

Target Practice

Okay; yes.

I can hear you saying that I'm being naïve; that there were, there are, guns in schools.

Sadly, I do know that.

Depending on the year, the city and the school, there might actually be, at any given time, an intimidating arsenal hidden inside backpacks, lockers, clothing and cars. And, yes, in those communities hardest hit by a nationally burgeoning social inequity; in poorest neighborhoods most painfully destabilized through the blind invasion of forced school turnarounds and the subsequent crossing of long-embedded gang/culture/crew lines – each day more insidiously? The harsh reality of easily acquired weapons not only threatens, but controls, street life.

But. Despite the many deficit-of-violence theories set up to target minority and poor students (theories lucratively adopted by fund-seeking reformers and sound-bite-seeking journalists alike), in over twenty years of working inside culturally diverse low-income schools, I have never known violence and guns to come even close to defining a school's true culture.

Although.

Well, yes, there was that afternoon when one of our more experimental children?

Shot himself in the leg.

Following district policy, upon notice of the shooting our school was very dramatically pushed into a suddenly unexpected lock down. Time crawled, and the minutes ticked off, one by one, ever so slowly, until authorities had managed to ascertain that the gun wound now famous to our "event" had been both accidental and self-inflicted. Important people flocked in, anxious to delve into this child's misguided psyche. What clearly sinister violence had he intended?

Having known the perpetrator, a creative young man named Leon, as a student in literacy classes two years in a row – I had my own opinion. Although generally a capable student, Leon had always been a bit unhelpfully prone to daydreaming. When finally I got the chance, I had to ask:

"Leon, what on *earth* were you thinking?"

"It *wasn't* my gun, Miss, honest. But you know how in the movies they sort of hold the gun sideways, and then, when the cops come, they kind of flip it and shove it down super-fast into the side of their pants?"

He paused before adding: "Well, that's not really a good idea."

Leon graduated the next year; so far as I knew he had stopped trying to juggle firearms. His short-lived fame, however, allowed our school to experience – if only momentarily – the highly anticipated and widely predicted low-income student's penchant for a weapon-induced violence.

It was a violence that, as the years dedicated to implementing an increasingly ruthless test-score accountability commenced, and an apparently endless flow of culture-and-poverty-detached reformers found themselves assertively moved into low-income buildings, was recurrently brought to our attention through insistently repeated warnings. As a nationally targeted, unmistakably pending predilection, a low-income student violence was, in fact, so likely to occur?*

That we were all cautioned to stay on our guard.

To keep alert; to watch for it coming.

To see it always looming, there – just over the horizon.

*Statistically, both gun violence and an illicit prescription drug use in schools has changed dramatically since the 1980s. In modern days it now makes much more sense to worry about the relative safety of a friend employed inside a 95% dominant-culture school located in one of our state's most conservative districts.