

Social perspectives on school anti-violence policies

On April 20th, 1999, events would unfold that would shock millions of Americans. In Littleton, Colorado that day, two young men whose names will not soon be forgotten, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, laid siege on Columbine High School where they were enrolled as students. They were heavily armed and wandered the hallways of their school, laying explosives and randomly shooting anyone in their path, resulting in carnage previously unheard of in an American school. The two shooters eventually committed suicide by shooting themselves. Including Harris and Klebold, 15 people were killed, and 21 were wounded. When the bullets stopped flying, much of the country was in a state of shock. Inevitably, many questions were asked, the most common ones being, “Why?” “How could this have happened?” “What caused these kids to become mass murderers?” “How can we prevent such an awful crime from ever being committed again?” Predictably, in the heat of the moment, people were quick with their answers. Fingers were pointed and much was to blame, including movies, music, video games, bad parenting, and the easy availability of guns. As time passed and emotions calmed, responses to the tragedy became a little more level-headed and less emotionally-charged (though such topics can never *really* be discussed without taking emotional context into account). In this paper, I want to examine the philosophies behind and the effectiveness of school policies geared towards reducing school violence. I will also make some recommendations on how to improve future policies.

I started with the Columbine example for a number of reasons. First of all, it was the act of (publicized) school violence that made the most impact on me--not just the

shooting incident itself, but the way people responded to it and how they went about looking for answers. Ideally, sufficient time has passed since the event that we can reflect on its meaning with greater objectivity than before. Second of all, although it was not the first incident of its kind, and certainly not the last¹, its magnitude was of a scale that warranted incredible amounts of public attention, and many of the school policies currently being implemented or debated are in response to the events at Columbine. Although those policies are intended to prevent future incidents, perhaps we can gain insight on their potential effectiveness by asking whether or not they could have prevented the incident at Columbine itself had they been implemented there prior to April 20th, 1999. And finally, the widespread distress caused by Columbine, in addition to spawning numerous school policies all over the country, is interesting for its own sake. That it was so shocking to so many, despite the more frequent violence that goes on every day all over America, gives us hints that this school violence in particular is *different* somehow. Until we understand why it has affected the public the way it has, our solutions to the problem might be doomed from the start.

It is important to note that not everybody feels that the media attention given to Columbine and other school mass shootings has been justified. Mike Males, of the Justice Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., in an article entitled “Real story behind school shootings going untold²”, expresses his discomfort at the fact that violence perpetrated by white middle-class kids shooting each other is sensationalized and the subject of intense debate, whereas, more common instances of adults killing kids or even minority youth-

¹ Katherine Ramsland presents a detailed listing and analysis of school killings, including both pre- and post-Columbine incidents and Columbine itself, in an online article entitled “School Killers”:
<http://www.crimelibrary.com/criminology2/school/>

² The full text of the article can be found at the website of the Justice Policy Institute:
<http://www.cjci.org/jpi/houston031301.html>

killings (often gang-related) go underreported. His point is a valid one. For all the worries of the American public, schools in general do not seem to be getting more dangerous for middle-class kids³, and thankfully, Columbine-style mass shootings are indeed rare with respect to other forms of violence at schools. But the fact remains that these acts of school violence are different, the motivations behind them are tricky and unclear, they are incredibly violent and premeditated, they are becoming more frequent (despite their overall rarity), and most significantly, they're perpetrated by kids who would 'never do such a thing' at places where 'it could never happen'. For policy makers (and the target audience of much of the mass media), these acts hit close to home. While I agree with Males' assessment that instances of violence that do not involve middle-class white youth are underreported, I think that these middle-class cases of school violence are different enough (as will be discussed) from other forms of violence that they need to be paid attention to in different ways. By no means, however, am I saying that adult and minority violence should be ignored.

Much of the public feels extremely threatened by the possibility of kids in the mold of Harris and Klebold wreaking havoc upon their schools and communities. For this group of people, schools are meant to be safe havens of learning, free from external distractions and danger. Schools like Columbine were meant represent the best and brightest hopes for the future of our society. Expressions of disbelief have been very common in response to school shootings perpetrated by white middle-class youth. There is a shattered expectation. Standards of behavior have been brutally violated. Perhaps it is

³ "Students Report School Crime at Same Level as 1970s But Use of Suspension Doubles" August 29th, 2001: <http://www.cjcj.org/sss/>

in these expectations and standards of behavior themselves that we can best understand the causes of school violence and therefore develop the best policies to curb it.

The main difference between the type of school violence we encounter that is perpetrated by minority youth versus the violence that is perpetrated by white middle-class males (such as Harris and Klebold) is also the reason why the former is underreported and the latter results in media frenzy. In the case of minority violence, minority gang violence for example, the perpetrators were marginalized to begin with. In the case of our middle-class perpetrators, the exact opposite was the case. Harris and Klebold were not marginalized to begin with. In the case of upscale American high schools, most of the marginalization occurs before the school year even begins. In many cases, one's socioeconomic background determines where one can live, which further plays a significant role in where one can attend school, not to mention private schools where very specific admissions criteria and high tuitions further determine the makeup of any given student body. Columbine high school, by all accounts, was populated mostly by students from white-middle class families in a tightly knit and religiously strong community with enthusiastic pride for the school's sports teams⁴. Instead of intentionally marginalizing its students, I would contend that schools (pre-college institutions, anyway) more often seek to do the opposite. For the lack of a better word, schools seek to *appropriate* their students, and otherwise well-off kids become victims of this outwardly benevolent but potentially stifling social system that forces them to fit in. Some of these kids turn to violence to cope with their situation.

⁴ Columbine High School's official profile can be found on the web:
<http://204.98.1.2/profiles/high/columbine.html>

The issues at stake here are discussed briefly by the authors Woodhouse and Lindblom when they characterize the policy-making process (and an enlightened democracy in general) as being hindered by cognitive impairment, very often exacerbated (somewhat ironically) by the schooling process. That process is characterized by them as being “conceived and used as an instrument to control the masses... Educational policy has attempted to construct schooling to induce habits of compliance at the expense of children’s development of skills useful for thoughtful dissent and inquiry.”⁵ Woodhouse and Lindblom see the hope of reforming attitudes towards education to be limited by people’s general disinterest in the topic. Concerns regarding school violence, however, seem to be an excellent starting point from which we can examine, at their most dramatic, the life-and-death consequences of our current educational policies and the urgency with which we need to address our problems.

Harris and Klebold (and the other perpetrators of mass school shootings in recent years), being “normal” white middle-class kids, would not be considered by most to have come from “marginalized groups”. They were intimately part of a school society that sought to have them fit in, but that society was not something the boys wanted to be part of. Harris and Klebold were characterized as bright and individualistic kids, but they felt oppressed and alienated by their peers and the educational system which sought to resocialize them. Their journals⁶ indicated they did not feel exiled so much as they felt imprisoned, and the (figurative) wardens were not particularly friendly. Although it was not talked about much at first, stories of Columbine high school’s “cult of the athlete” began to surface. The athletes, the same jocks that the two boys may have actively

⁵ Lindblom, Charles. E and Edward J. Woodhouse. *The Policy-Making Process: Third Edition*. p. 115

⁶ The Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office report contains excerpts from the journals of Harris and Klebold: http://denver.rockymountainnews.com/shooting/report/columbinereport/pages/suspects_text.htm

targeted in their killing spree, were the acknowledged kings of the school. There is a good deal of anecdotal evidence⁷ that they tormented and bullied other students, and the administration turned a blind eye to them, even allowing them to play on their respective sports teams after having been arrested for various reasons. Harris and Klebold viewed such behavior on the part of the athletic elites and the school administration to be vastly unfair and oppressive. Before being marginalized, Harris and Klebold had a choice. They could become part of the (unjust) social order they despised, or they could place themselves *outside* of that social order.

At this juncture, we might say that the two boys faced an identity crisis, although Erving Goffman's concept of "face" might be more useful in this context. Goffman defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact."⁸ Face closely corresponds to the notion of socially constructed self-image. If Harris and Klebold had allowed themselves to be appropriated by their peers, they would have suffered a severe loss of face. Their status (as non-athletes, especially), even if they had agreed to be part of the "normal" social order, would have been unacceptably low to them. Instead, they took a different approach. To regain face, they withdrew from the mainstream social order that threatened their face.

Having withdrawn, it is theoretically possible that the boys could have spent the rest of their high school careers isolated, but without engaging in violence. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Either because they were further provoked or because the withdrawal was not sufficient to regain the face they had lost from previous

⁷ "High schools' 'cult of the athlete' under scrutiny" in The Daily Camera, June 13th, 1999: <http://www.thedailycamera.com/shooting/13aathl.html>

⁸ Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-To-Face Behavior*. p. 5

transgressions against them, they acted out violently. According to Goffman, when a party's face has been offended and the offending party has left no room for face-saving measures, the offended "can resort to tactless, violent retaliation, destroying either themselves or the person who had refused to heed their warning."⁹

The social withdrawal also prevented the two boys from engaging in any further positive face-gaining interactions. Despite early media reports to the contrary, Harris and Klebold were only loosely associated with their fellow stigmatized students who called themselves the "Trenchcoat Mafia." One might hypothesize that a positive association with that group might have discouraged Harris and Klebold from acting out violently. As it turned out, the two had no long lasting associations within which they could potentially maintain face, except perhaps their association with each other¹⁰ as they planned their own end, with grandiose aspirations of becoming famous after April 20th, 1999—gaining face posthumously. Feeling ever isolated, they made *everyone* at Columbine their enemy.¹¹

Although they were not marginalized to begin with, by refusing to conform to a social standard they could not agree with, Harris and Klebold were immediately marginalized by their peers, and they further marginalized themselves when they actively acted out against their oppressors. As Goffman so correctly pointed out, such a strategy is a way of "salvaging face, but for all concerned the costs are usually high"¹² which in the case of school shootings is quite an understatement.

⁹ Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-To-Face Behavior*. p. 23

¹⁰ The dynamic between Harris and Klebold themselves remains unclear.

¹¹ While Harris and Klebold disliked the athletes of Columbine, it is important to stress that their violence was indiscriminate. In their aforementioned journals, Harris and Klebold expressed their hate of just about everyone and everything.

¹² Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-To-Face Behavior*. p. 23

Policy in the aftermath

If we can conclude that appropriation, alienation, and loss of face play a role in causing kids to become violent, how do these issues inform anti-violence policy? From a brief survey of the literature, it appears that current violence prevention policies are not addressing these issues very adequately. Although there is some discussion of ‘improving school atmosphere’¹³ and teaching kids to ‘appreciate diversity’ to help curb the problem of bullying¹⁴, most of the policies tend to be reactive (or punitive in the case of suspensions and expulsions¹⁵) towards the already troubled kids and are not actively finding ways to prevent their feelings of alienation in the first place. Proximate causes are more visible and easier to deal with than ultimate causes, after all. For example, even when utilizing policies informed by the rhetoric of ‘appreciating diversity’, it is easier to focus on teaching the troubled kids to appreciate their more mainstream peers, and not the other way around. ‘Anger management’ programs are clearly intended to prevent violent retaliation on the part of angry kids, and do not target those who might have provoked the anger in the first place. Yet, can we justifiably ignore the ultimate causes of violence simply because they are more difficult to deal with than the proximate ones? Such a policy seems inherently victimizing.

Research has also shown that implementing security cameras, metal detectors, and other technological fixes has not convincingly been effective at curbing school

¹³ For example, “School Violence: Risk, Prevention Intervention, and Policy. IV: The school as a setting for violence and prevention” December, 1997: <http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/monographs/uds109/setting.html>

¹⁴ “Bullying and School Violence: The Tip of the Iceberg” is one of the more progressive anti-bullying policy suggestions: <http://weinholds.org/bullyindex.htm>

¹⁵ Skiba, Russell J. “Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence.” August, 2000: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/ztze.pdf>

violence¹⁶. So far, since Columbine, the best (visible) preventative measures against school violence have been those that make sure that lines of communication between students, administrators, and law enforcement are always open, allowing for quick response to potential trouble. Numerous Columbine-like plots have been foiled due to students becoming aware of violent plans and then immediately reporting those plans before they could be carried out. Such measures often involve looking out for “warning signs”¹⁷.

The problem with looking out for “warning signs” and the other preventative measures mentioned so far, is that even if they are effective (and not all of them have been so far), they do not address the root of the problem. Whether or not the children become violent, something is hurting them, and curbing the violent acts temporarily through better security does little to actually help them in the long run.

For example, much of the immediate debate following school shooting incidents tends to focus on gun control. Yes, if we get the guns out of children’s (and adult) hands, less people will be shot. Civil liberties and gun rights arguments aside, however, even if kids do not shoot each other, they can use homemade bombs, knives, and even their fists to do harm. Even if schools are completely weapon-free, the problems have not been solved, only delayed. Troubled youth do not disappear after graduating from high school. They become troubled adult members of our society.

Policies such as looking out for early warning signs can also be misused, further alienating students instead of allowing them to maintain face. Even students who would

¹⁶ Skiba, Russell J. “Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence.” August, 2000:
<http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/ztze.pdf> pp. 7-9

¹⁷ Skiba, Russell and Kimberly Boone. “Using Early Warning Signs” February, 2000:
<http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/early.pdf>

never consider acting violently may feel stifled under conditions where their perfectly normal problems single them out as potential killers. Policy suggestions regarding the use of early warning signs carefully caution that such signs should not be used to stereotype, label, punish, or exclude¹⁸. Unfortunately, in practice, they tend to do exactly that. As seen in research regarding zero tolerance policies, despite the fact that parents and schools are increasingly finding such policies unreasonable, school administrators do not like to take chances, so they implement zero tolerance policies anyway--treating all infractions, major and minor, in the same way¹⁹. Paranoia seems to be the order of the day. Are we creating criminals in our quest to ferret them out of hiding?

Regarding the present American school environment, informal observations have been made by at least two sources that have caught my attention these last several months. One is an article entitled "The Organization Kid"²⁰ which was published in the Atlantic Monthly, and the other was an unpublished MIT admissions report. Both discussed the attitudes of the current generation of students entering college. In both cases, the current generation was characterized as being surprisingly comfortable with authority, community-minded, and extremely achievement oriented, but not always critical and mindful of ethical issues. While such students are obviously strong in many respects, both reports also expressed concern regarding their weaknesses, much along the lines that Woodhouse and Lindblom did when they discussed the impairing characteristics of schooling. If this is the atmosphere that children are now facing in our

¹⁸ Skiba, Russell and Kimberly Boone. "Using Early Warning Signs" February, 2000: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/early.pdf>

¹⁹ Skiba, Russell J. "Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence." August, 2000: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/ztze.pdf> p. 16

²⁰ Brooks, David. "The Organization Kid." April, 2001: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/04/brooks-p1.htm>

schools, we may reasonably hypothesize that conformity, “fitting in”, and high achievement have greater weight than ever before, and those who do not want to fit in face levels of alienation unheard of in the past.

A few recommendations

If we are to best address the needs of all students and if we seek to truly solve problems instead of just delaying them, I feel that policies are needed such that schooling allows greater freedom of expression without fear of persecution either from peers or administrators. Youth are in search of identity, a face they can present to the world. The process is difficult enough even without pressure to conform. Schools need stronger policies where diversity is encouraged instead of stripped away. Individuals of all temperaments, personalities, and interests need to be allowed outlets of expression. Or even if their activities are not explicitly condoned, they should at least be left alone and be allowed to exist without being bullied. Bullying itself needs to be stopped, and that includes the bullying done by the more mainstream students. Athletes and even straight-A students should not receive unreasonable privileges, especially when they are granted at the expense of other students.

Of course, schools must have standards of behavior, and obviously hurtful behaviors will not be tolerated, but there is clearly a difference between standards of behavior intended to prevent chaos and violence, and standards intended to appropriate, control, and breed compliance. Admittedly, this is a liberal perspective that can be seen as individualistic and non-communitarian, and not exactly in the mold of Benjamin Barber’s vision of a “strong democracy.” Yes, it is important to emphasize that the behavior of children who shoot others at school can not be excused, but we do have to

seek understanding. The troubled students may be the very ones our country will need the most, and their needs need to be addressed. It is not enough to say what one parent of a Columbine athlete did with regard to Erik Harris and Dylan Klebold: "They had no school spirit and they wanted to be different. Anyone who shows any kind of school spirit, any pride in the school, they're accepted."²¹ Such a statement is indicative of a very constricted and insufficient type of acceptance--a *conditional* acceptance that rejects personal differences and freedom of choice regarding personal affiliation.

As a concluding note, the media is often blamed for inciting and glorifying violence. While common sense tells us that media violence is desensitizing and may also inspire the forms violence can take, it is difficult to say that there is a causal relationship between violence portrayed in the media and real violence perpetrated by children, especially since most people who are exposed to violence in the media never become violent. Perhaps the backlash against particular *forms* of media is mostly a reactionary way for many of us to safely characterize the killers as being different from us, a conclusion that is far more comforting than what we subconsciously fear to be true, that such killers are really *not* so different from us and our own children, and we are all subject to (and even part of) the same societal forces that pathologize our troubled youth.

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