VIOLENCE, GANGS AND GUNS IN SCHOOLS

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PRESENTED AT

The issues that we are discussing today are immediate. They threaten us and the young people who attend our schools. We all feel a sense of urgency to prevent needless injury and death today and tomorrow. Though I am sure many on the panel will focus on these immediate concerns and strategies, my assignment is to provide a broader perspective. In doing so I will draw on my study of the perpetrators and victims of various forms of violence from suicide to omnicide (a term coined to describe the likely results of a nuclear war) to see what lessons we can learn about violence, and gangs in our schools.

LESSON #1: Problems of violence and gangs are not new.

The issues that we will be discussing today are not new. We need only think back to the 1950's and 1960's and two films "Rebel Without a Cause" and "Blackboard Jungle". Produced in 1954, both these films involved violence, gangs, sex, alcohol and the relationships between young people and adults. In both these films, young people were struggling to cope with the problem of coming to terms with the adult world and its realities. In addition, in both these films adults were struggling with how to come to terms with young people with problems. While young people of today still struggle with these problems, the easy availability of weapons makes today's conditions much more threatening.

Three problems and solutions to the problems on which each of these films focused were: (1) dependency and independence in adult/ young person relationships; (2) communication between young persons and adults, and (3) the search for realness or authenticity in relationships both with adults and with peers.]

LESSON #2: The problems of violence and gangs identified with young people are reflections of reciprocal relationships that exist in the interaction between the young people and the adult world, and not simply a reflection of the young people.

Young persons' behaviors cause problems for adults, and adult behavior and reactions to young persons' problems cause problems for young people. These reciprocal problems have involved and will continue to involve: dependency relationships; communication and authenticity as they are experienced across generational boundaries.

As young people struggle to gain independence, adults often struggle to maintain power over young people and struggle with the loss of control that once supported the dependency of the young on adults.

Communication is a two way process where both young people and adults struggle to be heard while having difficulty truly hearing what the other is saying. 30 years ago, this communication difficulty was

labeled "the generation gap". Today the same problem exists, but we have no name for it. When problems do not have names, society and individuals have difficulty recognizing and coping with them.

Young people struggle with questions of value and knowing and being "real", being <u>authentic</u>. They see how we adults "play games", follow prescribed rules and play our roles, however, they often see no place in the adult world were people can "really be themselves" and "say what they think and feel" and know that what they say and feel will be respected (even if not agreed with).

In discussing violence, gangs and guns in the schools, we will fail miserably if we only focus only on individual children who exhibit violent behaviors. In terms of the broader understanding of violence which I have been asked to discuss, we must understand and admit our (adult) contribution to the climate which generates this dangerous, threatening and destructive behavior.

<u>Lesson #3: Problems of violence and gangs in schools should not be isolated from other coping expressions of young people.</u>

From an adult perspective, there are many problematic behaviors in which we observe young people engaging: drug and alcohol abuse, sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases and teen-age pregnancy, suicide, interpersonal violence and gang (collective) behavior.

In addition, there are a great many problems which young people experience, often directly and often indirectly through discussions with peers and /or from the media: poverty, child abuse, spouse abuse, rape, war, executions, unemployment, lack of health care (to mention but a few).

Add to this the growing awareness of the oppression caused by racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism and the social and cultural context within which young people of the 1990's must cope would seem to be designed to produce the violence which we see all too frequently.

Thus violence and gangs in schools is but a reflection of what we adults call a premature loss of innocence, "growing up too soon" and the "lost childhood" which occurs when young people must cope with adult problems.

<u>LESSON #4: The social psychological context of young people reflects factors that are associated with the production of violence.</u>

In my study of violence, I have identified a number of common factors that seem to facilitate the decision to inflict harm on another and/or the self; that is, to use violence. Today I wish to discuss three of these: dehumanization, authenticity and peer pressure.

<u>Dehumanization</u>:

There are two types of dehumanization involved in violence: (1) "other directed dehumanization" where deny the human qualities of potential targets of violence" and (2) "self directed-dehumanization" where we (the perpetrators) lose touch with those human qualities that bind us to other people.

<u>A. Self-directed dehumanization:</u>

With reference to self-directed dehumanization we should note that we are all, young people in our schools included, living in what I would call the "post-person era".

To illustrate let me remind you of a saying that many at the beginning of the computer age used to refer us and to our relationships with other people. In order to express our desire to be treated as people and not as commodities, we would say "Do not fold, spindle or mutilate", echoing the sentiment oriented on the computer punch cards which had penetrated nearly every transaction we had with the world.

In today's world--the "post-person era"--the sentiment expressed in that phrase has come to fruition. In their families, in the schools, in their work settings, many of our young people feel that they have been "folded, spindled, and mutilated". They and we have been folded into "social roles". As long as we do what our role demands: teach, be students, be administrators, our individual value is meaningless, only our role performance counts.

Where 30 years ago social movements of the time (the civil rights and anti-war movements) and psychological strategies of education and counseling provided outlets to battle dehumanization--in today's world, youngsters seemingly have no where to go. Thirty years ago, human passions, feelings, emotions and potential were in some places nurtured and one of the individual's highest goals was "self-actualization" (to use Maslow's term).

Today, the purpose of life communicated to youngsters is to "exploit and be exploited by others". Today we are told by politicians and economists that we must educate our youngsters to promote economic growth", or to participate in a more intelligent military to control our killing machinery and to be targets for others." Seldom do we hear anyone speak of education's value in helping us understanding our individual place in the world and the purpose of our existence.

Is it any wonder that we read newspaper stories which find teen-age violence to be cold, unfeeling, and uncaring and without remorse? My study of violence finds that when people place social and organizational goals above their own personal goals, the likelihood of these individuals engaging in violence is enhanced.

Other directed dehumanization:

In the "post-person era", we have lost the need and our ability to empathize with others, to experience what others feel. Such a reaction is a common reaction to trauma and underscores the traumatic quality of everyday life in the 1990's.

Over the past 30 years, educators and counselors and psychologists have spent countless amounts of energy attempting to strengthen the "self-image, the self-concept" of young people by allowing them to feel and experience the joys of success. This often had positive results; however, self -development focused on only one half of the dehumanization process involved in violence.
Though emphasizing the psychological such an approach failed to recognize the social context of dehumanization; that is, how we tend to dehumanize the others with whom we interact.

Students fail to see teachers as people, they are "teachers"; teachers fail to see students as people "they are students". Teachers and students categorize each other. Students stereotype each other as: jocks, nerds, socialites, snobs, greasers, grits, members of gangs, burn-outs, trouble-makers. In doing so, they submerge the personal human qualities of others and limit their ability to empathize. Studies of violence have shown that stereotyping promotes violence, while the ability to feel what others feel reduces its likelihood.

Where the self and the other are both dehumanized, research in a variety of contexts has shown that the potential for violent behavior is substantially enhanced.

Violence and the search for authenticity:
Studies of people who have been perpetrators of violence and those who have been victims have pointed to a curious reaction to involvement with violence. Soldiers in wartime, victims of violence (including survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and natural disasters often describe the experience of coping with violence as among the "most real" events they have ever experienced. Why? Because the socially imposed meanings, social statuses and social judgments that direct their actions in everyday life and that

abstract the world from its "real substance" disappeared when one faced the reality of violence. Violence seems to put people in touch with reality. There are no social statuses, no good guys, no bad guys, no peasants, no kings. At the moment of violence there is simply the real stuff of ones life and death, simply survival, the most basic form of existence.

In the dehumanized world of young people, where they feel that social expectations and roles define and justify the behaviors that are expected of them, where they feel their "authenticity" slipping away into a web of other imposed expectations, it is no wonder that young people feel impotent to battle the world around them on real terms.

Some seek to escape and seek reality in suicide and/or drugs. Some believe that power and control and authenticity might be found in sexual activity and in related pregnancies and children; others might find reality at the end of a gun.

Peer-Group Pressure:

Though self- and other-directed dehumanization and the search for authenticity are clearly part of a violence-supporting constellation of forces that surround the individual, it is equally important to understand the social processes that support and communicate values and justifications for violence.

Studies of the social psychology of gang behavior have found that the dynamics of peer group behavior are more complicated then we normally think. Though we often find values supporting violence expressed in the "group context" of the gang. Conversations with individual gang members often find that they personally disagree with what appears to be the consensus of the group. Thus, we are faced with a situation called "pluralistic ignorance". This occurs when group values and attitudes are different from those of the individuals who make up the group. While a person identified as a member of a gang might support violence against specific targets who deserve it (rival gangs, someone who has hurt a fellow gang member, a person who wears an article of clothing the gang wants), as an individual (not as a gang member), the person might truly express a distaste for violence.

The problem for us as educators is figuring out how to promote opportunities for the expression of and the acting out on the non-violent and anti-violent alternatives to which many young people (including "gang" members) often subscribe.

<u>SUGGESTIONS:</u>

<u>Re: Humanization:</u>

To counter act these trends teachers, school administrators and students need to struggle with the problem of humanizing the educational environments in which they live. They need to recognize that the bureaucratic, controlled hierarchical environments support the dehumanizing effects produced by forces in the larger society. They must find ways of bringing both self-esteem and empathy into the classroom and school setting.

<u>RE: AUTHENTICITY:</u>

We as educators must find ways to struggle against becoming the social roles that our professional titles create for us. We must find ways of bringing our own personal, authentic humanity to our profession, and of not letting our professional identities submerge use as people. We must also find ways of communicating the appropriateness of empathetic authenticity to our students.

<u>RE: PEER PRESSURE and PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE:</u>

One strategy is to express support for on-violent alternatives and disapproval of violent alternatives ourselves. We need to be role models for non-violence.

This is often difficult and forces us to swim against the tide of current opinion. But if we are to teach students how to cope with peer-pressure, we must show that we can do it ourselves. I would suggest that teachers and school administrators become activists against violence of all types, and not just against violence in the schools. They should work actively and openly in the child-abuse movement. They should work against the death penalty. They should work actively to support gun-control legislation and to limit the likelihood interpersonal violence when it does occur will result in death.