

Minimizing the Violence

Maximum Security: The Culture of Violence in Inner-City Schools

John Devine

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Violence is an infectious epidemic in American society that has emanated into the nation's urban public schools. The United States is a "violent, divided society" and violence has become "normalized;" all too often, people are apathetic and have accepted it as a part of life (Asher 2). Many students of urban public schools have a "fascination with conflict" (Devine 88). Contributing to this factor is that "high schools are contexts where youth encounter a myriad of discourses pulling them in several directions" (Hemmings 293). Instead of getting pulled in academic or social situations where students can learn, violence pulls students towards dangerous, life-threatening situations. Violent climates lead to destruction of, "neighborhoods, other people, and ultimately themselves [students]" (Hemming 293). In John Devine's latest book, Maximum Security: The Culture of Violence in Inner-City Schools, Devine speaks of ineffective measures taken at the local and federal levels to address violence. This further divides student bodies of urban public schools, causing chaotic self-destruction and community destruction.

Devine, a professor at New York University's Metropolitan Center for Urban Education and director of the School Partnership Program, led a tutoring program in New York City's most violent schools beginning in the 1980s. These schools are thought to be part of "the lower tier;" they are the worst in the city (Devine 22). Frequently, education experts blame the media or music in such violent times. Devine claims that these institutions are partly to blame, but the real blame lies in an unsuccessful education

system that lets impoverished and uneducated students become impoverished and uneducated adults. The American education system is cyclical and only lets violence persist. Devine emphasizes the ineffective means taken by schools to supposedly “prevent” violence. Instead, the implementation of security guards and metal detectors create divisions between students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Ironically, “47 high schools that are equipped with metal detectors and large squads of guards are thought of as belonging to this lower tier” (Devine 25). Despite this “safety overhaul,” these schools never see a decrease in violence levels or improvement academically.

Devine’s most successful tool for creating an interesting proposal is his incorporation of captivating excerpts from tutors’ journals describing their experiences with students. The tutors reveal a depressed, impoverished, and fearful student body. Devine weaves in these real-life accounts magnificently. Another interesting device is beginning each chapter with a powerful quote from education scholars. For example, chapter 6 begins with a quote that states, “violence does not simply occur ‘in’ space, whether public or private; it is implicated in the very production and maintenance of the distinction between spaces” (Devine 161). Such quotes grab the reader’s attention for the upcoming chapter. Another strong point of Devine’s is his overall organization of the book. Chapter one provides an easy to understand, yet comprehensive review of the history of violence in urban public schools. Here, Devine clearly states his thesis and purpose; violence is an epidemic sweeping lower-tier schools and he is trying to identify these contributing factors. Each chapter identifies a different issue causing violence and often builds on the previous chapter. Finally, Devine offers his solutions, entitled “Remythologizing Inner-City Schooling.” Through his use of organization, Devine comprehensively tackles his thesis.

To understand unsuccessful and ineffective policy initiatives, it is necessary to understand the extent to which violence is accepted and tolerated. An Asian teacher is quoted as saying, “There is no sense of shame in the U.S.” and, “yesterday a girl was involved in a mugging; today she is in the classroom laughing” (Devine 121). Students learn violent behaviors from living in violent neighborhoods. They have no choice. In order to avoid gang violence, they must join gangs or be “tougher” than their friends. Violence is “normalized” in American society. In fact, when teachers say that a foreign student is becoming “Americanized,” this is equated with violent behavior, getting poor grades, and cutting class (Devine 110). One African American girl summarizes her experience at an urban public high school, “there’s just so much that goes on that’s ridiculous. It gets on my nerves how kids are always gettin’ ready to fight in the middle of the hallway and like do drugs and get pregnant and everything. School is supposed to prepare you for life challenges but not the kind of challenges I see here” (Hemmings 298). The real issue is that students are not taught coping mechanisms. If they get angry with a peer, they might pull a knife on their peer rather than conducting an orderly discussion. Violent behaviors are learned from society, neighborhoods, parents, and peers. In turn, violent behaviors are passed on to children and are carried out in public schools.

Devine’s purpose is accomplished effectively because of his clear establishment of a cyclical theme. Devine refers back to this repetitive cycle throughout the book. For example, students end up in “the lower tier” schools because they are not accepted into the more prestigious “ed-op” schools. Students hear for many years from parents and friends that these lower-tier schools are “places to avoid” (Devine 28). Students’ middle school guidance counselors have repeatedly told them that the local high school is a

school to steer clear of because of its violent history (Divine 28). These schools are seen as a last resort for students; therefore, freshmen enter these lower-tier schools every year with negative attitudes. Entering students expect violence, only spurring it on more. Devine recalls a tenth-grade girl announcing her acceptance at one of the ed-op schools. The girl was congratulated, but her entrance into the school, “represented one more defeat: she was not only moving up the pyramid, she was also fleeing the bottom” (Devine 24). Lower-tier schools lose the best students; therefore, they lack resources and brain power to improve their status.

Devine’s argument is so effective because he stresses our excessive reliance on law enforcement and technology to combat violence. In actuality, our dependence on these impersonal measures, such as a myriad of metal detectors and security personnel, has served as a hindrance in the war on violence. In one particular school, the “security personnel” is composed of 110 people, while comparably, the teaching staff is composed of 150 people (Devine 78). These implementations are seen as easy solutions to problems. One student dean was reported saying, “If I have a rape in the school this year, I’ll get two extra security guards next year” (Devine 76). Instead of educating students about the immorality and destruction of violence, security guards are put into schools as quick-fixes. This occurs so often and so quickly that teachers are not informed about its implementation until after the fact. Security guards frequently abuse their power. Devine describes an African American girl who transferred out of the school to an ed-op school because, “one of the guards had made suggestive remarks as he moved the scanner in the vicinity of her legs” (Divine 27). Many times, the guards date students (Devine 90). Clearly, such events are a violation of personal space and privacy. Abuses by school authorities cause teachers and students to distrust administration and to fend for

themselves. Teachers complain that many security guards are not high school graduates themselves and identify with students more than teachers. Security guards are often on a first-name basis with students; this behavior is clearly inappropriate. It sends messages to the students that the inappropriate student/guard relationships are appropriate behaviors and are tolerated by society. Furthermore, the implementation of law enforcement and metal detectors gives students the message that they cannot be trusted. It is a way to suppress the student body without reforming student attitudes.

Devine goes on to explain that teachers who voice their opinions of disdain for being “stuck” at the school add to the complexity of violence. Students’ situations become progressively worse when a teacher expresses his or her own disdain for teaching “bad kids” at a “bad school.” One teacher frequently remarks, “Okay. I don’t have to teach. I still get a check” (Devine 123). Such remarks do not create a supportive learning environment for students. Adding to divisions between students, teachers, security guards, and administration is that, frequently, teachers are told, “not to get involved” in student fights because of insurance issues (Devine 83). Liability issues cause the union to tell teachers, “Hands off! Hands off students! Stay away from the conflict! Don’t get in the middle! Don’t get involved!” (Devine 83). For example, if a male teacher tries to break up a fight between female students, he may find himself charged with sexual abuse and transferred to another school (Devine 83). Next, the responsibility to handle a violent situation is shifted to security guards that are more than likely irresponsible. Because many teachers cannot take responsibility or help their students, student/teacher relationships suffer deeply. It prevents teachers from being dependable adult figures and role models for students. Liability issues hinder students and teachers from forming healthy relationships with students.

Devine goes on to argue the highly stressful situation of teachers. In lower-tier schools, teachers are expected to teach the “worst” students. Many students in the lower-tier are “retreads,” meaning that they have failed many times, but are simply in that grade because teachers cannot risk their job by failing them once more. These students lack the resources and support to succeed in the classroom. No matter how much effort the teacher puts forth, students are apathetic. Despite this, teachers are still audited by the principal. There is a serious distrust between administration regarding teachers and student ability, leading to harmed relationships. A tutor writes of one teacher who “passes them on to the next grade, even though they have not done the work. She now understands, she said, how these kids have gotten where they are, by being ‘passed along’ in the lower grades” (Devine 120). Students “age out” of middle school when they reach the age of fifteen (Devine 33). Every year, students are passed on to the next grade even though they are highly unqualified and lack the academic tools to succeed. Students become apathetic, passive, and bored toward their schoolwork because they are taking classes that are above their level. There is no incentive for students to put forth effort when they “age out” or will be passed on for other reasons. Students’ pessimistic attitudes lead to self-destruction and violence. Teachers cannot form emotional relationships with their students when the emphasis is only on getting through the curriculum. The practice of “retreading” students must end, but high standards still must exist.

Devine achieves his purpose of identifying the causes of violence brilliantly. His goal was not to offer viable solutions, but to simply bring attention to the attributing factors of violence. Devine “rethinks” school safety (Devine 204). He commands the reader’s full attention to the issue. Because Devine is an insider of city schools, his thesis

is extremely valid. Instead of taking on the role of another figure blaming irrelevant issues for climates of violence, such as lack of religion in schools or heavy metal music, which have served as scapegoats, Devine gives valid explanations for violence in schools. His evidence is circumstantial; his use of real-life accounts engages the reader in the epidemic problem of violence. Tutors' experiences with students are especially poignant. Their accounts are heart-warming and emotionally moving. While the majority of the book is focused on the contributing factors of violence, Devine draws convincing conclusions in the final chapter. His in-depth description of each factor is very effective for his proposals in the final chapter. To understand youth hostility, we should try to understand it from the perspective of teenagers (Hemmings 306). He calls for eliminating the guns from American society instead of gun-carrying students (Devine 201). These lower-tier schools must be something more than "dumping grounds for trouble makers" (Devine 201). Perhaps, the most important proposal is to eliminate our reliance on technology and law enforcement as means for school discipline (Devine 204). Clearly, the implementation of these means has proved to be ineffective. Devine also recognizes the notion that security personnel cannot be eliminated from the school environment. Instead, Devine proposes proper training for security guards (Devine 204). Training in psychology and sociology will help guards cope with sticky situations with students. Perhaps, guards should be given the chance to complete high school or college (Devine 204). Finally, the elimination or breaking up of large schools must be eliminated to abolish anonymity. Devine's experience demonstrates that students benefit from tutoring programs. The creation of close relationships between students and adults will make schools more personable for students. To prevent and eradicate violence, schools must be personable institutions. Once these goals are achieved, students can proudly declare,

“Here, I have all I need to succeed. Here I am being treated as an individual” (Devine 212). Devine does an excellent job of addressing the problems he iterates in chapters 1-7. Chapter 8 successfully brings each established idea from previous chapters together. The final chapter motivates and gives knowledge to the reader to lobby and demand change.

Maximum Security should be required reading for every student, teacher, parent, and administrator. Devine’s proposals for change are more philosophical ideas rather than plausible solutions because of the apathy and improper allocation that exists within urban public schools. Still, he is able to recognize the system’s limitations. Devine opens up opportunities for change. Devine is one of the few pioneers in the field to identify the true problems overrunning urban public schools. He is not looking for scapegoats. It is society’s duty to build on his ideas and to make his proposals possible. It is our obligation to expand his propositions. Most importantly, we must stop looking for quick fixes, as Devine states. We must be committed to eradicating violence in schools. All education figures, not exclusively urban public school administrators or teachers, can learn from the state of urban public schools. Perfection is not possible, but the American education system and its educators need to strive for it. First and foremost, our main goal must be to “minimize children’s exposure to violence and to increase their safety” (Guerra, Husemann, and Spindler 1574). Change is long overdue. We must recognize the limitations of the system, but put these initiatives recommended by Devine into effect in urban public schools.

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Works Cited

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