

America's Dilemma: Reconciling Cultural Norms with 21st Century Education – Part I

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Commentary

I am deeply disturbed by the culture of violence, flagrant disrespect, and incivility (FDI) that has become the norm in America. I am especially concerned that violence, aggressive behaviors and trauma (VABT) is increasingly paired with FDI and is being distributed globally by the news, information, and media entertainment industries, or the NIME. Children spend a great deal of time with the NIME via social and digital media (SDM). When presented as entertainment, the NIME appeals to people, young and old, but young people in particular. Some research indicates that the merger of VABT and FDI is contributing to a decline in social standards, consequently a decline in school climate and culture [1]. Others disagree. Yet, a key question remains: What might be contributing to heightened VABT and FDI in schools? Since some public schools reflect the norms and expectations of the communities in which they co-located, how should school administrators, teachers and staff decide what is acceptable vs. unacceptable behavior in the classroom or on school property? How might a discussion about values inform public policy on matters of life, death and freedom, and the debate of the constitutional right to bear arms?

This commentary addresses this question. I provide some context for what may be contributing to an upward trend in VABT and FDI in schools and communities across the United States. I also propose what I think we can do about it. Specifically, I explore the NIME potential role in creating and sustaining our interest in VABT and FDI. While I do not specifically address bullying, please note that that is frequently linked to VABT and FDI. Ubiquitous access to VABT and FDI via NIME outlets may be contributing to a culture of heightened aggression, especially among children and young people.

Americans may think Columbine High School was the 1st recorded incident of school violence in the United States. However, it was the 1927 massacre in Bath Township, Michigan that was the first recorded incident of mass casualty on school property in the US [2]. Most of the 45-people killed were children, and it remains the deadliest recorded attack at a school in U.S. history [3]. Since Columbine, there have been over 25 separate fatal shootings at U.S. schools [4]. Over 150 children and school personnel have been killed in schools (The Washington Post, 2018). The attack at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida is the 18th school shooting in the U.S., within the first 45 days of 2018 [5]. What we are witnessing is unprecedented and I believe worthy of discussion. Does context matter?

If we start from the beginning, we will see that America is a nation with strong ties to violence from its inception. America has profited greatly from violence – justified and otherwise, projecting mixed messages about guns, violence, life and death [6]. Today, well-meaning people believe arming teachers and other school personnel with weapons is the solution to preventing school violence [7]. For them and those who agree, this is how we should balance the constitutional right to bear arms, despite the clear and imminent danger doing so places innocent others. Two additional questions emerge: “How do we reconcile a culture where recreational use of firearms remains constitutionally guaranteed, regardless of whether one as serious

mental illness or not? Can this reconciliation be resolved by laws, or is more needed, given the dilemma our current laws have created?

For decades, Americans have been socialized to embrace the concept of violence, when justified [8]. The concept of justified violence, however, presents a moral dilemma for some [9], as it places a greater value on some lives than others. Over the past several decades, we have witnessed a steady increase in references and images of VABT and incidents of FDI in all forms of the NIME. Most notable in film, games, music, television, and on demand streaming media [10], perhaps, because the NIME has made VABT and FDI available to all people, regardless of age, with few, if any, forums for critical deconstruction and dialogue. Children may be the most vulnerable among us. Today, there are no national school standards requiring media literacy instruction on topics such as violence, despite evidence in support of media literacy education. This evidence includes using mixed methods to evaluate whether such an approach would engage young people in: 1) critical dialogue about VABT [11] building competencies [12] facilitating health education to reduce risky and problem [13,14].

Some believe critical media literacy (CML) offers young people an opportunity to clarify their values on sensitive topics, such as violence and other prevailing themes in popular youth multimedia. CML is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate [5], and understand the “call to action” in mediated messages, whether implicit and covert, or explicit and overt. Researchers found that regular exposure to VABT and FDI has adverse and negative effects on a young person’s developing brain [15]. Other researchers found benefits to providing a safe space for children to critically deconstruct the themes and messages about violence in digital music media [16-20]. These researchers found that critical analysis of digital music media helps young people refine select skills and build specific competencies. Given what is known: “Is it reasonable, responsible or responsive of caring adults to act as if frequent and regular exposure to VABT and FDI has no effect on kids?” Or, “will we live to regret that we failed to respond, fully aware that frequent, routine exposure to violence, has negative and possibly deadly consequences, particularly when combined with poverty, race and discrimination [21-38]?”

Concerns about young people’s exposure to VABT and FDI resonate with people of both political persuasions. The debate is fueled by one side preferring to “keep it real” about the need and right to bear arms, vs. the other side favoring a more idealized society with

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less of a need for defensive or offensive weapons. I know that we can no longer ignore the reality that we live in a society where VABT and FDI has been stitched into our subconscious by media. However, can you imagine what our new reality might be if teaching and learning was grounded in helping children and young people acquire, refine and practice life-affirming values aligned with reconciliation and mutual respect, over flagrant disrespect and discord? Perhaps, now is the time stakeholders concerned about seeing children survive and thrive advocate for a culturally-relevant education that include critical media literacy, especially given the pervasive role media plays in society today. cultivating individual and group values. Perhaps, now is the time schooling should focus on teaching life skills and building key competencies, including academic, behavioral, emotional, moral and social [8,29-37].

I can think of no better approach to support young people today, than to start with what they enjoy the most – social and digital media. This is most likely what you will find in the palm of their hand, anyways. Lessons learned from a youth-centered intervention that uses digital music media as content and context for critical analysis and gives young people the space to discuss sensitive topics can help clinicians, educators, practitioners and policy makers a useful framework to initiate these discussions [14,38-41] using the Socratic approach. Lawmakers would be well advised to pass legislation that directs states to adopt national media literacy standards. Adoption should be based on peer-reviewed evaluation studies. Grants and other incentives will likely be required to facilitate teaching and learning that measurably improves CML linked to clinical and educational outcomes. Evidence-based programs, with trained personnel, should be implemented in spaces where young people gather, including schools, afterschool and community settings [42-46].

I believe gun violence in schools might just be the issue that sustains a national discussion about gun policy and potentially legislation that ushers in real dialogue about our shared values or the lack thereof. The implications of linking this topic to CML for teaching and learning purposes are robust; the possibilities for culturally-relevant curriculum, instruction and enrichment that affirms life, reconciliation and mutual respect over FDI are endless. The time to act is now, because this is a matter of life and death, for some. That is my opinion. What's yours?

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