

REVIEW

Arming Students with Experience: A Review of *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom*

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Twenty years ago I was finishing my third year as an undergraduate in secondary English education. I came home from class on that Tuesday to turn on the TV as the news coverage of the Columbine school shooting played out. I dropped to my knees in shock and horror as I watched the news loop the footage they had of students and teachers being evacuated and interviewed. The faces of the shooters filled up the screen. My mind reeled. What was happening? How could this happen? How could teenagers--*kids*--do this? Possibly even more alarming is that twenty years later, gun violence has not only continued, but has become more frequent. Active shooter and lockdown drills have become the norm for school children in the United States, which is why Shelly Shaffer, Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil, and Steven T. Bickmore's *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom* is not only timely, but necessary for all ELA teachers who strive to keep social issues at the forefront of their curriculum.

In her preface, Ashley Boyd points out that while many in our country would like to avoid talking about gun violence, our students do want to “face the challenges--they desire critical conversations, personal reflection, and thoughtful action around gun violence and school environments” (iii). Students need a safe place to read and write and discuss such a heavy topic which is precisely why this book is an excellent guide for teachers. *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom* is divided into five sections. The first section presents a history of gun violence in schools in four essays. Young adult author Chris Crutcher sets the urgent tone of the

book with his direct essay, “It’s the Gun,” where he contests any argument that lays the full blame of gun violence on anything that is not the actual gun. The other three essays in this section follow suit showcasing the building of violence and further avoidance of facing the real problem: the gun. An interesting addition to this section could be to highlight the culture of violence in this country from big budget military to nuclear weapons and how the belief that the country with the biggest guns is the winner then translates to citizens wanting the biggest guns too.

Sections two and three concentrate on young adult literature that can be used as entry points for students to talk about gun violence in schools, the trauma that comes with such attacks, and the ways students can move to take action. Each chapter presents a different text with possible before, during, and after reading activities. Text selections are all contemporary and offer a diverse array of narrative structures including *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* by Matthew Quick, a first-person narrative using footnotes as asides to show the protagonist’s unstable state of mind; *Mercy Rule* by Tom Leveen, a more traditional, multiple point of view novel; *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, a novel in verse; and *The March* graphic novel trilogy by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. The young adult literature chosen in this section are titles usually reserved only for classroom libraries and choice reading. Centering titles like these, as many of the contributing authors note, could cause conflict in how it is received by parents or administrators. Guns, racism, and violence are just a few of the uncomfortable topics that elicit conversations around social injustice which is what we need in the English classroom if we are to create agents of change and advocacy in the next generation. Having books like these is important but teaching them to all students and engaging all learners in the discomfort is how growth and change can happen. In addition, each chapter includes a “Connected Resources” section for teachers to use as a way to expand on ideas and adapt pedagogy given in the chapter itself as well as how the titles can be used across disciplines.

The final two chapters of the book focus on writing and the power of telling difficult stories—both for students and teachers. There is a chapter by Jonathan Bush that focuses on rhetoric with approaches for teaching students to analyze the arguments made in the the media surrounding not just guns, but any topic. There are two chapters dealing with how writing can be therapeutic in the aftermath of a crisis, and how students can use various text types, such as social media, to write the story of the victims and make calls for action. The final chapter of the book directs attention to future teachers and how to provide them with support and readiness for a job that may ask them to decide to what extent they would sacrifice themselves for their students.

Bickmore, Rumohr-Voskuil, and Shaffer could not have published this book at a more auspicious time. While I was reading this book, the junior high where I teach went into a lockdown. A student reported seeing a gun in another student's backpack. It ended up being a toy, but not without all of the staff throwing scared glances at the big, orange buckets we were issued when we were taught how to pack a wound and tie a tourniquet just weeks before. Not creating the space for conversations about school gun violence is irresponsible at this point. In their introduction, the authors articulate that they "believe that vicarious experience is the smoothest, least painful way to learn important lessons" (xi). As we turned off all the lights and sat silent in the classroom during the lockdown, I realized that this was becoming too common. Students were getting desensitized. They need the "vicarious experiences" that literature can provide. And while the texts presented for students to read are all young adult works, *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom* is a pragmatic read for any teacher who uses texts as a way to enter conversations with students. Middle and high school teachers would benefit from having this text on hand as a reference not just for titles listed, but for the pedagogy used that can be applied to multiple critical conversations. For instance, it would be easy to make the jump from gun violence in schools to gun violence in the streets using the texts suggested by contributor Sarah J Donovan: *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds and *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. As a before reading activity, Rumohr-Voskuil suggests questioning the practice of victim blaming. This could also be used with texts that deal with other forms of violence such as sexual assault, racism, and xenophobia.

Many of the chapter contributors heavily encourage promoting the power of words and storytelling. Secondary teachers can directly benefit from activities described in chapters such as Shaffer's "Adolescent Counter-Storytelling: Finding Youth Voice and Truth in *That's Not What Happened*" (48-56). Shaffer's ideas can be applied to any novel that has multiple narrators telling the same story. Jason J. Griffith writes about inviting students to use their own words as a means of processing trauma, which can, again, be adapted to fit many different unit or text themes. This entire book is not a rigid lesson plan for select texts, but something that is flexible and malleable to fit an educator's current resources and needs.

Additionally, *Contending with Gun Violence in English Language Classrooms* would make an ideal textbook for pre-service English teachers in their methods courses. While each chapter offers veteran teachers easily adaptable activities, new teachers will find specific steps they can follow. Such is the case in Melissa Williamson-Pulkkinen's chapter, "Exploring the Blame Game Through

the Lens of the Scout: Reading and Writing About *Give a Boy a Gun*” in which she leads the reader through explicit steps for teaching students to write a causal argumentative essay (59). In “What He Knows and What He Will Say: Voicing for Justice in *All American Boys*,” Alice Hays outlines how to apply a Youth Participatory Action Research framework to the novel (85). This book has the potential to reach a number of pre-service teachers preparing them for the trauma that goes along with teaching young people while also exposing them to inventive pedagogical moves. College students would practice the very conversations they should lead in their future classrooms so that they, too, can have the dual “vicarious experiences” of gun violence and teaching about gun violence.

If *Contending with Gun Violence in the English Language Classroom* is lacking anything it is more of everything. The book is a slim 131 pages, each chapter under ten pages. Using it as a text for pre-service teachers will certainly start conversations; however, it seems that much of the discussion would need to surround what the activities would actually look like in the classroom. Chapters could be stronger with examples and implementation strategies for both current and pre-service teachers to easily imagine in their own learning environments. Similarly, all of the young adult literature in the book was geared toward high school-aged students, but gun violence affects all ages. The addition of middle-grade titles and picture books could have appealed to a broader, k-12 and beyond, audience and given a greater scope. Students under the age of fourteen can also thoughtfully consider ideas such as the difference between right and wrong, how our choices affect others, and what to do when you are afraid. As we know too well by incidents such as the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, it’s not just high school students who need to contend with gun violence.

After every single incident of school gun violence, we are told, “it is too soon” to bring up the subject of gun control. The adults our students see in the media are constantly holding up their hands saying, “Nope. We are not going to talk about this.” The Parkland shooting was a turning point for young adults. Teenagers across the country slapped back those adult hands and yelled, “Yes. You WILL listen. We WILL talk about this.” Our students are hungry for these discussions because they don’t want to be next. They don’t want their school—their safe place—to be the next on the long list of gun violence in American schools. James E. Fredricksen and Joe Dillon explore how students can “focus on the ways authors use tools, particularly as they move their audience to take action,” and this is the key to why this book is so important to educators right now: Students want to talk about gun violence, but more so, they want to do something about it (103). It is our responsibility as educators to guide our students through “vicarious experiences” with love and care, but also with

the intent to reveal to them the power they hold in their words and actions. Our students do not need to be bystanders who watch the violence and hope it doesn't come for them next. They can read to understand the experiences of others and write to change policies so those experiences don't happen to anyone else.

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