Fast, 2008; Newman, 2004) to see what ideas about schooling contributed to the tragedies. (A fuller discussion of this approach can be found in Warnick, Kim, & Robinson [2015]).

Meaning One: Schools as Places of Emotional Violence and Coercion

While schools are safe places physically, they are sometimes not safe places mentally and emotionally. Among youth ages 12 to 18 in 2003, 21.5% report being bullied at some point in the school year (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016, p. 63). Teachers also commonly report being harassed, bullied, and assaulted (Mcmahon et. al., 2014). Beyond these statistical reports, it is obvious that many schools tend to include a great deal of force and coercion governing when students can speak, when and where they can sit, what they can wear, and when they can use the bathroom. Students are sometimes punished without due process and lack rights to privacy and speech. Classrooms are shaped by strict standards

imposed by outsiders, enforced by punishment in the name of accountability.

It is well known that many of the shooting incidents involve bullying in some form. Some of the perpetrators of school shootings had been subject to intense bullying; others had themselves been bullies. What ties the bullies and the bullied together is that they both experience the school as a place of force and violence -- some experiencing bullying on the giving end and some on the receiving end. In a school culture pervaded by bullying, it is no wonder that some students interpret schools as places where escalating violent and destructive behavior is expected and appropriate. The move to gun violence is rare, but the fact that some students make the connection should not be surprising.

It is not just the force and control of peer groups that leads students to interpret schools as locations of violence, but also the actions of teachers and administrators. Some educators, of course, can be quite cruel or oblivious to the humiliation and distress they cause. Others, however, are simply enforcing the authority that comes with the role of teacher. One of the shooters in the Jonesboro shooting, Andrew Golden, was driven primarily out of anger at teachers. His accomplice Mitchell Johnson said, "Andrew was mad at a teacher. He was tired of their crap" (quoted in Fast, 2008, p. 43). This seems to be the case, even though Andrew was not a problem student and not disciplined in any extraordinary way. He was responding, it seems, to the regular control and authority exercised by teachers. Likewise, the Virginia Tech shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, had a long history of negative interactions with professors, where they would try to force Cho to speak (difficult for him since he had been diagnosed with "selective mutism" in high school), to take off his hat, to remove his sunglasses, and so forth. Such demands are not out of the ordinary in schools across the

nation. Still, they do send the message that schools are governed by the use of coercion and power -- a sort of symbolic violence. Because schools can be places of force, power, and imposition, they are places where expression of force can be seen as natural and appropriate. The often coercive and compulsive experience of schools contributes to students choosing their schools as spaces for extreme displays of force and violence.

Meaning Two: Students Go into Schools with High Expectations of Friendship and Romance

Students in American society go to school with high expectations for what they will find there. Not only will they find teachers who care, but also friends and romantic partners. Schools do quite a bit to foster these social expectations, and these expectations are not necessarily a bad thing. We want students to have close relationships with both teachers and peers. Indeed, we hold this out as a sort of aspiration for schools: in schools, students will find somebody who cares about them and mentors them. There is a view that schools can be places of refuge for students who come from less-than-ideal situations at home.

There are certain practices, though, that contribute to a sort of "status tournament" within the school peer environment (Newman, 2004, p. 151). Think of the unique prominence of sports in American schools, where participation is often limited to the most talented students through try-outs. Think of the common practice of anointing "kings" and "queens" for homecoming dances or other special occasions. This not only creates a climate of social winners and losers, but also reinforces the idea that schools are places where heterosexual couples get paired off. Practices like these set a certain expectation: (1) schools are places to build social and romantic

relationships, and (2) social and romantic relationships are competitive in nature.

One often hears in the narratives of school shooters a sense of social betrayal. Sometimes, the students feel betrayed by a teacher, but even more commonly, they feel betrayed by their peer groups. The sense of betrayal turns into animus directed specifically against the school and its occupants. The school becomes an appropriate place for violence because, as the carrier of social hope and expectation, it marks the site of the betrayal.

This dynamic of thwarted social expectations seems to be on display in several school shootings. Scott Pennington in 1993 shot his teacher and janitor and held his class hostage for fifteen minutes. Part of the motivating factor was a caring teacher who tried to befriend Pennington -- an awkward and brutally bullied 17-year-old -- and give him extra time and attention. When the teacher gave Pennington a "C," and began to distance herself from him, he felt devastated and betrayed, his thoughts spiraling downward until they manifested in a shooting. The teacher was one of his two victims.

In other cases, we see thwarted romance and peer relationships leading to rage and betrayal. In the 1998 Jonesboro shooting, Mitchell Johnson, dumped by his girlfriend and cut from the basketball team, seemed to actively target girls who had broken up with him. Johnson and Andrew Golden, his accomplice, feared they had lost this status tournament of adolescence. The school had held out promises of friendship and romance and had not delivered.

Finally, we see this sort of social disappointment in one of the Columbine shooters, Dylan Klebold, whose journal is filled with both social longings (for friends and love at school) and dashed social hopes. "My existence is shit" he writes, "I don't fit in here" (quoted in Cullen, 2009, p. 174). School

promised social belonging, and it was therefore the place of betrayal, a place appropriate for violence.

Meaning Three: Schools as Places of Individual Expression

One characteristic embodied in American schools, particularly high schools, is "expressive individualism." Expressive individualism is manifest when we try to find out "who we really are" as individuals, or attempt to outwardly express a part of ourselves that is important to us. This value can be seen in movies about American high schools, where we often find students engaged in a quest to find and express "who they really are" (for a discussion, see Bulman, 2005). The focus of such films is almost never on teachers or principals, or even academics and learning, but on the individual journeys of students toward self-understanding and self-expression. Think of high school films such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985). In their quests, students often have to overcome obstacles, resisting social pressure from cliques and academic pressure from uncaring parents, teachers, and administrators. Schools are the stages on which the drama of self-expression takes place.

Many school shooters seem to have embraced the idea that schools are places of self-expression. Published accounts of school shootings are filled with statements in which the perpetrators claim that there is something inside them that needs to be expressed. Often, this is a feeling of hatred or frustration. Because schools are seen as the places to find and express individual identity, schools become chosen as the proper stage to enact violence. Luke Woodham, who killed two students in a 1997 school shooting, left a manifesto saying, "I am the hate in every man's heart." He urged his readers to "live by your own rules ... For you, dear friend, are a Superman." His act of violence was an

attempt to express the courageous rule-breaker he felt inside of himself. "Murder," he wrote in his manifesto, "is gutsy and daring." The school became the place, therefore, where people would find out who Luke Woodham really was.

The Columbine shooters, particularly Eric Harris, seemed obsessed with how history would remember them. Harris took great care to claim that his actions were different -- a unique expression of himself, and unlike the other school shooters. He left hours of videotapes explaining his actions. He writes in his journal, "My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, if you don't like it, you die." He continues, "HATE! I'm full of hate and I love it ... Yes I hate and I guess I want others to know it." Because we think of schools as locations of self-expression, his school became the space where Harris expressed the hate he felt inside.

Pathways Forward

To think about school shootings as educators means to think deeply about how schools are experienced and portrayed. It means we seek to answer the question of how these perceptions contribute to schools being chosen as places appropriate for enacting gun violence. It means we must imagine new ways to construct schools that counteract some of these cultural meanings.

The meanings explored here are only the beginning of a full description of the links between the experience of schools and school shootings. Other authors have explored other possible links. For example, one set of authors looks at the link between consumerism and commercialism in schools and school shootings (Keehn & Boyles, 2015). Others look specifically at the issue of masculinity and honor as it relates to school shootings -- this is relevant given that nearly all school shooters are male -- and examine

how masculinity should be rethought to counteract violence (Shuffelton, 2015).

In this report, I have addressed several ways in which the perception of schools can influence school shootings. First, schools are experienced as places of force and coercion and therefore interpreted as places where violence is appropriate. Second, schools set high expectations for friendship and romance. When these expectations are not met, resentment builds against the school sometimes taking the form of retributive violence. Third, schools are perceived as places for individual expression, where a student can find and express the "true self" that lies inside. When the student feels anger and hate, it seems to follow that school is the place where these emotions should be expressed.

How might these perceptions of school be counteracted? One idea involves the first meaning. To the extent that some schools are sites of coercion and control, of mental and emotional violence, steps could be taken to make schools more caring and more humane. This might involve giving students a bigger voice in shaping school culture, and in emphasizing the formation of trusting relationships between students, teachers, and administrators. It might involve giving students more choice about where to sit and what to read. It would certainly involve fostering school environments where students believe that staff care about them as people, and not just as objects to be manipulated. This would seem to necessitate smaller classrooms and perhaps smaller schools, where these sorts of personal relationships can flourish.

Consider also the second perception of schools discussed above. To the extent that high social expectations contribute to school shootings, there is some ambiguity about what to do. We obviously want students to experience caring relationships, to go to schools seeking friends and mentors. One

solution is to better fulfill this expectation, with some of the reforms just mentioned that make personal relationship more realistic. At the same time, it does not seem necessary for schools to coronate kings and queens, to put such emphasis on highly competitive athletics, and to otherwise foster the status tournament of adolescence. Part of the solution might be to simultaneously better fulfill the need for caring relationships in schools, while lowering the level of social competition and social expectations.

Finally, to the extent that schools are seen as places to express a violent identity, the implications are also somewhat ambiguous. It does seem like the quest to find and express one's true self is an appropriate goal of schooling. Indeed, schools contribute to social life by allowing students to experiment with ideas and identities that are not offered to them in their families or other local communities. At the same time, schools can do much to offer students opportunities to express themselves (and their negative emotions) in non-violent ways through writing, art, music, drama, and other endeavors. These programs should not be eliminated, as they often are in funding cuts, but perhaps seen as essential component of safe schools.

The above suggestions may indeed make schools safer by creating schools that feel more convivial and less appropriate places for violence. Rather than focusing on these specific proposals, however, it is more important to think about school shootings in new ways. We should look at them not only as epidemiologists considering at a public health issue, nor as security professionals seeking to harden a target, but as educators concerned with the lived experiences of students and their growth and learning.

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