

# Three Approaches to Coping with School Violence

Denny Wolfe

*We humans have always sought to increase our personal energy in the only manner we have known: by seeking to psychologically steal it from others—an unconscious competition that underlies all human conflict in the world. (James Redfield, 1993, The Celestine Prophecy, New York: Warner Books, 65–66)*

Wolfe offers a trio of solutions to school violence.

Some school critics and statisticians have observed that drug-dealing, vandalism, robbery, and murder have replaced gum-chewing, “talking out of turn,” tardiness, and rudeness as the most chronic problems afflicting today’s schools. If the intent of this observation is to shock and rattle the public’s sensibilities, it’s working. Of course, some of us may interpret such suggestions as merely dark, stoic, and cynical—“scare” tactics quite in keeping with the current national mood about many social issues these days.

Yet, as a profession (and a society) maybe a little shock treatment now and then is good for us, especially if we ourselves work in relatively “safe” schools and communities. Maybe it’s time to remind ourselves that *one* school’s problem can become *every* school’s problem if the profession at large is not watchful and careful. No school is immune to the potential of extreme violence, as many of us, without meaning to, have learned.

If you’re a long-time, veteran English teacher, you may never have thought you’d see the day when an issue of *English Journal* would be devoted to school violence. The idea never occurred to me, either. But here we are, and here that issue is. And, what’s more, it’s high time. While none of us needs convincing that the violence problem is serious in a great many places, some of the statistics are sobering.

The National Education Association (March 1994) reports that the number of children killed by firearms between 1979 and 1991 equals the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War; every two hours, a child dies from gunshots; guns kill more black males between the ages of 10 and 24 than any other cause. A 1993 Harris survey (*Youth Record*, August 3), reveals that 22% of students polled claimed they took weapons to school in the previous school year (and how many declined to admit it?); a Gallup poll conducted for *Phi Delta Kappan* (Elam 1993, 137–152) showed the public ranking drug abuse, discipline, and violence in the top four of the ten most serious problems affecting schools. And the depressing numbers drone on.

Yet, a MetLife teacher’s survey in 1993 shows that 77% of teachers and 50% of kids felt safe in and around

their own schools (9). And according to a *New York Times* article (1994), although violent incidents in New York City’s 1,100 public schools (K–12) rose 26% in 1993–94, *no homicides occurred in them*—the first year since 1990. Still, in the same article, New York City Schools’ Chancellor Ramon C. Cortines laments:

When I read the list of weapons we have seized, I wonder if we shouldn’t start handing out medals for valor instead of report cards. The violence and weaponry in [New York City’s] streets and communities is (sic) being imported into our school buildings. (27)

While the facts about school violence indeed have quite a shock appeal, the attitudes and spirit of a majority of teachers and kids are admirable. But we must not allow ourselves to think “it won’t happen here.”

## THREE SOLUTIONS

Clearly, in many schools violence is like a sore that won’t heal; it screams for attention. I certainly claim no expertise on how to resolve the problem (who among us does?), but if we do not attempt to be a part of its solution, we become accessories of a sort. So I’d like to point to three levels of solutions, all of which are being tried somewhere. To eliminate the violence problem, though, these three levels of solutions need to occur in *every* school, *everywhere*, and *at the same time*. The first is a solution firmly fixed within the context of “crisis management” (and there are many schools in which violence has already created a lot of crises that need managing); the second is a long-term solution for which *all* teachers—not just English teachers—need to take responsibility; and the third is lodged firmly within the domain of the English curriculum in particular.

### Crisis Management

The crisis management solution has to do with strategies of surveillance and close (often unrelenting) supervision of students in schools. These strategies have become commonplace—some would say oppressive. In their extreme, they include such tactics as installing metal detectors, creating “hot lines” for students and teachers to report trouble, placing hired guards in hallways, and enacting more federal and state laws that require stiffer penalties for criminal acts. The crisis management solution, of course, is a reactive solution; schools tend to use it to deal with incidents *after* they occur, *hoping*, however, that it will have some preventive effect as well. To argue zealously against crisis management in this context would be naïve, given the scary dimensions of the violence problem in many schools.

It’s hardly news to any *EJ* reader that high schools—middle schools, too—simply are more dangerous places than they used to be. Part of the reason has to do with what Elijah Anderson, eminent sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, calls the “baddest dude” phenomenon (1994). (Although Anderson writes about the plight of young African American males, we all

know that the behaviors he describes and the issue of school violence itself do not pertain exclusively to any single group, ethnic or otherwise. Let's keep that straight.)

Anderson argues that there is a role played out by some street-oriented and troubled youth, at school and elsewhere, that is especially grim. It's role played by students who many teachers dread to see enter their classrooms. This is the "hardcore" student, often male, who wears his manhood on his shoulder like a giant redwood. His main goal is to show everyone around him that he has no fear, that he doesn't care about anyone or anything, that he has nerve. As Anderson writes, "Nerve is shown when one takes another person's possessions (the more valuable, the better), 'messes with' someone's woman, throws the first punch, 'gets in someone's face,' or pulls a trigger" (92).

This is the student who doesn't just respond to violence; he or she starts it. Such students (male and female) have deeply internalized the "code of the streets," or some other "code" that may violate another's right to safety and freedom. And they have followers, often in gangs.

When school populations include students whose behaviors show that they've learned to *value* violence—by dint of their home cultures, peer cultures, or "entertainment" cultures—schools need crisis management. There's no getting around it. But this is a low-level, band-aid approach to a profoundly complex, long-term problem. While it may be a *necessary* approach to coping with school violence, if it's the *only* approach, it's just moving deck chairs around on the *Titanic*. Or, to use another well-worn metaphor, it's a way of keeping the lid on a potentially explosive container. Regardless, it's not a viable way of dealing with the container's contents. Crisis management, or containment, is generally coercive, and coercion may be temporarily effective in directing or controlling students' surface behaviors. It doesn't work very well, though, if we're interested in helping students learn to *think for themselves*—that is, to learn how to choose healthy, rational, defensible alternatives to destructive ways of living.

Building a safe environment in the English classroom—a classroom mutually owned by students and teachers—can often reduce the need for crisis management. Since language is our business, in our own classrooms we can work to help students speak to one another with civil tongues. Before trouble starts brewing, taking time to explore alternative ways of relating and responding to others can help English teachers build the kind of learning environments where students feel secure.

Language can be a catalyst for violence or for peace. The English class may be the only place where students can learn to appreciate the power of language in that regard. Time spent analyzing the potential effect of students' utterances to one another can help students learn to think twice before they say things offensive to their classmates. Learning to appreciate the *etiquette* of language, through examining the content and style of

students' talk and teachers' talk, can sometimes deter violence.

### Mediation

Schools need people and programs to educate students about how to resolve conflicts and disputes. The National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law and the National Crime Prevention Council can offer useful resources in this regard. Both organizations are working to promote the process of mediation as a long-term strategy for dealing with the violence problem in schools.

Mediation has long been used by the legal profession as an alternative to taking cases to court, where judges or juries settle disputes. Of course, there are times when going to court is necessary, like going to the "office" at school. Mediation, however, is a process of managing conflicts through an objective third party (mediator) whose job is to get those in conflict to solve their own disputes with a goal of eliminating further trouble in the future. Typically there are six steps in the mediating process (Zimmer 1993, 19):

**Step 1—Introduction:** The mediator makes the parties feel at ease and explains the ground rules. The mediator's role is not to make a decision but to help the parties reach an agreement. The mediator explains that he or she will not take sides and that confidentiality among all parties is expected.

**Step 2—Telling the Story:** Each party tells what happened. The person who brings the complaint usually starts—no interruptions allowed.

**Step 3—Identifying Facts/Issues:** The mediator tries to identify each party's facts and needs by actively listening, summarizing each party's side, and making sure that each party understands and agrees. Often the mediator asks disputants to summarize each other's perspective.

**Step 4—Identifying Alternative Solutions:** The disputants offer possible solutions. The mediator makes a list and asks each person to explain his or her feelings about each possibility.

**Step 5—Revising and Discussing Solutions:** Based on the feelings of the disputants, the mediator helps revise possible solutions and tries to identify common ground.

**Step 6—Reaching Agreement:** The mediator helps parties reach an agreement. The agreement is written. The parties discuss what will happen if either fails to follow the agreement.

Feeling at ease, telling one's own story, actively listening, identifying alternatives, revising one's work and one's thinking, and abiding by the rules of a jointly-owned classroom community—these are more than

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strategies of mediation; they are principles of teaching, learning, and classroom environment-building that are rock-solid.

When teachers and students apply these principles beyond the paper curriculum—whatever the discipline—to define a process for settling disputes, what emerges is a rational approach to coping with the violence problem. And it is a process grounded in sound educational practice rather than in mere top-down coercion. Setting up mock mediations to explore alternative ways of resolving disputes between characters in literature, for example, can pique students' interest in reading and help them develop skills in resolving their own real-life conflicts.

As teachers and students together practice mediation, they grow in their skills to make it work. Teaching and learning become a single concept, not two separate ones; and the curriculum becomes both a *who* and a *what*—the people who are learning (adults and youth alike) and the “stuff” to be learned. And the stuff to be learned goes beyond the paper curriculum to include strategies for living and working together that respect and honor everyone. Finally, over time, it is this approach to coping with school violence that can begin to eliminate the problem.

### The English Curriculum

Third, the English curriculum solution is a synthesis, really, of crisis management and mediation. Whatever else “English” is, it's language—language that often invades the soul. And whatever the literature canon is that houses that language, it must include works that deal with *conflict*—strenuous and wrenching conflict that likely will provoke many different ways of questioning, valuing, and seeing. That doesn't mean literature by dead white guys only, or by any other group only, but it does mean literature deliberately chosen that can move the psyche up, down, and all around.

A healthy learning tension occurs in classrooms where teachers and students openly and deeply interrogate texts and film, interrogate each other, and interrogate themselves. Through talking, reading, listening, writing, and viewing—with high degrees of both patience and rigor—students get better with language and more knowledgeable about alternative ways of dealing with conflicts; therefore, they are likely to get better and wiser at handling trouble when it arises in their own lives and relationships.

What if, for example, we were to place at the front of our classrooms the quotation from James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* that appears at the beginning of this article? It suggests at least two questions we might ask students as they encounter literary characters in conflict.

The questions might be framed in several ways, but here are two possibilities: *What is the nature of the “personal energy” that (so-and-so) is trying to “steal” from (so-and-so)? And—how does he or she try to “steal” it?* Consider the questions in light of such pairs as these: Brutus and Caesar (from Shakespeare's *Julius*

*Caesar*), Pappy and Huck (from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), Jack and Ralph (from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*), Creon and Antigone (from Sophocles' *Antigone*), Ahab and the White Whale (from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*), the Socs and the Greasers (from S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*), Norton and John (from Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*), Doc Holliday and Johnny Ringo (from the films *Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp*), Waverly Jong and her mother (from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*), and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie (from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*).

Such considerations can deepen students' understanding of the psychology of human conflict, not only between fictional characters in literature but also among students themselves. Reflecting rationally upon the nature of human conflict can help students deal in healthier ways with challenges they face in their own lives. And such considerations can help us, as English teachers, realize a major goal of the literature curriculum; to enrich students' lives and aid personal growth.

## CONCLUSION

If we are to institute a “high-quality” set of approaches to coping with school violence, we need three events that enable students to capture the system (rather than *vice versa*) that many of them violate: we need to be ready and able to meet crises when they occur in schools—there can be no denying that; we need to help students learn to mediate their own disputes by turning principles of good teaching and learning practices into a process of dealing with conflict; and we need to offer students a language and a literature that can empower them, that can help them invent and discover alternative ways of perceiving trouble in order to handle it when it comes.

These approaches, taken together, are the best we can do. If we are patient and diligent, they will suffice.

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