Constant Frustration and Occasional Violence: The Legacy of American High Schools (**)

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The Legacy of American High Schools
By Alfie Kohn

In the wake of the recent string of high school shootings, many people are desperate to find a silver lining, a way to wring hope from tragedy. At least now things will have to change, some observers might declare grimly. At least now there is no escaping the need to take a good hard look at American secondary education. Unfortunately, though, if history is any guide, that hard look will likely turn out to be short-sighted or misdirected: The point will be missed, and the responses that follow might even make things worse.

If that sounds overly pessimistic, consider the American penchant for ignoring the structural causes of problems. We prefer the simplicity and satisfaction of holding individuals responsible for whatever happens: crime, poverty, school failure, what have you. Thus, even when one high school crisis is followed by another, we concentrate on the particular people involved — their values, their character, their personal failings — rather than asking whether something about the system in which these students find themselves might also need to be addressed.

To raise this criticism is not to deny that people bear some responsibility for their actions. Nor is it to ignore the fact that there was something wrong with the kids at Columbine High School (and elsewhere) who murdered their classmates. Nevertheless, it is as naive as it is convenient to assume that the trouble resides exclusively within the heads of the killers.

Even when we do try to consider other causes, we tend to concentrate on factors that have nothing to do with our education system — as though we weren't faced with high school shootings so much as shootings that just happened to take place in high schools. On one level, this is understandable. Ready access to guns, combined with a culture steeped in violence,[1] might be the only ingredients necessary to get from Point A (individual psychopathology) to Point B (a bloodbath). But again we must ask: Is it possible that something about our schools might also play a role? We need to steer between too narrow an analysis, in which we focus only on the individuals involved, and too broad an analysis, in which we focus only on "American culture."

As citizens, you and I might believe the most urgent task is to make it harder for young people to get hold of guns. But as people who are professionally involved with the schools, we might also want to cast a critical eye on how students are being educated. A decade ago, Deborah Meier remarked that American high schools are "peculiar institutions designed as though intended to drive kids to the edge of their sanity."[2] That might have seemed an exaggeration before Littleton (and Jonesboro and Springfield and West Paducah …), but today her observation deserves to be taken seriously. We need to consider what it's really like, from the student's point of view, to spend three or four years in a typical high school.

In an illuminating passage, Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University, argued that "many well-known adolescent difficulties are not intrinsic to the teenage years but are related to the mismatch between adolescents' developmental needs and the kinds of experiences most junior high and high schools provide. When students need close affiliation, they experience large depersonalized schools; when they need to develop autonomy, they experience few opportunities for choice and punitive approaches to discipline; when they need expansive cognitive challenges and opportunities to demonstrate their competence, they experience work focused largely on the memorization of facts … "[3]

Read that paragraph again, slowly. It is not a casual indictment, but an evaluation based on a careful summary of what psychologists have identified as key human needs.[4] All of us yearn for a sense of relatedness or belonging, a feeling of being connected to others. All of us need to experience ourselves as self-determining, to be able to make decisions about the things that affect us. And all of us seek opportunities to feel effective, to learn new things that matter to us and find (or create) answers to personally meaningful questions. If anything, these needs are most pronounced, most urgent, for adolescents. Yet Darling-Hammond is absolutely right: American high schools not only fail to meet those needs but make a mockery of them.

What could be worse, for kids who desperately desire a feeling of connection, than to plop them in a giant factory of a school, a huge, seemingly uncaring place where they feel invisible, anonymous, lost? (Those are the exact words many students use to describe their situation to anyone who bothers to ask.) It's not that most teachers are indifferent or sadistic people; it's that something is seriously dysfunctional about the structure of high school. Too many people are thrown together, and too little time at a stretch is provided for any subset of them to come to know each other well. From early every weekday morning until well into the afternoon, it is rare for students to have much meaningful contact with adults — or even with one another. Moreover, any sense of community that does manage to develop is snuffed out by practices that set kids against one another. When students must compete — when, for example, they are not only rated but ranked — the lesson each learns is that everyone else is an obstacle to one's own success.[5]

What could be worse, for kids who need to be able to make decisions and feel some control over their lives, than to make them spend their days following other people's rules, to tell them what to read, where to go, what to do? In many ways, secondary schools are even more controlling than elementary schools, with less opportunity for student participation. How logical is it to expect that teenagers who have been coerced into following directions will develop into responsible decision-makers? The average high school is terrific preparation for adult life — as long as that life is led in a totalitarian society.

Finally, what could be worse, for kids who need to make sense of themselves and the world, than to treat them as passive receptacles into which facts are poured? They are made to sit at separate desks while a stream of details about Romantic poets or binomial equations wash over them. Rather than being invited to pursue projects that seem relevant and engaging, they are required to slog through tedious textbooks, memorizing what they think they will need for the next exam. Rather than coming to understand ideas in depth, they are exposed superficially to a vast amount of material during 45- or 50-minute periods. When students predictably respond to all this by tuning out, or acting out, or dropping out, we promptly blame *them* for not working hard enough. (As bad as it is, this situation is now becoming even worse as high-stakes exams and misguided demands for "accountability" and "tougher standards" squeeze out whatever intellectual exploration had somehow survived.[6] The more that high schools are transformed into test-prep centers — fact factories, if you will — the more alienated we can expect students to become.)

Does it not seem plausible that these gross disparities between what students need and what they get in high school might be related to the acts of terrible violence that occur there? Foreclose the possibility of a meaningful community, and students will create something to which they can belong, even if it is the kind of group that we find disturbing, Make students feel powerless, and the need for autonomy might express itself in antisocial ways. Treat students as interchangeable and anonymous, and occasionally someone will do dreadful things to attract attention and make his mark.

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This is, intentionally, a serious indictment of the American high school. How might defenders of the status quo respond?

CHALLENGE: *You haven't convinced me that kids have a fundamental need to feel related, autonomous, and competent.*

REPLY: Anyone is welcome to amend this particular list of basic needs or propose another list in its place. But it's not as though American high schools are trying to meet a different set of needs. The problem is that, as a rule, they are not designed to meet students' needs at all.

CHALLENGE: *Even if the summary of needs is basically accurate, high schools really aren't so bad at meeting them. Your description is exaggerated.*

REPLY: Anyone who thinks that most students in most high schools don't feel alienated, powerless, and unengaged need only (1) think back to his or her own years in high school, because very little has changed since then; (2) read some of the best contemporary accounts of high school life, such as Ted Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* and Linda McNeil's *Contradictions of Control*; or (3) follow a high school student around for at least one full day.

CHALLENGE: *Maybe high schools* are *dreadful places but it's not clear what we can do to improve them.*

REPLY: The education literature is brimming with specific suggestions. For example, Darling-Hammond cites research showing that "teenagers who stay in more nurturing settings where they encounter less departmentalization, fewer teachers, and smaller groups experience higher achievement, attendance, and self-confidence than those who enter large impersonal departmentalized secondary schools."[7] High school reformers, including those affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools,[8] have developed (and sometimes even implemented) proposals for transforming schools into places that are both more welcoming and more intellectually engaging. These ideas range from setting up small advisory groups to replacing traditional grades and tests with "exhibitions" of meaningful learning.

CHALLENGE: *It's not easy to implement these changes.*

REPLY: Indeed, I often meet students, parents, teachers, and principals who are committed to educational renewal but lack the power to restructure schools, to replace existing practices with those that are more need-fulfilling. Frustrated, they urge me to "talk to the school board members and the superintendents." Hence this article.

Of course, even those who have more authority to make change do not operate in a vacuum. They may face state legislators and newspaper reporters who don't know the difference between intellectual quality and high standardized test scores, with the result that the former is sacrificed in a quest for the latter. They may face college admissions officers whose criteria are disturbingly narrow. (One wag suggests that teachers ought to just issue a formal declaration of surrender to the Educational Testing Service and be done with it.) They may face parents who reflexively oppose meaningful reform, sometimes seeming to say, "Hey, if it was bad enough for me, it's bad enough for my kid."

Still, the constraints faced by school board members and other key players cannot become an excuse for inaction. The stakes are too high; the damage done by the present system is too great. Education policymakers must lead as well as follow, and leading entails educating members of the community. They must also recognize that the usual explanations can go only so far in rationalizing current practices. For example, no college admissions office demands huge high schools, or short class periods, or an absence of opportunities for students to make decisions. Some secondary schools have created opportunities for more thoughtful learning — and have even eliminated letter grades entirely without jeopardizing students' chances for acceptance into selective colleges and universities.[9]

Meanwhile, school leaders can invite parents to reflect on their long-term goals for their children. What do we want them to be? How do we want them to turn out? Parents can be helped to understand that the characteristics they list (responsible, caring, happy, creative, lifelong learners, and so on) are more difficult to promote in traditional schools. The knee-jerk demand for textbooks, honor rolls, and other familiar practices might even make it less likely that students will develop the features valued by their parents and others in the community.

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Unhappily, many school officials fail to grapple with these key issues or commit themselves to meaningful change. In fact, some throw fuel on the fire, unwittingly making things worse by responding to signs of student distress with even harsher discipline. Consistent with the tendency to ignore the structural causes of problems, they seem to think sheer force can be employed to make the bad stuff disappear: Tell the kids what to wear, subject them to drug tests, announce a "zero-tolerance"[10] policy. Punishment is based on the premise that making people suffer for doing something wrong will lead them to see the error of their ways. If punishment proves ineffective, then it is assumed that *more* punishment — along with tighter regulations and less trust — will certainly do the trick.

The shootings at Columbine provoked a general panic in which hundreds of students across the country were arrested, according to *Education Week*, while "countless others were suspended or expelled for words or deeds perceived as menacing." The fear here is understandable: Could our district, too, be incubating killers? But there is a critical distinction that virtually no one has made: We need to understand the difference between *overreaction*, such as closing down a school to search for bombs after a student makes an off-hand joke, and *destructive reaction*, such as relying on a policy of coercion to make things safer.

Experience should tell us that cracking down on students (with more suspensions or other punitive strategies) will not only fail to solve the problem but might exacerbate it. Even in those cases where a student's actions pose a significant risk to the safety of others, the first question for every school board member and administrator should not be, "Have we used sufficient force to stamp out this threat?" but, "What have we done to address the underlying issues here? How can we transform our schools into places that meet students' needs so there is less chance that someone will be moved to lash out in fury?"

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Although I have suggested the possibility of a link between the nature of school, on the one hand, and acts of violence that take place in school, on the other, I can't be sure that one causes the other. But perhaps we should take a step back and ask how important it is to establish such a connection. After all, the case for high school reform shouldn't have to be made on the basis of gunfire. Even if no one was ever shot on school grounds, the daily frustration and steady alienation experienced by the overwhelming majority of high school students offer reason enough to rethink what their schools are like. The desperation of the masses might be expressed more quietly, but if the environment in which they find themselves is stultifying, that is an invitation for us to take action. Or, to put it differently, a lack of violence doesn't imply that all is well, just as the students who don't make trouble for the teacher aren't necessarily the "good" kids — just the docile kids.

The undeniable fact is that we don't always respect the everyday experiences and needs of all students. Some teachers derive their professional pride from the occasional kid who goes on to become famous. (This, as Deborah Meier has observed, reflects a powerfully antidemocratic sensibility: It says education is about winnowing and selecting rather than providing something of value for everyone.) Some parents essentially mortgage their children's present to the future, sacrificing what might bring meaning or enjoyment — or even produce higher quality learning — in a ceaseless effort to prepare the children for college; they are not raising a child so much as a resumé on legs. And some policyrnakers see students mostly as test scores, valuing only those who get the best numbers — and therefore not really valuing any of them.

More than half a century ago, John Dewey lamented that "the conditions still too largely prevailing in the school — the size of the classes, the load of work, and so on — make it difficult to carry on the educative process in any genuinely cooperative democratic way."[11] The fact that this situation is even worse today just might be connected to the tragic events we've observed recently in some of those schools. In any case, it represents a tragedy in itself.

Notes

1. To talk honestly about a culture steeped in violence is not just to condemn violent entertainment. Movies and video games that turn killing into sport are popular around the world, sad to say, including in countries with very low murder rates. The United States, however, is one of the few industrialized countries that still puts criminals to death. It is a nation where the use of physical violence on children is still defended as a legitimate form of discipline, even in many schools. And it is a nation that has invaded or bombed dozens of others over the decades. Any child growing up here, even one who has never seen a Schwarzenegger or Stallone film, receives a constant stream of messages to the effect that hurting and killing are socially acceptable, at least under some conditions.
   Schools could, but rarely do, help students reflect on capital punishment, corporal punishment, and the militarism that lies behind the rhetoric of U.S. foreign policy. They could invite discussion about why millions of people make a fetish of the right to own devices whose only purpose is to injure or kill. More broadly, they could, but rarely do, encourage students to think critically about our society rather than leading them to accept our institutions and ideologies as "just the way life is."
2. "The Kindergarten Tradition in the High School," in *Progressive Education for the 1990s*, edited by Kathe Jervis and Carol Montag. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991, p. 138.
3. *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools That Work.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 122. She adds that when students "need to build self-confidence and a healthy identity, they experience tracking that explicitly labels many of them as academically deficient" — an equally disturbing situation that I lack the space to address here.
4. For example, see the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan.
5. A generally competitive culture often goes hand-in-hand with an ugly kind of social stratification. Columbine High School, like many others, was characterized not only by the size of its student body (nearly 2,000) but by a tendency on the part of students and staff alike to deify athletes. Some of these sports stars taunted other students mercilessly "while school authorities looked the other way." (See Lorraine Adams and Dale Russakoff, "Dissecting Columbine's Cult of the Athlete," *Washington Post*, June 12, 1999, p. A1. Also see Bernard Lefkowitz, *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.)
6. For more on this topic, see Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards."* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
7. Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn.*
8. For more information, contact the Coalition at 1814 Franklin Street, Suite 700, Oakland, CA, 94612, (510) 433-1451, or at http://www.essentialschools.org.
9. See Alfie Kohn, "From Degrading to De-Grading," *High School Magazine*, March 1999, pp. 38-43. See especially the sidebar titled "Must Concerns About College Derail High School Learning?"
10. For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Russ Skiba and Reece Peterson, "The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1999, pp. 372-76, 381-82.
11. John Dewey's comment appears in *Dewey on Education*, edited by Martin S. Dworkin. New York: Teachers College Press, 1959, p. 130.