

Bullets, Bullies, and Lessons Unlearned

Two days after Seung Hui Cho massacred 32 students and teachers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, I landed at the Greenville-Spartanburg airport for two days of bullying prevention training. After I retrieved my luggage, I walked to a rental car counter where a young female clerk stood alone, talking on the phone. I decided to rent a car at the last minute, being tired of shuttles. As I filled out the paperwork, the clerk told me about the videos and photographs Cho had sent to NBC. I had been traveling and didn't know about them.

My training in Greenville consisted of two days of "booster" training in the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, an effective program originally designed by Dan Olweus, a researcher from Norway. The United States Olweus program is centered at Clemson University in South Carolina, which is why I was in Greenville. The Olweus program is a "whole school" approach that reduces bullying by changing the school culture. Part of the Olweus method involves class meetings, interventions, and awareness by teachers. I thought of that when I read about Cho's experience in a high school English class.

According to numerous news reports, mostly based on the statements of Cho's high school classmates, Cho was called upon to read aloud in class. Characteristically for him, Cho resisted. His teacher forced the issue and threatened him with a failing grade. This is how CBS [reported the incident](#):

Once, in English class, the teacher had the students read aloud, and when it was Cho's turn, he just looked down in silence, Davids recalled. Finally, after the teacher threatened him with an F for participation, Cho started to read in a strange, deep voice that sounded "like he had something in his mouth," Davids said.

"As soon as he started reading, the whole class started laughing and pointing and saying, 'Go back to China,'" Davids said.

Cho was born in South Korea.

CBS added, "The high school classmates' accounts add to the psychological portrait that is beginning to take shape, and could shed light on Cho's state of mind in the video rant he mailed to NBC in the middle of his rampage Monday at Virginia Tech."

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that this was an isolated incident. More likely, it is a graphic metaphor of the kind of mistreatment that Cho, apparently without sufficient resiliency or coping mechanisms, drew upon when he became a self-appointed angel of death on April 16, 2007. In the incident related by CBS and others, Cho was bullied by a teacher and taunted by fellow students. When he went on his rampage, he killed teachers and fellow students. Do the math.

We did not discuss Seung Hui Cho or the Virginia Tech tragedy in the Olweus “booster” training in Greenville. There are enough reasons to teach and promote bullying prevention without invoking the sensational events, like Columbine, Paducah, and Blacksburg. We know that most victims of bullying in schools suffer silently and that is enough. We know that some of them commit suicide and that some of them strike back violently.

Last fall, in the Clark County School District, a middle school student who was small for his age had been bullied enough. He stashed a knife in bushes on his route home and stabbed two students who had bullied him. In the Canyon Country of north Los Angeles County, another bullying victim slashed open a bully’s forehead with a knife. The Great American Myth of bullying is that victims should “just fight back.” That’s not always a good idea.

Most victims internalize the bullying and the results are lower grades, poor attendance, physical symptoms, and low self-esteem. The bullies don’t get off much better. Studies show that they are more likely to spend time in prison, indulge in drug and alcohol abuse, and get involved in aggressive relationships. Bullying produces no winners. And sometimes, rarely, incredibly, and awfully, it produces horror.

I won’t take the position that the bullying Seung Hui Cho endured had a causal effect on him that led to the April 16th massacre. The interviews with fellow students and family members suggest an underlying, undiagnosed, pathology. So do reports from his teachers and a court finding that he was a danger to himself. Cho sent out warning signals that filled the sky.

But I know this. I would not want to be a high school English teacher who allowed Cho to be taunted by his classmates and spend the rest of my life wondering if I should have done something to stop it.

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