

Blocking violence at the door: Is education in urban inner city schools in danger or endangering?

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Introduction

In the past decade or so the media, whether through Hollywood entertainment or news media, has given us this grim portrayal of violence in the public school setting. We have been bombarded with images of youth punching each other in school corridors as armed security guards jump on them only to increase the physical intensity of the scene. Does it exist only in selected schooling situations and has it always existed? Some may argue that since Columbine we have been awakened to the harsh reality of gun violence in schools, and schools have lost a certain sanctity reserved for a learning environment. But the gun violence in suburban schools is perpetrated by a small number of individuals targeting the school and points towards certain psychological disorders on the part of the perpetrator. The media has picked up on these acts of violence as an anomaly and something out of the ordinary. The American public seems to have been reawakened to the danger that guns hold and the absurdity of the crimes committed only through the increased attention on suburban and rural schools.

In urban inner city schools however, violence is seen as an unavoidable part of everyday life. From teachers to parents, people have come to accept the culture of violence as part of everyday life. Violence in urban inner city schools has evolved into a dangerous black hole. Urban communities which surround inner city schools have adopted a 'street culture' where traditional systems of power and control like the police work in an insidious relationship where right and wrong are barely distinguishable, better known as an accepted culture of violence (Devine). The porous nature of violence has allowed this culture to seep in and out of the walls of inner city schools. It is hard to pinpoint the exact time when violence and inner city schools became synonymous with each other. Discourse surrounding violence in urban schools has existed for decades but currently public policy has shown an

increasing frustration and indifference towards these inner city schools. Solutions to the problems involve an increased presence and reliance on security guards, which has radically redefined the relationships that students have with teachers and vice versa. Despite this lack of valuable research and solutions on tackling this paramount issue, there are viable options that exist. Education reformers have emphasized the need for smaller schools, increased lines of communication between communities, schools and youth. Before we explore these policy initiatives it is essential to first understand the perceptions of violence in an urban inner city context.

An accepted culture of violence

Urban inner city schools are unique in that they serve some of the largest populations of socially disenfranchised and marginalized youth. Many of the students are minorities and many of whom are immigrants or children of immigrants. They arrive in these schools from a non-empowering junior high school and have to contend with their socioeconomic status and the general ignorance of society towards them. These schools have also developed into dumping grounds for youth who have failed in private and higher valued public schools (Devine 29). The violence culture has co-evolved alongside a culture of apathy towards these students. Students have to cope with schools which are in historically poor neighborhoods, segregated, overcrowded and socially inhospitable environments (Devine 23). John Devine's *Maximum Security; the Culture of Violence in Inner City Schools*, examines the case of New York City's lower tier schools. "Their [incoming freshman] junior high school guidance counselors have repeatedly reminded them that the local high school is a place to be avoided at all costs because of its history of violence" (Devine 28). Administrators, teachers and the wider society look upon inner city schools with a sense of

hopelessness. From this constructed image, students are likely to lose faith in both the school and in their own ability to succeed educationally.

Schools of this sort have taken on a very different identity. Learning and providing equal opportunities for individual success are rare occurrences, while ritualized violence is part of an accepted culture. The reasons for this prevailing culture are often attributed to social alienation both in and outside of school. In a study conducted through surveys from a sample group of urban youth published in the *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, lack of social support was cited as one of the biggest indicators for weapon carrying.

“Implications of this finding are that students who perceive that the people in their lives are supportive are less likely to carry weapons to school” (Malecki et al.). Most of us, including policy makers, understand these predictors. But how does the physical relationship students have with the school space, emotional relationships with teachers and with their peers within the walls of inner city schools affect the changing culture of violence in schools?

Cycles of blame

Normalized violence has become accepted by both teachers and students. Discussion among teachers about violence is ambivalent on the topic of violence as one or two knifing incidents are considered signs of things quieting down (Devine 35). On the side of some students, carrying a weapon is as automatic as getting up in the morning. “A number of them, when they get up in the morning, they brush their teeth, they put the pants on, put your knife in your pocket, you put your shoes on, its another part of what you do in the morning” (Devine 36). It is hard to locate the direct cause for this behavior. As part of safety mechanism anybody who interprets an impending threat is bound to protect themselves in one way or another. What emerges is a cyclical form of violence where fights may be incited not by malicious hatred but by self defense against a perceived threat.

Cycles of normalized violence feed into the perceptions the general public has towards youth. Pedro Noguera's book *City Schools and the American Dream* challenges the state of urban education, and he looks at how culture of violence has evolved in urban schools. "With media reports about gangs of youth engaging in unprovoked attacks against innocent bystanders, young people have come to embody the public's fears about uncontrolled violence in the inner city; fears that are used to justify extreme measures by police" (Noguera 127). This inclination towards prejudiced blame absolves adults in the lives of these youth from responsibly responding to their needs. Students are blamed for low test scores, drug abuse and gang violence (Noguera 128). It is not to say that these youth do not commit acts of violence. But yet again we encounter a cyclical relationship where committing acts of violence and being victims of violence are not isolated from each other. "These two phenomena –victimization and perpetration-are not unrelated; they reflect the fact that violence, like health, wealth and political power, continues to be a central feature of the persistent inequality between racial groups" (Noguera 128). Noguera points out the fact that minority groups are the main groups of people we encounter in an inner city neighborhood and school and they often suffer the brunt of extreme inequalities. After having examined the culture of violence and its affects on youth it is important to analyze the current policy initiatives and the problems they hold and have created.

Adding fuel to the fire

Public discourse is commonly centered on looking primarily at crime statistics and numbers published by the Centers of Disease Control. These statistics may indicate a general decrease in the number of violent crimes but do not go deeper than this superficial level. Discourse tends to fall into political ideology categories, which simplify this complex problem of violence. Youth are depicted as a troublesome group from the conservative

perspective or an alienated group from the liberal (Devine). The right wing conservative debates more often than not call these schools places of chaos where abandonment is far easier than reform, while left wing explanations have a tendency to blame the institutions and authorities for ineffective policies that alienate rather than educate.

This discourse, largely conducted by adults sometimes gets lost in numbers and horror stories and thus fails to truly understand the plight of these inner city youth. Solutions tend to be simple band-aid policies like the installation of metal detectors and the employment of security personnel. The strategies deployed by no means target the pervasiveness of violence. It insists that violence comes from outside and that these metal detectors are methods of stopping the violence before it enters the school. What has emerged is an almost complete restructuring of the ways in which teachers and students interact and view themselves, all of which contribute to a disconnection between adults and youth. The fear that violence spawns has the dangerous potential of becoming the primary motivator for school policy and the biggest deterrent against effective policies that change the way we view youth today. We focus less and less attention on changing the characters of the youth and on teachers developing human relationships with their students. We forget the most fundamental values, such as courtesy and respect.

Proliferation of security

Upon entering a school the scene can be compared to airports and state department offices where metal detectors, security guards and staff walking around with walkie-talkies are there to welcome you. In one inner city school in New York there are no fewer than 110 security personnel to run the 'safety' of the school as compared to the 150 teaching staff. "The constant chatter and static of the walkie-talkies dominates the acoustical space of the school..." (Devine 78). The installation of metal detectors and employment of security

guards functions as a defense mechanism against these students. As their school bags are searched for weapons, these students are increasingly being viewed as potential criminals. It is not to say that these strategies have not helped bring the numbers of reported violence down, but these strategies are not coupled with large scale programs designed to change ways that students' feelings of justice, morality or self-worth. Instead they have completely revolutionized the schooling institution with huge implications on students and learning.

The chain of command for security personnel varies from district to district, but on a whole, guards do not report to principals and at times, like incompetent teachers, it can take months and even years to get them removed. Guards have not gone through much schooling and are at times closer to the students than the teachers in a school. "...reported seeing a male security guard passionately kissing one of the female students. A guard in another school was fired for getting a girl pregnant" (Devine 89). The duties of the security guards are not clearly understood by both the teachers and the guards themselves. Guards are sometimes called into classrooms to tell individual students to be quiet, at other times they are used to break up fights. Teachers rely heavily on guards to maintain discipline within their classroom space. Teachers are seen increasingly less and less as disciplinarians or even respectable figures (Devine).

Disconnection between teachers and students

Corridors, hallways, classrooms, cafeterias and bathrooms. These individual spaces that make up a school are where new battle lines are drawn. Over reliance on security guards act as a buffer between the teachers and the students. Traditional power structures in a school involve the connection of teachers not merely to the minds of their students but to whole physicality of the students and the school. Teachers in schools where violence has not infiltrated everyday life and rhetoric are comfortable walking around the space of the school

and are comfortable in their influence over students learning. In inner city schools, as Devine points out, teachers walk around turning a blind eye to misbehaviors. Teachers rarely ask students wearing hats in classes to take them off and many know that their lives could be endangered for trying to enforce discipline in the classroom. “The teachers’ supervisory gaze is conspicuous by its absence, not its presence. Even the most flagrant violations and inappropriate behaviors are studiously avoided. Teachers walk around from their classrooms to the cafeteria as if they had blinders on” (Devine 98).

Teachers have a tendency to place the blame solely on the shoulders of the students. “Many teachers and almost all administrators share a common assumption: that the cause of the disarray is to be placed solely on the shoulders of the students, especially on a small core of troublemakers” (Devine 35). As students are viewed as the main causes for this dominant culture of violence, education seizes its attempts to empower them but instead functions on this fear of them. This fear motivates public policy and runs the great risk of creating youth that are apathetic towards violence.

We must not however look at inner city schools as completely hopeless and discount the efforts of the dedicated teachers and principals who are fighting to make their classrooms and schools better places. Apathy towards these schools can only block creative initiatives for reform.

Hope for the future

Some might argue that in order for violent school culture to be subverted, policy must hit the root of the problem such as poverty and inequalities. But in the political era of big words and empty rhetoric it is far more realistic for us to employ strategies that start small but think big. Policy recommendations must therefore create a sense of mutual trust

and respect amongst teachers and students. Schools provide the largest platform for us to educate successive generations about the impact justice and morality can have on students; this responsibility falls even more heavily on inner city schools because of the population they serve. Current policy initiatives include tougher punishments on crime, lowering the age where juveniles can be tried as adults and an increased emphasis on force and control.

Another major flaw of these policies is that they are created in a vacuum where input from youth barely exists. Ideally reform would change gun laws and promote media reform, but this would call for a revolution. In order for policy initiatives to work we must focus our attention on schools itself. Reform must change the structures of these schools including rethinking the roles that security guards play. It must target the attitudes of teachers towards these youth and give a voice to these youth.

Small Schools

If we have learnt anything it is that if policies continue to reflect the fear that adults have of our youth than whatever policies are created will only alienate youth from adults further. Changing mentality and attitudes of both adults and youth is not an easy task. But one of the keys is the creation of smaller schools. The push for smaller schools has come from almost all avenues of educational reform because small schools provide the most realistic opportunity for us to envision reform.

- Small schools facilitate better communication between adults and students. Large, poorly funded and dilapidated schools are where students become anonymous, loose motivation to learn and have few role models to look up to.
- Small schools work because of the environment of respect and accountability.

Teachers know the faces of their students and have the time to focus their efforts on individual students.

- When adult attention for youth is built on respect and care, then students realize their potential for educational success. Learning is the key prevention against violence.

Increasing lines of communication

The creation of small schools is a positive solution but one that involves long-term strategy and planning. In the meantime we should not ignore short term efforts. Some would suggest that technology and law enforcement are the most effective short term solutions. But these short term solutions require a new level of communication between teachers, security guards and principals. Security guards in many cases are barely trained and receive very little support in dealing effectively with the students.

- Teachers must work hand in hand with these guards so the two adult parties can be a unified force in the eyes of the students.
- Guards should be required to have some basic knowledge of the psychology of teenagers and should be hired through the direct communication between the principals and teachers.
- If guards are given a slight pay rise they might also be more willing to carry out their duties effectively.
- Guards should also be used only in major cases of violence and the responsibility of responding to minor violations should fall on the shoulders of teachers. These include marijuana use, vandalism and harassment.
- The prompt response of teachers to minor infractions, as opposed to law enforcement from police or security guards, sends a message that the school will not stand for actions that undermine the learning environment. This works only through a ‘climate of respect’ as Noguera names it. “ In this way assertive responses to minor

infractions can serve as a means of reinforcing values and mission of a school and help to create a climate where respect for learning and the rights of others are maintained as prevailing community norms” (Noguera 138).

Paying attention to our youth

The voices of youth must also be given an added value in the decision making process, not only because these policies affect them the most but giving them a voice is crucial to a mutual respect for the policies. When acts of violence like knifings occur it is key to include the students in the discussion about what should be done. In Castlemont High School in Oakland, California, students were invited to discuss methods of improving safety and security in their school following a stabbing. Students suggested that all students wear temporary identification badges during school hours, since the perpetrator was not from the school. It turns out that this short term solution did work because students had a clearer understanding of its purpose (Noguera 135). The future is not as grim as it seems. There are strategies out there that work. In place of traditional methods of punishment like suspension, certain schools have used community service, after school tutoring and methods that encourage students to learn from their mistakes (Noguera 139). For these approaches to have a larger impact we must include everybody in the dialogue, from parents to security guards. We must also stress to district officials and local politicians the promise that small schools hold.

Conclusion

Violence pervades every level of society, cutting across class, race and gender lines. But neglect and apathy towards inner city communities and more importantly, inner city schools only perpetuates the lines that divide our society. Within urban inner city schools violence is commonplace something that suburban schools and communities would never

stand for. Violence has created a void in the relationship that teachers in inner city schools have with their students. Traditionally employed strategies have created a sort of blind spot, where we are so focused on stopping violence before it enters the school that we ignore changing the structures of school that perpetuate violence. These static strategies provide little room for understanding the complexity of each individual student. Youth have however never failed to discover creative mediums of expressing their frustrations, loss and hope. Poetry has been one such avenue or self-expression. As the conditions in inner city schools steal students' sense of agency; poetry and artistic expression provides a lone outlet.

My abstract life

My sense is your chaos
My chaos makes sense.
I am destined to be
Lost.
No one knows my world
Drag me to the asylum
so I can be amongst
my brilliant peers
They are, you know,
brilliant people.
Am I chaotic in
a world that's supposed
to make sense?
Am I sensible in a
chaotic world?
A diamond in the ruff?
Am I . . . ?
What am I here for?
To be laughed at?
Ridiculed?
Scorned?
Labeled?
Judged?
What?
What is my place
in this semi-chaotic
and semi-sensible
world?
To be pointed at
and talked about?
You look at me

because you want to know.
If I speak, I am to be
quieted.
If I move, I am to be
stopped.
No one knows my name,
no one knows anything about
me.
Yet they can tell stories
about me.
I don't question their
actions any more, I let
it be. I have succumbed
to the madness.
I have become madness.

-Tanzania- (McCormick 4)

Tanzania a 16 year old African American student explores the conditions of urban inner city schools and the daily dehumanization that she is exposed to in these schools; of which violence and policies attempting to curtail violence are a major part. As students like Tanzania feel a loss of identity and purpose it is essential that we never lose hope in changing this culture of violence. Youth and adults must realize that they have a vested interest in promoting safety and that bridging the adult youth divide is the primary means of doing so. "However if we truly seek to create a different future, one that is more peaceful and nonviolent than the present, we must actively go about creating it. That is a challenge for researchers, activist, young people, and everyone else who still has the ability to imagine and envision another reality" (Noguera 141).

Works Cited

Devine, John. Maximum Security: the Culture of Violence in Inner-City Schools. 1st ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

The book which provides the basis for this essay is an in-depth ethnographic perspective from inner city schools in New York City. The book's value comes from the critiques of both theory and practice that dominates our inner city schools. Besides representing the views of our youth from first hand accounts, Devine also provide viable solutions to

tackle violence. Reading the book provides any reader with a clear sense of the problems that frame violence in the inner city schools.

Malecki, Christine, and Michelle Demaray. "Carrying a Weapon to School and Perceptions of Social Support in an Urban Middle School." Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders August 2003. 11 Nov 2005 <<http://0-sas.epnet.com.clicnet4.clic.edu/citation.asp>>.

McCormick, Jennifer. "'Drag Me to the Asylum': Disguising and." The Urban Review 35 (2003). 4 Dec 2005 <http://0-sas.epnet.com.clicnet4.clic.edu/externalframe.asp?tb=0&_ug=sid>.

The paper from which the poem is taken from is a unique analysis of students' views on the conditions of inner city schools through the use of poetry. A large section of the paper focuses on the poetry of one student, Tanzania and her feelings towards security guards and their scanners. The article is of value to readers who are interested to the social psychology of urban inner city schools.

Noguera, Pedro. City Schools and the American Dream. 1st ed. New York: Teachers College press, 2003.

Pedro Noguera takes a pragmatic approach to analyzing the state of urban education. He addresses a broad range of questions and concerns that plague urban education. He critiques the government's policy of higher standards and testing. He clearly shows the link between school achievement and social forces like violence. Readers from diverse backgrounds and perspective will find that this book gives the American public a much needed analysis.

References

"Center for the Prevention of School Violence." Journalism Department. August 2005. Center for the Prevention of School Violence. 14 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.ncdjdp.org/cpsv/jourdept.htm>>.

"Ending School Violence." Mission Statement. 2005. National Campaign to Prevent School Violence. 14 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.ribbonofpromise.org/about.html>>.

"National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center." Daily News Briefs. 1 Dec. 2005. Centers for Disease Control. 14 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/index.asp>>.

"Safe Schools;Healthy Students." Youth Violence Prevention. 15 Sept 2005. National Mental Health Information Center. 14 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/schoolviolence/default.asp>>.

Further Reading

Dunbar, Christopher, and Francisco Villarrual. "What a Difference the Community Makes: Zero Tolerance Policy Interpretation and Implementation." Equity and Excellence in Education Dec 2004. 5 Dec 2005
<<http://taylorandfrancis.metapress.com/>>.

The authors address the issue of zero tolerance policies that are employed in rural, suburban and urban schools towards offenses, including violence, drug abuse and alcohol abuse. The article explores how the different school districts in the rural, suburban and urban context enforce and implement these policies. An added value of the article is the analysis of how administrators have modified these policies based on the economic, cultural and social background of the school locality or have not. The results showed that in some situations, suspected students were expelled, while in others students were not. The data reflected the racial inequality that many students of color face, seeing as a disproportionate number of students who were expelled were of color and from urban school districts.

Eliot, Delbert . Violence in American Schools. 4th ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

This book examines the latest research on causes of youth violence through a variety of perspectives including criminology, ecology, public health and developmental psychology. The author evaluates the strategies that various schools and communities have used to prevent or reduce violence. The book takes a unique perspective on solutions and also considers the influence of social networks on student life. It is valuable to parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers and all those concerned with violence.

United States. National Center for Education Statistics. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2005. Nov. 2005. 10 Dec. 2005.
<<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006001>>.

This annual report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Center for Education Statistics examines the state of crime in school. The in depth statistical information is designed to give the public a scientific look at the issue of crime in schools. The report also presents data from multiple perspectives including the general population. There is also a section on statistics of crime outside of school to place school crime in the context of larger social forces.