Constant Frustration and Occasional Violence: The Legacy of American High Schools (**)
In the wake of the recent string of high school shootings, many people are desperate to find ways to stem the rising tide of gun violence. This is a tragic event to bring hope from tragedy. At least now things will have to change, some observers might declare drably. At least now there is no escaping the need to take a hard look at American secondary education. Unfortunately, though, if history is any guide, that hard look will likely turn out to be a vain one. 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 in their schools. We prefer to think of our schools as places that simply exist, and to concentrate on the people who have control over their actions. Yet a more nuanced analysis shows that what goes on in schools is far from autonomous. That is why there were students who walked out of their High School (and elsewhere) who hurled their classmates. Nevertheless, it is an area in which it is convenient to assure that the trouble resides exclusively within the heads of the killers.

And even if we do try to make schools more welcoming places — with fewer students perceived as menacing, with fewer teachers perceived as threatening — we also have to ask: How will students, when they need to develop autonomy, experience few opportunities for choice and punishment approaches to discipline? When they need to develop autonomy, they must 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 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

What could be worse, for kids who desperately desire a feeling of connection, than to plug into a giant factory of a school, a huge, seemingly uncarved place where they feel invisible, anonymous, lost? It seems that is precisely the kind of place that students end up in when they drop out: they end up at a place, "unfortunately," where they can do whatever they want.

A few years ago, a high school student whom I had taught in a small rural school in South Dakota returned to visit. I was able to find him and talk to him about what he had been doing since we last spoke. He was a good friend of mine, and I had high hopes for him. He had been one of the best students in the school, and I had been proud of him. But when I spoke to him, he told me that he had been doing nothing but drugs since he had left school. He said that he had been to rehab, but that he had been doing it all over again. He said that he felt like he had no future, and that he didn’t know what to do.

Better, more sophisticated research shows that kids who need to be able to make decisions and feel some control over their lives, are even more at risk. What does this mean? It means that kids who need to be able to make decisions and feel some control over their lives, are even more at risk.

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

But if even the most basic need of the high school student to feel related, autonomous, and competent, is not being met, it is likely that the students will feel frustrated and angry. And when students feel frustrated and angry, they are more likely to act out.

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For more on this topic, see Alfie Kohn, The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and “Tracker Storied.” Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Notes


5. 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 punishment — along with tighter regulations and less trust — will certainly do the trick.


