



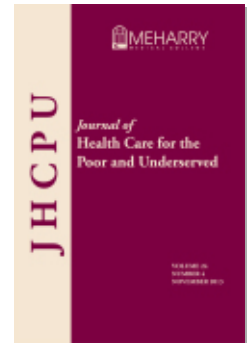
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Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, Volume 6, Number 2, 1995, pp. 205-208 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/hpu.2010.0525



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VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS: WHY—AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

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Abstract: This paper discusses the causes and effects of the violence that occurs in schools. The author explores the notion of need (to be a part of, to belong, and to be connected) as it relates to the tendency toward violence, and conversely, the association between success in school, which allows for the development of positive self-esteem and therein socially acceptable behavior, with a tendency toward nonviolence. The paper explains how behavioral factors common to poor and disadvantaged students, such as a lack of esteem for self and for their educational institution contributes to a failure cycle. The paper also suggests that the development of the affective domain, coupled with sensitivity to culture, good instruction, and an educational environment that nurtures success, leads to an effectively functioning individual with a social, economic, political, and ethnic identity.

Key words: inner-city youth, violence, education, public school, psychological issues

It is indeed a very special privilege for me to join with members of the medical, social service, public policy, and legal field, community leaders, as well as those from the educational community to discuss the pressing and broad-ranging issue of violence, especially the epidemic of violence that is plaguing the very existence of youth in America generally, and minority youth specifically.

I speak to you as a practitioner, one who has toiled in the vineyards of the public schools of this nation for some 27 years. In that time I have served in every position, from teacher at the elementary and middle school level to superintendent of the largest school system in the state

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of Indiana. I have worked at every level of education, and encountered just about every problem that could be imagined in an educational environment. Therefore, I am eager to share with you today what I believe and have experienced in relation to violence and disruptive behavior on the part of students in the schools of our great nation. I hope to share with you ways to deal effectively with the challenges that violent behavior presents to those of us charged with the responsibility of educating the youth of America, so that we can save lives and prepare future generations for a satisfying and rewarding adulthood.

Whenever I talk to educators and other child advocates, especially minority educators and those who are responsible for minority education, I impart to them the necessity of being both an intellectual and an emotional person. Feeling is a necessary emotional ingredient for all human interaction. All people desire to be loved, liked, respected, rewarded, and stroked, whether they are five or 55, and their inability to achieve this recognition, this feeling of connection, of "belonging" in a socially acceptable way will lead them to socially unacceptable behavior.

Many students come to school with the three prerequisites for failure: a poor self-concept (which arises from the absence of having someone who cares about them and whom they care about), a lack of experience in realistic life (which makes it difficult for them to relate to the teacher or the textbook), and no value for the importance of school. These students then find themselves in a perpetual failure cycle, which leads to poor academic achievement and perpetuates their sense of low self-esteem. This, in turn, leads them to search for a way to get recognition "by any means necessary," in the words of Malcolm X.

This scenario finds us dealing with people who feel no compunction to abide by the rules of polite society. They often are youth who have had few reasons to feel good about themselves, and who often are angry because they feel left out of the rewards of our society. And yet they are constantly exposed to the many opportunities our society provides through television and newspapers, and when they temporarily "cross the tracks" they see the trappings of success only to have to come back to their "real world" of despair and hopelessness.

We educators find ourselves trying to provide support for youngsters who often have been raised by young, uneducated parents, who themselves were victims of teenage sexual activity and pregnancy, drugs, violence to the level of immunity, little disciplinary structure, poor nutrition, lack of values, and aggressive coping skills. The environmental stresses placed on youngsters are compounded by fear of their surroundings, poor self-concept, and an instinct to survive. The result is a dangerous potpourri of predisposing factors which, when combined with the energy, strength, impressionable nature, enthusiasm, and creativity of youth, gives way to violent expression. That

expression mostly occurs in the public schools; parochial schools usually expel unruly students, and private schools are financially untenable to disadvantaged students. So, we have millions of students in public school who often explode violently. Of course, there are other factors that contribute to the lack of success of urban public school students, including dysfunctional teaching, cultural insensitivity, and a lack of focus and structure of the school and its leadership.

So what do we do about the fact that these millions of youngsters are ill equipped to take advantage of the considerable talents and skills of the majority of educators who care and are committed to giving their very best to the education of America's youth?

First, we educators must accept the fact that we are in the business of developing people, not just "little people," but also big people—teachers, administrators, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, counselors, social workers—everyone involved in the area of education. We must help them understand the importance of the affective realities of education and of life. Universities and colleges involved in preparing future educators, and school systems (superintendents, principals, and boards of education), must emphasize the affective domain and maintain the proper balance among three areas: methods, content, and human growth and development. My experience finds that the teachers of the nation do very well with content issues, they do very well with methods issues, but unfortunately they do not do very well with psychological issues. We must revisit the knowledge base, emphasizing such courses as educational psychology, child psychology, and general psychology. We must hold teachers accountable for expanding that knowledge base with an understanding of cultural realities to better connect with students.

We must develop administrators who allow students to make errors, and who understand that error used correctly can be a catalyst for positive self-concept. They must create an environment which is tolerant of error and which encourages risk taking. Additionally, we must get experience-starved inner-city youth out of the schoolhouse and into the community to broaden their experience base and bring relevance to school. We can thereby help them develop values that embrace the importance of school.

We educators must set clear and high expectations for not only academic achievement, but for behavior. We must be consistent and fair in the implementation of the consequences for not adhering appropriately to those expectations, and celebrate with them when they respond appropriately. Principals must be quality assurance officers who maintain consistency and ensure systemwide interrelationships. He or she must accept this role as the most important participant in the educational effort, and must set the climate of expectation and excellence in the school.

We must bring together, with parents as the core component, the community to form a community of believers who nurture the necessary self-concepts, experiences, and values in the students. Educators must work with these support mechanisms to create a focused set of initiatives designed to help students believe they can do better, challenge themselves to try, understand there will be shortfalls, but never quit. This effort must be bolstered by clinical support staff professionals (counselors, social workers, psychologists, doctors, and nurses) to assist in identifying inherent psychological or physiological roadblocks to school success. Finally, we must all believe and be challenged by the words of noted educator Ronald R. Edmonds, who said "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, educate all children whose education is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to know to do that. Whether or not we do, must ultimately depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far."¹

REFERENCE

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DISCUSSION

Audience Participant: What do you think about the idea of jailing parents for their children's truancy?

Dr. Gilbert: Well, if parents are not paying attention to their children to begin with, and you put them in jail, they certainly will not be able to pay attention to their children from jail. Most parents want to do right by their kids. The reality is that some parents find this difficult to do because they are so involved in just trying to survive. So, what we have to do is try to help them understand why it's important to do what they can for their children. We have to help them understand how to manage their children in a way that does not impede basic survival, and help them understand that there is a reason why they should help their children.