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Published in:
Religious Education

Publication status and date:
Published: 15/03/2017

DOI (link to publisher):
[10.1080/00344087.2016.1113908](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1113908)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for the published version (APA):
Pfeifer, B., & Ganzevoort, R. (2017). Tell Me Why? Existential Concerns of School Shooters. *Religious Education*, 112(2), 123-135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1113908>

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Tell Me Why?

Existential Concerns of School Shooters.

Birgit Pfeifer & R.Ruard Ganzevoort

Religious Education 112(2), 123-135

Abstract

One of the few recurring characteristics in school shooters' stories is their expression of existential concerns. Many discuss their hatred of the world and existential loneliness in their manifestos, suicide letters, or social media updates. These expressions—called leaking—are made during the planning period preceding their deed. They are not only important in terms of prevention, but also help us understand the intrinsic meanings in this seemingly irrational and psychopathological behavior. This study offers a content analysis of the existential issues in personal expressions of school shooters prior to their deeds in order to shed more light on their motives.

Introduction

In the last 25 years more than 250 mostly young people have died worldwide in school shootings. The social impact is enormous. Traumatized children, parents, and teachers wonder why tragedies like these occur and those responsible for security policies ask how one can prevent these crimes. In recent years, researchers have approached this issue from isolated scholarly perspectives including sociology, psychology, criminology, and medicine (Harding, Fox, and Metha 2002). Some argue that school shootings arise from a combination of different risk factors (Robertz 2004; Newman et al. 2004; Henry 2009). Studying isolated factors like bullying or violent computer games as causes of school shootings therefore will not provide reliable answers but lead to a narrowed perspective of the problem and misguided polarization in the discussion about prevention.

To overcome this polarization, Bockler, Seeger, and Sitzer (2013) published an international and interdisciplinary overview of research, cases studies, and concepts for prevention. It forms a collection of the latest empirical findings and theoretical concepts and claims to “turn attention to the violence-affirming

setting in its entirety" (2) including socialization, institutional circumstances of school life and biographical, psychodynamic background.

Arguably, violence by adolescents can be linked to behavioral, biological, and social circumstances like playing violent video games, prefrontal deficits, influence of family and social environment (Fryxell and Smith 2000), social disintegration, and a systematic loss of control (Heitmeyer, Bockler, and Seeger 2013). Considering the nature of these factors, it is easily assumed that the cause of violent behavior is a certain deficiency in the perpetrator's life (Carlson 2003). In fact, research on popular perceptions about school shootings suggests that most people postulate a psychopathological reason to account for the event considered abnormal (Pfeifer and Ganzevoort, in preparation).

In our opinion one aspect is strikingly missing in this overview: the existential concerns the perpetrators are engaged with prior to their crimes. To understand violence, existentialists like Sartre and May suggested, it is important to look at existential needs (Diamond 1996). Violence helps to overcome limits that frustrate personal freedom and meaningful actions (Stigliano 1983; Diamond 1996). Without denying the obvious ethical boundaries, it is essential to recognize that violence, in some cases, provides an existential reward (Carlson 2003).

The aim of the present study is therefore to complement the overview by answering the question: Which existential concerns are found in autobiographical expressions of school shooters prior to their crime? Studying the perpetrators' existential concerns contributes to an understanding of their motives. These concerns can be found in documents like suicide letters, essays, or manifestos, created by the perpetrators during the phase of planning their deed. A number of researchers argue that school shootings are usually planned over a significant period (O'Toole 2002; Vossekul 2002; Robertz 2004) and during this period the perpetrator almost always announces his plans. This is called leaking. Most perpetrators express their thoughts, feelings, and plans via videos, suicide letters, comments on social media, graffiti, or essays. These expressions contain statements about existential themes like life and death, love and hate, isolation and the struggle with identity.

Theory: existential concerns

Existential concerns, as addressed in this article, are related to the view of life and death, the freedom of the individual and the responsibility for one's actions, the awareness that one is fundamentally alone, and the problem of meaning (Yalom 1980). Ernest Becker (1973) even argues that the fear of death is the foundation of all existential concerns. He states that the fear of losing our own life makes us use violence against others. By killing others we create an illusion of being invulnerable. This is an attempt to deny the reality that we are mortal.

Based on Yalom’s seminal work, Koole, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2006) further developed the five major existential concerns: death, isolation, identity, freedom, and meaning. These originate from the knowledge that death is inescapable; that identity, beliefs, and values are uncertain; that the array of choices one has is flustering; and that essentially everyone is alone. Although these concerns are traditionally discussed in the field of philosophy, Koole et al. empirically investigate the role these concerns play in psychological functioning to understand how these issues affect human behavior and experience. Elsewhere, Koole (2008, 7) states that “existential concerns are a major force in human behavior, and that ignoring these concerns only serves to deepen the psychological conflicts that are associated with them.”

Experimental studies point out that those existential concerns have an immense influence on people’s emotions, thoughts, and deeds (Koole et al. 2006; see Table 1). The question addressed in our study is what—if any—role these concerns play in the lives of school shooters prior to their deed. To answer the research question the contents of perpetrators’ original statements referring to the planned shooting are analyzed. As these statements were made by the school shooters themselves in the course of their preparations, we can construe them as indicative of the motives and meanings most significant to them.

TABLE 1. The Five Existential Concerns and the Existential Problems They Represent (based on data from Koole et al. 2006)

| Existential concerns | Existential problem |
|----------------------|---|
| Death | Psychological conflict between mortality and the desire to live forever |
| Isolation | Conflict between the wish to be connected to others and experiences of rejection; realization that one’s subjective experience of reality can never be fully shared |
| Identity | A clear sense of who one is and how one fits into the world versus uncertainties because of conflicts between self-aspects, unclear boundaries between self and non-self, or limited self-insight |
| Freedom | Experience of free will versus external forces that impact behavior and the burden of responsibility for one’s choices in response to a complex array of alternatives |
| Meaning | Desire to believe life is meaningful versus events and experiences that appear random or inconsistent with one’s bases of meaning |

TABLE 2. Selected School Shooters and Materials

| Name | Incident | Impact | Material |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| 1 Luke Woodham Age: 16 | Mississippi, USA: October 1, 1997, Pearl High School, Pearl | Kills his mother and two students at school; serving three life terms and an additional 140 years in prison | Several writings: 4 pages |
| 2 “Kip” Kipland Kinkel Age: 15 | Oregon, USA: May 21, 1998, Thurston High School, Springfield | After killing his parents he kills two people at school; serving a 111-year sentence without parole | Journal, essay: 5.5 pages |
| 3 Eric Harris Age: 18 | Colorado, USA: April 20, 1999, Columbine High School, Columbine | 13 people killed, shooters commit suicide | Journal, writings in school planner: Harris 2,5 pages; Klebold 3,5 pages |
| 4 Dylan Klebold Age: 17 | Germany, Europe: 20th November 2006, Geschwister Scholl Schule, Emsdetten | 5 people injured by firearm, many more by smoke bombs, shooter commits suicide | Suicide note: 3 pages |
| 5 Sebastian Bosse Age: 18 | Virginia, USA: April 16, 2007, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg | 32 people killed, shooter commits suicide | Manifesto: 9 pages |
| 6 Seung-Hui Cho Age: 23 | Finland, Europe: November 7, 2007, Jokela High School, Tuusula | 8 people killed, shooter commits suicide | 3 online documents, confession video: 9, 5 pages |
| 7 Pekka- Eric Auvinen Age: 18 | | | |

Method

Sampling and tekst corpus

For this project we selected seven cases for which an adequate amount of trustworthy material was available while aiming for heterogeneity in terms of cultural and educational contexts, age and social circumstances of the perpetrator, and impact (number of deaths) of the actual deed. We included cases from Europe and the United States (see Table 2).

Original documents and videos in English and German were used because crucial information could get lost in translation from other languages with which we are not familiar. The selection was restricted to documents and videos that the perpetrators had produced themselves prior to the shooting and that had a direct reference to the crime. Unless otherwise stated, all original expressions of the school shooters and transcriptions of their videos were retrieved from www.schoolshooters.info.¹ For this study we translated documents written in German.

Coding and Analysis

By using existing concepts of existential concerns we started coding with the predetermined codes using QDA Miner qualitative data analysis software. If we could not assign a code to an expression we decided if we needed to form a new category or could assign a subcategory of an existing code. The five existential concerns were used as the main coding categories to analyze the text. The subcategories were developed inductively. For example, the expressions I want to die or I will kill myself are found in the texts and therefore the subcategory suicide was attached to the main coding category death. This leads to the following list of subcategories:

- Death: murder, suicide and mortality
- Isolation: feeling outcast, loneliness, rejection
- Identity: I-see-myself-as, you-see-me-as, I-see-you-as, I-want-to-be
- Freedom: responsibility, free will
- Meaning: hope, faith, purpose

The documents were first analyzed on a case by case basis. When shooters acted in pairs (e.g., Eric Harris and Dylon Klebold) their statements were

¹ Dr. Langman is a psychologist and the author of *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (2010). He is a sought-after expert on the psychology of youths who commit rampage school shootings. All the material on his website appears to be trustworthy.

analyzed both individually and as a pair. A secondary analysis was performed on the whole corpus.

For a first step in the analysis we used methods of quantitative content analyses (Bortz and Doring 2006). We looked at how frequent existential concerns occurred in the texts using QDA Miner. For this purpose the material was divided into text segments, based on structure and content. For example, if in a document the perpetrator wrote about death and then changed the subject to feelings of isolation, segments were created. If he changed from introspective thoughts to addressing directly to an audience, it was also counted as a new segment. If he started writing in capital letters for one or more sentences, it was treated as a segment. In video material after making a pause in his monologue, a new segment started.

The smallest segment was one sentence, the largest segment was eight sentences. The number of segments varied between cases, ranging from 59 segments for Sebastian to 141 segments for Eric with an average of 71 segments. With this first step we could assess the relative importance of the various concerns for the perpetrators. The following categories are used: top frequency (TF) when a concern is found in more than 60% of the segments; high frequency (HF) for occurrences between 41%-60%; medium frequency (MF) 21%-40%; low frequency (LF) less than 20%.

In a second step, we analyzed how the existential concerns were valued in the text (valence analysis, see Bortz and Doring, 2006). The range was positive, negative, and neutral. For example, death is valued positively when the perpetrator expressed that he thought of death as a solution for his problems. Murder would then be the fulfillment of his desire to take revenge for the injustice done to him by others. Suicide would be the solution to end his suffering.

Statements were ranked as neutral when they had a more general content, like: death is not special because everyone has to die. Pekka, for example, states: "not all human lives are important or worth saving." Negative statements would be expressions like "I do not want to die." Because this step is more prone to subjective interpretations by the researcher, coding was done conservatively and the researchers discussed diverging interpretations to reach consensus.

In a third and final step, we analyzed co-occurrence of existential concerns, both in the individual cases and in the overall corpus.

Results

The autobiographical documents show clear expressions of existential concerns. Two existential concerns are found in every case: death and identity. Isolation is found in five of the seven cases and the expressions of feeling isolated are always very emotional and strong. In most cases the shooters feel

superior and are frustrated that no one else seems to acknowledge their superiority. They feel rejected and do not know how to cope with that. Meaning, also found in five cases, is mostly expressed as a disappointment in reality and life. "Normal" life (i.e., school, work, having a family), is meaningless to them. The results are presented per existential concern and in the patterns in which they emerge.

Death

Death is found in all of the cases in a top frequency except in Sebastian's text, where death is found in a low frequency. Suicide and murder are related to death in all cases. In four cases the concept of mortality is mentioned as a more general idea. A positive value is assigned to murder in all cases. Murder is seen as a way of being more powerful than others and of being able to choose who will live and who will die. Suicide is valued ambivalently. Positively valued segments are found in all cases where suicide is seen as a way of bringing an end to suffering. Some school shooters express the idea that their own death will grant them the status of hero or martyr and therefore will make them unforgettable. Seung-Hui² expresses this idea of immortality in a video he mailed to the National Broadcasting Company (NBC): "Thanks to you I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people." Negatively valued segments appear in three cases because of the pain caused to family and friends.

Of all cases, Luke most frequently expresses concerns about death. Death in his case is mostly expressed as murder. Luke fantasizes in his documents about shooting others. "I can't do it through pacifism, if I can't show you through displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet." Revenge also seems a motive for murder: "I killed because people like me are mistreated every day."

Kip's documents express an urge to kill people and his feelings of hate obviously disturb him. Death is mentioned in his document with a high frequency in the form of murder and a possible suicide. Kip defends his plans of killing people by saying, "All humans are evil. I just want to end the world of evil."

Eric and Dylan seem to be role models for other school shooters. They are quoted literally or mentioned by all the perpetrators in this study posterior to their shooting at Columbine High. Death is the most often mentioned existential concern in Eric's documents. He calls his planned murder a "final solution" and refers to the genocide of the Jews by the German Nazis. He also calls his murder revenge. People whom he sees as having wronged him will be his victims. He refers directly to the shooting when he says, "And if you pissed me off in the

² Seung-Hui is the only non-Caucasian shooter in this study. Statistically, the majority of school shooters is male and Caucasian. Seung-Hui was born in South Korea and lived in the United States from the age of eight. He spent two thirds of his life in the United States, where he attended primary, middle, and high school and college.

past, you will die if I see you.” Eric sees himself as superior and states that he therefore has the right to decide who will live or die. This gives him a feeling of power.

In Pekka’s documents death is a top-frequency concern. He explains his deed as natural selection, a term also used by Eric. He even named his YouTube manifesto Natural selector’s manifesto.

Isolation

Expressions about isolation are found in five cases and always in top frequency and with a negative valuation. In all these cases the perpetrators feel lonely, rejected, and treated like outcasts. The perpetrators point out that isolation is one motive for their deed. All feel that they are being treated as outcasts by other students, teachers, and society. Isolation is the most often mentioned existential concern for Dylan. He writes about others having fun and falling in love and regrets that he has none of this because “I do not fit in.” When he describes what is bad in his life, he focuses on isolation: “What’s bad—no girls (friends or girlfriends), no other friends except a few, nobody accepting me even though I want to be accepted.” He feels rejected when one of his best friends gets a girlfriend and spends less time with him. “I feel so lonely, without a friend.” Luke writes how his hatred is related to feeling isolated: “I suffered all my life. No one ever truly loved me. No one ever truly cared about me.”

Identity

As with the existential concerns about death, all perpetrators discuss concerns about identity in their writings. In five cases the concern occurs with a top frequency, in one with a high frequency and in one with a low frequency. Six of the perpetrators write about how they are seen by others and all discuss how they see themselves. In three cases there is an expression of who-I-want-to-be but it is more significant that all perpetrators express who or what they do not want to be.

The perpetrators display a positive, even superior, self-image, except for Kip and Luke. Kip writes “I don’t know who I am. I want to be something I can never be. I try so hard every day. But in the end, I hate myself for what I’ve become.” Luke sees himself as an unloved person. In all the other cases the shooters feel superior to others and emphasize that they are very different from and superior to other people.

Eric addresses identity in a top frequency. He calls himself a racist and he states that he is proud of it. He refers to Nazi ideology and uses expressions from the German language. He says that he is “full of hate and I am loving it.” He considers himself one of the few people with intelligence. This feeling of superiority shows in statements like: “No one is worthy of this planet, only me and whoever I choose.” One person he chooses is Dylan Klebold, the only person he sees as

having “SELF AWARENESS” (capitals in original) while other people are just “robots.”

Freedom

Freedom is discussed in the documents of four perpetrators, once in low frequency, once in high frequency, and twice in medium frequency. It takes the form of, for example, a feeling that their personal freedom is in conflict with the demands of society. Freedom itself is always valued as positive, but it is often accompanied by the negative restriction of freedom. When Luke talks about freedom in a low frequency, he relates it to existentialism: “Study the philosophies of others and condense the parts you like as your own. Make your own rules. Live by your own laws.” Here, freedom is positive and something one should pursue.

Eric seems to struggle with freedom and talks about it in a medium frequency. He states that there is no freedom and he hates it when other people like parents, teachers, or politicians tell him what to do. Moreover, he sees the boundaries of society as restricting everyone’s freedom: “Human nature is smothered out by society, job, and work and school. Instincts are deleted by laws.”

Freedom also seems to be an important existential concern for Pekka (high frequency). He, too, struggles with the rules that society places on him. He says that stupid people should be slaves and intelligent people, like him, should be free. Freedom is important and positive but a lack of freedom frustrates him. He holds society responsible for the absence of freedom and therefore seeks revenge. “Democracy . . . you think democracy means freedom and justice? You are wrong. Democracy is a dictatorship of the moral majority.”

In Sebastian’s documents freedom is discussed in a medium frequency. He wants to free himself from the boundaries of society. He writes that “a big part of my revenge will focus on the teachers, because these are the people who interfered in my life against my will and put me in the position where I am now; On the battlefield.”³

Meaning

Meaning is discussed in five cases, twice in medium frequency, twice in low frequency, and once in a top frequency. One could argue that death, identity, isolation, and freedom are also related to meaning and therefore that these percentages are inaccurate. However, we chose to look at the existential concern of meaning separately and as defined by Yalom (1980): the wish that

³ Original text: Ein Grossteil meiner Rache wird sich auf das Lehrpersonal richten, denn das sind Menschen die gegen meinen Willen in mein Leben eingegriffen haben, und geholfen haben mich dahin zu stellen, wo ich jetzt stehe; Auf dem Schlachtfeld.

life is meaningful versus the experience that some events are inconsistent with their bases of meaning. In all five cases meaning is valued as negative. The perpetrators are disappointed in the reality of life. In two cases meaning is also valued as neutral. For example, Pekka argues that “life is just a meaningless coincidence.”

Sebastian’s expressions discuss meaning much more frequently than any of the other cases. One whole document written by him is related to the dilemma of personal dreams versus reality of life. “I recognized that the world, as I thought it is, does not exist, that it is an illusion, which is mainly created by media.” He is obviously disappointed in reality and cannot find a meaning in life the way most people live it. He does not want to be how society wants him to be, and as a result he wants to kill others and himself. The murders are his revenge for these disappointments.

Patterns

The most common combinations in the various documents (i.e., segments in which categories coincide) are death/identity and death/isolation.

In Luke’s documents the most common combination of existential concerns in the expressions is death and isolation. He feels unloved and singled out and as revenge he fantasizes about murder. Death and identity are also frequently combined. Luke identifies himself as the one who kills to take revenge for all mistreated people.

Kip’s documents most frequently combine death and isolation. He wants to fight his isolation with murder and suicide. Death is also frequently found in combination with identity. He sees himself as the one who frees the world from evil.

Eric combines death and identity. Because of his godlike feelings of superiority he feels he has the right to kill people who are inferior in his eyes. The combination meaning and death is also found, as his deed gives meaning to his life.

When Dylan expresses death he talks about suicide and murder. Because he feels that no one loves him he does not want to live anymore. He also wants to take revenge on all people who do not fulfill his desire of being loved. Identity and murder are also combined frequently. Although feelings of superiority are expressed less often than in Eric’s documents, Dylan also writes that he has the right to kill others because of their inferiority.

Pekka writes very frequently about death in combination with identity. Like Eric and Dylan he derives the right to kill people from his absolute superiority. Freedom and death also form a frequent combination. Everyone tries to take away his freedom and the freedom of others and, therefore, everyone has to die.

The combination freedom and meaning is also found in a number of his expressions. Without absolute freedom there is no meaning to life.

Sebastian combines meaning and freedom. He is unable to accept the fact that life does not seem to be what he would like it to be. The boundaries of society or school make life senseless. Death and meaning are also combined in his expressions. Because of the meaninglessness of life he wants to kill himself and others so that he will be remembered. The deed actually gives his life a meaning. Identity and isolation are also combined.

Sebastian sees himself as a true individualist but because of that people see him as outcast. Death and isolation are found as a combination, but, unlike in the other cases, not very frequently.

Seung-Hui combines death and isolation when he notes that he kills people because they treat him as an outcast and torture him. Identity and death are also found as a combination. Seung-Hui sees himself as an angel of revenge who kills because they are tormenting people like him, a God-like figure who frees the world from evil.

Discussion

What can we learn from the documents these school shooters have produced in the time before their violent acts? It is clear from the analysis of the cases in this study that existential concerns play an important role in the life of the perpetrators and presumably act as an important precursor to the school shootings. Apparently, to them their lives do not live up to the standards and expectations set for them. The perpetrators seem to consider their deed meaningful. Like avenging angels or superheroes, they take revenge for injustice, rejection, and bullying. Because they feel superior, they argue that they have the right to kill inferiors. The narcissistic self-image—feeling Godlike—combined with rejection or insults (narcissistic injury) leads to a high level of aggression toward the source of complaint. Notably, under the same circumstances low self-esteem does not lead to that kind of aggression (Bushman and Baumeister 1998). One has to consider that many adolescents have a relatively favorable self-image and they are able to cope with narcissistic injuries without turning to violence. In the cases studied here, a sense of isolation is combined with narcissistic traits, amplifying the development of aggression against the sources of the insult and rejection. The shooters find it unbearable that other people question their identity by not acknowledging their superiority. Defending their superiority, they want to demonstrate their power by choosing who may live and who has to die. These adolescents hold the whole world—and their world at this point is mostly their school—responsible for their existential concerns and consequently set out to kill teachers and fellow students.

This analysis and interpretation of the existential concerns of school shooters should incorporate one more element that—although obvious—has not been

addressed in most research on school shooters: the perpetrators in this study and the majority of school shooters as such are male adolescents in Western societies. This begs for an interpretation of the critical existential challenges young men experience in these societies (Dykstra, Cole, and Capps 2009; Kindlon and Thomson 2000; Pollack and Shuster 2001). Pollack (1998) claims that especially in Western societies boys struggle with feelings of isolation, frustration, and the inability to handle their emotions. This matches the expressions of existential concerns in the documents analyzed in this study. Therefore, it is not too far-fetched to see a cultural dynamic at play as well.

Many theorists argue that the acceptance or even glorification of violent behavior became standard in Western society. For example, extreme violence is a common component of Hollywood movies and popular culture. When the “hero” of a story uses violence it is rarely depicted as aggression, but instead as a means of defending what one believes in. The other becomes the enemy, against whom violence is accepted easily. Giroux (2013) argues that warlike values like “survival of the fittest ethics” (44) have become the “primary currency of a market-driven culture” (38). This “pedagogy of brutalizing hardness and dehumanization is also produced and circulated in schools” (39). With this Giroux refers inter alia to the transformation of schools into an extension of the criminal justice system, where metal detectors at school entrances and surveillance cameras in hallways are very common.

“Redemptive violence,” as another cultural aspect of violence is introduced by Walter Wink (1992). He argues that the idea that redemptive violence solves all conflicts is a powerful myth of the modern Western world, tapping directly into religious language like spiritual warfare and even crucifixion. According to this myth, violence exercised by the true-hearted person redeems society, even if it means that the violent redeemer loses his life.

This corresponds with many expressions in the documents studied revealing the perpetrators’ feeling God-like when fantasizing about murdering people. They claim that with their deed they do what God should have done: kill inferior humans. Justifying the shooting as an act of freeing the world from evil or inferior people is found in all the documents in some way. These adolescents use violence to feel superior and powerful, mimicking the role models of male-dominated societies believing in redemptive violence. Society defines what a “real man” should be (Harris 1995) and from a young age male heroes are presented as victorious because of violence.

The desire for superiority as experienced by the school shooters versus the impossibility of meeting Western male role models, leads to struggles like I feel lonely, no one understands me, there is no real purpose in life, I am outcast. To be redeemed from these struggles and to feel superior and powerful some boys reach out to extreme violence, fostered by cultural and religious myths of redemptive violence.

Obviously we do not claim that this is the only or even the most important factor, but it certainly should be considered as a significant one. In the light of

preventing school shootings it is important to address the existential concerns of young people. On the cultural level, society has to examine its ways of legitimizing male violence. Schools must play a role in a nonviolent education where students learn how to express their feelings. They need to have room for existential questions and staff who can teach how to approach these issues. For religious education (RE) the question arises which role RE can play in the guidance of students struggling with existential questions like those of the school shooters in this study.

Garbarino (1999) concludes that school shooters live in a crisis of meaninglessness and spiritual emptiness. He also states that the fact that these adolescents' spiritual needs are not met can damage them as much as their nutritional or emotional needs not being met.

I think there are at least three reasons why a spiritually empty kid is in jeopardy. First, because a spiritually empty kid has a kind of hole in his heart and that hole must be filled with some sense of meaningfulness. Second, a kid who is spiritually empty has no sense of limits. Third, a spiritually empty kid has no emotional floor to fall back on when he gets sad. He can go into emotional free fall and can fall as low as a human being can possibly go. (Garbarino and Haslam 2005, 449)

Therefore, RE should address religious, ethical, and existential questions considering religious, spiritual, and personal diversity of the students.

Widham, Hooper, and Hudson (2005) conclude that religious factors, among others, have a protective effect regarding the development of at-risk behavior which may lead to fatal school violence. Interestingly enough, Pfeifer and Ganzevoort (2014) concluded that a number of known school shooters participated actively in church life and school shootings have occurred more frequently in areas with a strong conservative religious population (Arcus 2002). Possibly, the related conservative RE gives students answers to existential questions in accordance with these churches' doctrines instead of guiding these students' search to find answers. Bultmann (1959) understands the assignment of RE to include sensitizing students to their existential questions, in other words, to empower students to critically examine their ideas and visions on life. Consequently, as Sutinen, Kallioniemi, and Pihlstrom (2015) state in their consideration of Dewey's concept of RE as a pedagogical transaction, "RE cannot be a situation in which an adult or educator transfers his or her thinking on religion to a learner's mind or way of thinking" (39). A critical examination of your own, personal world vision means that you need the other to discuss your vision, to hear the vision of the other, and, above all that, to accept that they can differ. Therefore, Roebben (2007) defines as important goals of RE to consider the opposition, to be able to have a respectful dialogue, and to have empathy and appreciation for the other. This way, the classroom can become a place for encounter and dialogue.

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