



Agitate

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BLOOD IN OUR SCHOOLS!

A crazed teenager, intent on racking up the body count, enters his school. He has an irrational hatred of his school and everyone in it. He pulls out a gun and starts shooting as many students as he can, then takes out a couple of teachers. He's screaming, "Shut up, shut up; I hate this school!" (New York Times) Then, in an ultimate act of mental instability, turns the gun on himself and blows his already addled brains out.

What's going on?

In October the horror scene described above was carried out at Success Tech Academy by a young man named Asa Coon. (NPR, AP, New York Times 10/11/07, Reuters 10/10/07) Mr. Coon played out a role already well defined since the horrific Columbine massacre. (Larkin, Williams) We've seen this before. Every time we endure this heartbreak we stumble through the same old paradigm: troubled young men doing the unthinkable. We then follow through with the same response: greater restrictions on our young, more discipline, more surveillance, less tolerance and respect for individual human dignity.

It's understandable. If school shootings are just examples of our violent youth acting out their video game fantasies, then all we have to do is deal with individuals. If we can define students, especially non-conforming students, as mentally unstable, poorly raised whack jobs with guns, then we can crack down on students—especially non-conforming students. If the problem is individuals then the solution involves acting on individuals. Schools simply need to institute more draconian zero tolerance rules, implement greater surveillance technologies and ensure that the rights of the students are disregarded in favor of heightened security measures.

If, on the other hand, the problem is a complex interaction between individuals and a toxic social structure, then the corresponding solutions become more problematic. If what we are seeing is a response to overarching social ecologies, then the solutions lay in changing those social ecologies, a task which is significantly more complicated, let alone expensive. Of course, our society has a history of acting on individuals rather than analyzing the social ecologies in which the individual acts.

In my research into schools I'm amazed that education, more than any other institution, appears to be the stage on which society's conflicts are played out. Schools are our main socializing institution, what sociologists refer to as technologies of social control. Such schools are the instruments of those who control the dominant paradigms. In this case, the paradigm being played out is that of sacrificing freedom for the sake of security. What's more, violence becomes a rationale for allowing the institution to disregard rights. And if we can convince students to disregard their rights in favor of security, then we have already taken the first steps into creating adults who will do the same.

But the premise is false from the start. We know this because the very measures that have been put into effect since Columbine are not working. An analysis of the facts could lead us to come up with different solutions that emphasize human freedom and dignity rather than intolerance and authoritarianism.

Curtailling violence in schools may not be the goal. It may very well be that socializing students to accept authority in exchange for security is the ultimate goal, and that violence, when it occurs, merely reinforces the false legitimacy of this goal.

Violence and Exclusion: A Part of School Culture

The stats show that our youth are becoming less violent, regardless of video games. (Youth Violence Project) Despite the fact that our kids are becoming less violent, however, schools remain the main loci of violence in their lives. If kids are going to experience violence they are likely to experience it in schools. Rates of violence in schools are intolerably high. (Thomas) According to Kimberly Williams, in *Socially Constructing School Violence*, thirty-three percent of all violence against young people occurs in schools.

The debate, however, centers on what's causing our kids to be uncharacteristically violent in schools. This is a false premise. Violence is not an aberration in our schools any more than it is uncharacteristic of our society. Violence, in some manner, is the norm. Schools reproduce social hierarchies. Status in schools is reinforced through the use of violence and exclusion against students in the lower strata. This violence is not only perpetrated by peers, but is condoned and reinforced by teachers and staff through passive violence and adult nonresponsiveness. (Michaelis)

Within these status structures schools define certain acts of violence as deviance subject to zero tolerance rules. Other acts of violence are condoned and even perpetuated by the school structure. In schools, as in society, violence is defined based on social capital, not on a ideal of social justice. Since this is the case violence in schools serves to create and reinforce strata in which there are winners and losers, the popular and the geek.

Popular students wield noticeable power. They can commit acts of abuse and violence without significant consequence. When less popular students like, Asa Coon, resort to violence they are subject to sanction mostly in the form of exclusionary techniques. These exclusionary techniques are used by peer groups, but are also formalized by school administration through such tools as time out, suspension, transfer and expulsion. (UCPP)

It's interesting that in all mass school shootings it's the students who are most subject to violence and exclusionary practices who commit the acts. Mr. Coon was suspended for fighting the day before. He was described as an unpopular individual who did not fit in with other students. The media made it a point to describe Coon as a Goth with painted fingernails, piercings and black clothing.

He was different, non-conforming. And non-conformity has no place in our schools. Ralph Larkin, in his book *Comprehending Columbine*, notes, "non-conforming students were perceived as a blot on the reputation of the high school." According to the New York Times, "Mr. Coon was often mocked for the way he dressed..." Larkin also noted the prevalence of religious sorting in Columbine that later became a huge issue. Similarly, NPR news thought it was significant that, "Coon told his classmates he didn't believe in God and instead worshipped rocker Marilyn Manson."

His exclusion was reinforced by his invisibility. Despite his Goth

appearance and that he was one of the few white students in his school, and despite that he was suspended and thus not allowed in the building, he was able to walk into this small school--unnoticed. He was punched in the face by a student in the boys room (the first student he shot on his rampage) without anyone noticing. (NPR) He had a history of domestic violence and psychological problems yet did not raise any concerns with his teachers. His math teacher stated, "I had concerns about him, yes. He seemed like an angry young man. I did not fear for my safety." (NPR) Being a teacher is not about fearing for one's safety, but rather acting on one's concerns to improve the life of a student. Should we only act when we are afraid?

Here is a student excluded to the point of invisibility. And this is the norm for millions of students around the country. They are subject to multiple modes of exclusion from peers, teachers and administrators. In some cases students create ways of becoming visible, becoming a person, such as adopting radical styles and finding alternative group membership. But being different subjects the student to ridicule and further exclusionary practices. Perhaps, as a final act of resistance, a final act of surrender, Mr. Coon found solace in the fact that he was no longer invisible.

Violence is so pervasive in schools that it is rarely noticed by the adults charged with running the institutions. Coon's Teachers told reporters that violence was a rarity in the school, (New York Times) yet the facts betray this perception. Asa Coon was suspended for fighting. He was punched in the face the very day he went on his rampage. When the shooting started one student noticed his classmates running down the stairs. He "thought that it was probably just a fight so I just kept going," (NPR) only to find himself in the line of fire. Violence in Success Tech Academy was not a rarity. Adults may not have seen the violence, but the kids saw it. Asa Coon saw it. Asa Coon was often at the receiving end.

In the October 2007 issue of the American Sociological Review Derek Kreager examined how violence is intertwined with masculine identity through school approved sports like football and wrestling. According to his research, students who play contact sports and have peers who play contact sports are more likely to be involved in violence. Often, it's excluded students who are on the receiving end of this violence, yet retaliation on their part is often defined as further evidence of the need for exclusionary practices. The research on school bullying, including *Comprehending Columbine*, notes the deference allowed athletes regarding their abusive behavior, especially those athletes who wrestle or play football.

This injustice is reinforced when adult role models condone the violence. This is what Karen Michaelis calls passive violence. In many cases, teachers turn a blind eye to bullying committed by popular students. The advice they give to victims of bullying is to toughen up, to deal with it. In more extreme and disheartening cases, Michaelis notes, teachers actually participate in these exclusionary and abusive behaviors.

Students learn the role of violence in schools and that status and violence are linked. Violence committed by those of lower social strata, however, is defined as deviant and subject to measures of control. The measures of control used by school administrators are, ironically, exclusionary methods. Students, like Coon, are suspended and

further excluded from school society. In more extreme cases they are transferred to "alternative schools," and even expelled. Either way, the universal solution to the violations of excluded students is to further exclude them!

A 1999 report by Universities Children's Policy Partnership (UCPP) concluded that exclusionary means of discipline do nothing to deter violence in schools. The report suggests that in some instances it tends to increase negative outcomes like, "delinquency, substance abuse and dropping out." Excluding the excluded exacerbates the conflict that exists with such students within the school ecology. The student learns that his place in the strata is unavoidable, and that violence is the means of enforcement. School is perceived as an unjust and indifferent, one might say toxic, environment.

(Michaelis)

School as a Toxic Environment

Though no one would suggest that violence is manifestly condoned in our schools, let alone our society, there remains clear evidence that our ideal values are not manifesting themselves with real consequences in our schools. Violence and exclusion are the every day experience of millions of our students. Under the right circumstances this social isolation has devastating effects on the individual as well as the student body.

It doesn't take long for students to realize that they are living in a toxic environment. When one is trapped in a toxic environment there is no way to respond that is not influenced by this toxicity. The standard options for living within any social milieu are conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreat or rebellion. (Merton) But in a toxic social milieu, such as one in which some form of violence, be it manifest or latent, active or passive, is the norm, all such options are tainted. Was Asa Coon and other school shooters rebelling against injustice or conforming to violent expectations established by the social environment itself?

There's no way of knowing for certain just what goes through the minds of such young men. What is sure, however, is that our current strategies of curtailing student rights, zero tolerance and exclusionary measures are not working. The

sickness is not isolated in these troubled individuals. The sickness does not die with the student who takes his own life. The pathology exists deeper in the very violent nature of schools themselves. Until schools are designed to reflect ideals of social justice and respect for human dignity it is unlikely that school shootings will end.

While this article was being written the Associated Press reported that eighteen year old Pekka-Eric Auvinen killed eight students at his School in Finland. He was described as "a bullied teenage outcast." Finland is known for its quality schools and mostly peaceful culture where violent acts are rare. The AP report noted that a similar shooting took place in Finland in 1989 by a "14 year old boy who killed two other students apparently for teasing him." Even in a relatively peaceful culture, exclusion and selective violence can have terrible consequences.

The book *Comprehending Columbine* notes four major themes that contribute to school violence:

1. Tolerance of intimidation
2. Religious intolerance in the community
3. Paramilitary culture
4. Culture of celebrity

What analogues does this have for society?

Michaelis' research studies five structures of oppression:

1. Exploitative exclusion
2. Marginalization
3. Powerlessness
4. Imperialism
5. Inevitable Violence

Take Action!

There are not a lot of organizations devoted to changing the paradigms of school discipline. That's not to say it can't be done. Parents who are organized can demand more proactive measures for dealing with school related issues. Informed parents are more effective than uninformed. Check out the Children's Defense Fund and the Youth Violence Project for ideas and materials.

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