

Big Guns, Thwarted Dreams: School Violence and the English Teacher

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Perhaps an article about school violence needs to begin with a disclaimer from its author. I am not a gray-haired academic musing sentimentally about a lost past that probably never actually existed. I do not reflect nostalgically on the days of one-room school houses and saintly teachers who taught well-scrubbed demi-citizens on the brink of exploding into full-blown, contributing membership in society.

Any accurate and honest history of America education reveals that even in the legendary one-room school houses of a by-gone era, it was not uncommon for male students to engage in fisticuffs with their teachers. Indeed, some new teachers proved their mettle and established their turf by defeating their larger, more aggressive students in violent schoolyard encounters.

In a country colonized by adventurous rebels and settled by gun-toting pioneers, it is inevitable that outlaws and other rugged individualists have attached to themselves an aura of glamour and excitement. The film and television industries, ever since their inception, have both capitalized fully on the romance and allure of the outlaw. British literature celebrated the fourteenth-century outlaw Robin Hood in ballads and tales that have survived to the present day.

Even if the film and TV outlaws like Jesse James or Bonnie and Clyde ultimately died, they went out in a rush of glory, heroes to the end. For the purposes of the scripts that portrayed their nefarious activities, they never suffered when death came: they merely died. *Bang, bang! You're dead!* It's all over. Never do the celebrated, mediagenerated outlaws of fact or fiction end up in writhing agony on emergency room gurneys as they drown in spurts of their own gushing blood. Never are they confined for years after their downfall to wheelchairs. Never are they seen as they face grueling years of physical therapy trying to regain some vestige of mobility from devastated limbs. Never do they live to fruitless and lonely old age in abject poverty. These things happen in real life, not in the media, whose message seems to be, *Live fast, die young, have a beautiful corpse.*

WHAT IS THE REAL SITUATION?

The stark realities of school violence are recorded daily in the press and reported nightly on television. Here are some of the dimensions of the problem:

- Wisconsin recorded a 23% increase in school violence between 1988 and 1989 (Grover 1993, 32);

- In 1992, school police in Houston, Texas arrested 174 students for carrying weapons into school buildings, probably about 10% of the actual number of students who actually committed such an offense (Bushweller 1993, 35);
- The New York City School District had to spend \$28 million to install access-controlled monitoring systems in 40 of its high schools (Sabo 1993, 37–38);
- Information from the Center for Health Statistics indicates that ten Americans under the age of 19 die daily from firearms injuries (Harrington-Lueker 1992, 21);
- The National Association of School Security speculates that 9,000 rapes, 12,000 armed robberies, 270,000 burglaries, 70,000 serious physical assaults against teachers, and 204,000 other aggravated assaults occur in the nation's schools each year (Rich 1992, 35); and
- As estimated 580,000 teen-age students—about one in 20—carry weapons into American schools every year (Harrington-Lueker 1992, 21).

The threat of school violence, particularly of armed violence, has increased so markedly in the past decade that a siege mentality exists in many school districts, particularly at the secondary level. Whereas armed violence, where it existed a decade or so ago, was thought to be confined to inner city schools in large metropolitan areas, a recent study by Texas A&M researcher Paul Kingery indicates that rural students are twice as likely to carry firearms to school as their urban and suburban counterparts (Harrington-Lueker 1992, 21; Sabo 1993, 37). Educators and law-enforcement officials generally agree that no area in the United States is currently immune from the problem of school violence.

ROOT CAUSES AND SOCIAL REALITIES OF VIOLENCE

America's youth receive all sorts of subliminal messages suggesting to them that violence is a viable means of problem solving. When Saddam Hussein challenged American interests in the Middle East by invading Kuwait, the official American response was to subdue him with force. When Muammar Qaddafi rattled his saber a few years earlier, the American solution was to bomb his palace in an attempt to kill him (instead the bomb killed his foster daughter, an innocent of two or three). Grenada, Somalia, and Haiti were controlled by American force or the threat of it.

Thus, when the official American response to crises is force, a message is broadcast to our citizenry that force is an acceptable way to deal with problems. Underlying such an attitude is a dehumanizing view of the world: "What if Qaddafi's little girl was killed? She was one of the enemy."

Teenage violence is centered more in adolescent males than in their female counterparts. For whatever rea-

Shuman places the issue of school violence in a historical perspective and offers specific strategies for schools and English teachers.

son, males tend more frequently toward violent acts than females do. Young males are also at a developmental level where belonging, being one of a cohesive group, seems more important to them than adhering to the norms society has set for civilized human behavior. Middle schools are the institutions that feel the full brunt of these problems.

It is interesting that, in some parts of the world, it is males at this developmental level who are drawn into the armed forces as cannon fodder. Fifteen-year-old boys make marvelous guerrillas: give them guns and pep talks, and they become fearless killers, murdering without conscience, eager for the approval their acts of violence will bring them. They view death so abstractly that realistic thoughts of their own possibly painful demise as they engage in life-threatening combat never impose upon them the inhibitions that might restrain older, more seasoned combatants (Keller 1994, A-7). Young boys who join gangs are expected to be equally fearless and brutal.

In the United States, particularly among the poor, the yawning distance between the life projected by the media and the lives that kids growing up in poverty face very day is daunting. In predicting violent behavior, John Martin Rich notes, "The blocked opportunity approach suggests that society emulates middle class values and ideals, but legitimate access to the middle class and its material rewards is not available" (Rich 1992, 36). Thwarted ambition and perceptions of personal powerlessness, predictably, lead young people into lives that promise them immediate rewards—despite the overweening dangers that cast their shadows across such lives and across society.

Residents in formerly peaceful, middle-class neighborhoods now live under the threat of violence. Typical is Bay Ridge in Brooklyn's 68th police precinct. The poor and the alienated who have moved into parts of this once-stable community, originally populated by middle-class Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans, have sparked the fires of racial hatred that have resulted in two brutal attacks in recent months, one of them fatal. Such attacks are not necessarily perpetrated by the new arrivals against the established citizenry: it is frequently this established citizenry that feels threatened by new arrivals and attacks them.

The mix of income levels can also have negative results. John Trimmer, a policeman in Bay Ridge, commenting on the depressing lives that many of the young people in his precinct live, says, "In East New York, you look around, and the whole neighborhood is down. But the kids in Bay Ridge look out the window and see half-million-dollar homes, and they know they are the haves-nots" (Sexton 1994, A-18).

Adolescents who see no reasonable hope of attaining by socially acceptable means the levels of life regularly portrayed on television and in many movies are vulnerable to pressures that entice them into such illegal yet lucrative activities as theft, drug pushing, or prostitution. These are realities with which secondary school teachers and administrators constantly deal. In trying to

combat such problems, educators often find themselves engaged in a losing battle. They think of long-term outcomes; their most at-risk students think of the moment and of instant gratification. *Live fast, die young, have a beautiful corpse*, echoes in the ears of many young people.

WHAT CAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS DO?

School faculties, administrators, parents, and students are at their wits' end as they try to cope with the problem of school violence. Many schools have put in place all sorts of punitive measures to control those who are violent in school and those who bring weapons onto the school property. Many schools resort to metal detectors and employ full-time security personnel to preserve a semblance of order and maintain a modicum of safety.

Arming Security Guards

Most controversial has been the question of whether to arm school security guards. Some argue that such guards should not be required to put their lives in jeopardy without having weapons to defend themselves, especially in situations where students have weapons, some of them semi-automatic. In the other camp are those—many of them school security guards—who fear that in any sort of armed exchange, innocent bystanders might be injured or killed.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has armed its school security personnel. Even though school police in Maryland's Prince George's County schools confiscated 27 handguns, 6 pellet guns, 12 BB guns, one starter pistol, and 159 knives from students in the 1991–1992 school year, Peter Blauvelt, the district's director of security, has resisted arming school security guards because of the dangers inherent in such a procedure (Bushweller 1993, 34).

In Houston, it was left to students, parents, teachers, and administrators to decide whether to arm the guards in their schools. Eighty percent of the district's 69 middle schools and high schools voted in favor of arming their guards. Even in rural Columbus, Mississippi, with 5,900 students in 15 schools, Larry Johnson, the school district's director of security, recommended arming school guards, although the school board vetoed the idea, finally allowing armed guards only at athletic events and dances (Bushweller 1993, 35).

Special Police Units

In 1991 in Ohio, the Cleveland public schools, in collaboration with local police, created a five-officer Youth Gang Unit, seemingly a small contingent to serve the 127 schools and over 73,000 students in its jurisdiction. In the second year of the Unit's operation, however, the Cleveland schools chalked up a 39% reduction in school gang incidents, dropping from 381 in 1991 to 231 in 1993 (Trump 1993, 39). The establishment of this unit represents a major step toward helping the schools to, as Harrington-Lueker suggests, "establish a strong enough cultural identity of their own, [without which]

the street culture will continue to rule the school corridors” (Harrington-Lueker 1992, 26).

Most students, parents, teachers, and administrators resist the notion of having schools turned into armed camps. Creating a repressive atmosphere in a school can seriously compromise the learning that takes place within its walls. One cannot lose sight of the fact, however, that, as Sabo notes, “from a security standpoint, the elementary school’s top priority is protecting the students. At higher grade levels, the emphasis shifts to protecting teachers and school property from the students themselves” (Sabo 1993, 38).

Electronic Security

This statement, cynical though it may seem, accurately reflects the attitudes in many school administrators today, particularly in an age when schools are under pressure to be well equipped with such expensive and portable equipment as personal computers, VCRs, projection equipment, and videocameras. The San Diego Unified School District has equipped all of its 179 schools with infrared beams or sound sensors that operate 24 hours a day to detect unauthorized intrusions into school property. In Nevada, the Las Vegas public schools, faced with substantial losses of valuable equipment, turned for assistance to the local casinos and, with their guidance, have installed surveillance cameras in most of the city’s schools.

WHERE DO SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS FIT IN?

In the face of cataclysmic social dislocations, secondary school English teachers might find it tempting to bury their heads in the sand, to teach language, literature, and composition as best they can, and to count the days until retirement or some other sort of rescue. To do so, however, is to negate the very reasons for which most English teachers entered their profession.

Mediating Teams

School districts that have dealt most successfully with violence are the ones in which strong mediating teams composed of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and law-enforcement officials have worked together toward solutions. In the end, it is through communication that the dilemmas of school districts under pressure finally move toward resolution: communication is at the heart of everything that effective English teachers seek to accomplish in their classrooms.

Student Information

The best source of information about school violence is the student body. Students know who among their peers has weapons, is involved in gang activities, or is intimidating other students. Students also are good at proposing solutions to problems that occur in schools, but they often need guidance to articulate their suggestions cogently and persuasively. English teachers can be instrumental in helping them achieve such articulation.

Literature Study

Both English and social studies teachers are in strong positions to direct class discussions of the material with which their students are working into channels that parallel some of the social situations that are currently most on their minds. Literature can help students to comprehend contemporary situations in their historical perspectives and, by so doing, can heighten their understanding of what solutions might be available to the social problems that most concern them.

For example, *Oliver Twist* faced many of the problems that today’s youth face. Discussed as a nineteenth-century masterpiece, Charles Dickens’ novel may fall flat with contemporary secondary school audiences; discussed as a book that has direct parallels in today’s youth culture, *Oliver Twist* begins to take on a new life, to become a significant link in what philosophers like to call “the great chain of being,” which also includes among its links many of the ethical problems with which contemporary students are themselves dealing.

What about John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat*? Were Danny and his boys a gang or merely a social group? What about the knights of King Arthur’s round table—group or gang? What about blood brotherhood among Native Americans? What parallels might students see between modern gang members and the ruling class of boys who emerged in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*?

Advertising Analysis

English teachers can do a great deal to help their students deal with propaganda, much of which comes to them in heavy doses through television and print advertising. Making students aware of the ploys that advertisers use—the bandwagon approach, the prestige-by-association approach, the buy-it-now-or-you-may-never-have-the-opportunity-again approach, etc.—can make them better able to resist many of the temptations that are thrown in their paths as they traverse the sometimes torturous road toward adulthood. Critical viewing of films, television, and other media is a skill that English teachers can and should emphasize.

Student-Written Rules

It has been suggested that schools need to distribute student handbooks that spell out clearly the rules that govern students and the penalties for infractions. Such handbooks can be student-generated. The generation of their individual parts may become the responsibility of various English classes, where the writing skills involved would serve well the instructional intent of any English class that emphasizes composition. The production of a student handbook unquestionably represents writing with a purpose.

Producing Videotapes

Because many students of secondary school age view illegal activities as pranks and death as a painless process that happens to other people, an English class might take upon itself the task of producing a videotape that shows some of the realities of what happens to peo-

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ple on the streets. They might interview a prisoner who committed a serious crime at an early age and who now, years later, is still confined with little hope of parole. They might show a youth being wheeled into a morgue and being placed in a refrigerated compartment. They might videotape what happens to a gunshot victim in an emergency room. They might interview a paraplegic who was caught in the crossfire during a gang encounter. Injured youth can speak more volubly to errant youth than any authority figure is able to.

HOW MIGHT STUDENTS DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE?

Late in October 1994, a group of 300 secondary school students, gun control advocate Sarah Brady, and other adults met at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania to discuss the problem of violence. Students involved in the conference offered their collective solutions to dealing with violence.

- Stricter punishment
- More activities to relieve boredom
- Better enforcement of laws
- Increased police patrols
- Reduction of violence on television
- Increased church-going
- Equal treatment of people
- Making daily anti-violence seminars available
- Having available people who are willing to listen and help (Krawczeniuk 1994, 1)

Although it is unlikely that all of these solutions would prove workable over time in all places, it is important that a group of students working collectively produced and articulated them. Groups of students within individual schools might be encouraged:

- to create a similar list of suggestions and
- to discuss critically and analytically the suggestions the Scranton students proposed, ultimately debating them or producing a written critique of them.

Certainly any committee within the school that is officially designated to deal with the problem of violence should contain a preponderance of students. They are often in the best position to know exactly what might be done in a specific local situation. They will have available to them sources of express information to which few teachers and administrators are privy.

ENGLISH TEACHERS AND THE DELINQUENCY RATE

In 1979, a study of 12 of London's inner-city secondary schools was undertaken. The researchers were interested in students' behavior in school, as well as in

their attendance, success in examinations, and delinquency. The research revealed, not surprisingly, that schools with high delinquency rates produced students with lower verbal reasoning scores than students from schools with less delinquency and that these schools essentially served families whose occupational levels were low.

Homework

Important in this report is the finding that in the schools that ranked highest, teachers regularly assigned and graded homework, that student work was frequently displayed on the walls of the classroom, that students used the library regularly, that teachers engaged in group planning, and that rewards were emphasized over punishments (Rich 1992, 38).

Secondary school English teachers in this country might take a lesson from this report. Certainly students should be expected to do homework, but such homework must be graded regularly and returned if it is to have meaning. Communication through prompt feedback must exist between teachers and their students. This is part of what the individualizing of instruction entails.

Art Displays

English teachers should reserve a portion of their classroom wall space to display student work. Students who are unused to success will react well to having something they have produced singled out as being worthy of display.

Coordination

English teachers within a school should coordinate their work. Administrators can cooperate in this regard by making sure that all the English teachers in a school have one free period in common every day. Beyond coordinating their work with that of their colleagues, it improves classroom morale and involvement for English teachers to do much of their day-by-day planning of classroom activities in consultation with their students.

Library Work

It is probably advisable in situations where it is logistically feasible for all English classes to spend at least one full classroom period out of every ten in the library performing specific assigned tasks. Students should also be given assignments that will encourage them to use the school library during their free periods or to use public libraries after school hours. Helping students to develop the habit of using the library provides them with interesting things to do when they might otherwise be engaging in less fruitful activities.

Use of Praise

Finally, teachers must put themselves in their students' places. We all prefer to be stroked rather than demolished. Encouraging words on papers—even weak papers—will probably produce better long-term results than insults, negativity, sarcasm, or cynicism. Discovering students' abilities can help English teachers direct their students into activities in which they can

succeed. As they experience success, sometimes even the least promising students begin to function at levels their teachers may have considered beyond their reach.

CONCLUSION

The problem of violence seems deeply ingrained in our society. Teachers, particularly English teachers, by approaching their teaching as humanely as possible, are in an admirable position to move troubled student in directions that will prove productive for them and that might succeed in turning even the most angry students into reasonably well-adjusted adults. What we teach is important, but how we teach is still more important. If we are dealing with deeply troubled students, as many English teachers are, we can never get to the “what” of our teaching until we have mastered its “how.” Only then will we truly confront the issue of school violence.

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EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Literature and Life

“I can bring forward no more appropriate generalization than the oft repeated one that literature is an interpretation of life . . . We grant this truth, and it follows that your project and my project, every day of our lives, is to make the literature that we teach a living thing. If the purpose of all education is what we claim, a preparation for right living, we must admit that we have in the field of literature the easiest and most appropriate material to present. The books that the pupils read are their short-cuts to an experience in worthy living.”
Marietta Hyde. 1920. “Projects in Literature.” *EJ* 9.7 (Sept.): 401.