

Responding to Violence in Schools: Contemporary Regimes of Control in the Age of Mass Violence

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Abstract/Description:

Mass violence, particularly those events happening in and around school institutions, attracts considerable public attention. Especially in the North American context, the public discourse involves intolerance for miniscule risks to safety and security in schools, which has led to efforts at securitization and the growth of a regime of control in schools characterized by punitive measures and visible efforts to demonstrate control. Thus, the police presence in schools, along with surveillance technologies, and punitive techniques of control (e.g., zero-tolerance policies, increased school exclusion, and mandatory sanctioning) has become the “new normal” in schools. Indeed a rapid and heavy-handed response on the part of police and formal agents of social control, are seen as a source of stability and safety in schools, rather than as a symptom of some deeper pathology within the social fabric.

That is, what is missing from the discussion is any acknowledgement of what has changed in the social system, making it seem currently self-evident that police are needed in schools, and that schools are a place where behavior and risks need to be controlled/managed by police personnel. For those in older generations who grew up attending schools without police (and for whom schools were not considered places requiring police presence/control), it is interesting to consider what has changed in the last decades such that more police are needed in more places, and in particular in schools. While the presence of police in secondary institutions has been on the increase in the last decades in North America (will discuss statistics/trends), in the most recent decade police are increasingly present in primary schools. In the United States, this trend has accelerated by the December 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut.

At community forums following this event, numerous communities and school districts expressed the need to place police (or more police) personnel in local schools. Despite the exceedingly small risk of a shooting taking place at their local schools, it was clear that the dominant voice in the community was that police were needed in schools to ward off the worst possible case in which a rampage shooting were to occur. There was a contrary voice to this dominant tone, one which suggested that police presence in schools might be undesirable or even damaging to the youth in the school and conflicting with the primary pedagogical goals of the school. This contrary voice was squelched by the perceived need to maintain security in the slim chance that the worst case scenario might come to pass. Subsequent idiosyncratic examples in which police (because they are on-site) have immediately responded to school attacks, have offered apparent “proof positive” of the indispensable nature of police presence. Let’s put it in context that there are in the United States in excess of 64 million children enrolled in primary and secondary education, and that the educational “trade” operates on an annual budget well in excess of US\$1 Trillion. To make policy decisions about security procedures in such institutions due to an excess of fear may be unwise at best, and perhaps even misguided or damaging. Of course, we have all heard about Max Weber’s concept of “unintended consequences.”

It’s not that I am fundamentally bothered by the presence in schools. Rather, it seems that we’ve let the cat out of the bag, which as one is aware puts one in the situation where only with extreme difficulty can the cat be stuffed back in. Most bothersome was the lack of any exit plan, where communities did not consider the conditions under which they could imagine removing police from schools. Clearly, the placement of police inside schools has been a function of the immediate need to securitize the institutions. However, rather than treating this solution as a short term patch, we find ourselves in the situation where the presence of police and punitive control measures have become “business as usual” in educational institutions. Thus, I ask here three fundamental questions, which if answered might offer us a path forward in our current situation. These are,

1. Under what conditions can we imagine the removal of police personnel, surveillance technologies, and punitive policies from educational institutions? Perhaps it is time for us to consider the exit plan. Can any of us envision a set of social circumstances where there would be no perceived need for police in schools? Can we education and social science researchers help to clarify such social conditions, and to help to clarify the extent to which we achieve those stated conditions?
2. What has changed in the regime of social control in schools, such that it must be supplemented by police and punitive social control? Can we education and social science researchers from older generations who experienced education without police presence and punitive control, and who subsequently have observed the securitization of schools in recent decades, help to identify which aspects of the lifeworld of schools has changed? For many of us, the need for police in schools was not even a possibility for discussion, yet it has come to seem as essential and self-evident in the contemporary discourse.
3. What would it take to restore the mechanisms of social control which functioned properly in earlier decades, before the appearance of mass violence in schools and the subsequent placement of police and punitive control measures? In identifying those aspects of the school lifeworld which have changed, we should explore whether it is possible to restore the functioning of these mechanisms making the presence of police and punitive control unnecessary. Finally, those of us in positions to influence the academic, policy, and public discourses about school security should help us to chart a plan of action that would move us effectively forward toward achieving the conditions identified in the first question, in which we would no longer need police in schools.

This paper will be an examination of the above questions, within the context of school institutions, although this discussion may also apply to analogous contexts in which the threat of mass violence has

led to increased securitization. Key is an examination of the efficacy and challenges faced by police and other security personnel to maintain peace and productivity within educational institutions.