



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

C.S.I.: High school

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment April 13, 2010

John Odgren, currently on trial for allegedly murdering a fellow student at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, was known for his fascination with violence. He fashioned himself as “Jack,” a character from his favorite Stephen King novel. Odgren loved to play violent video games and had a keen interest in knives.

Odgren’s fascination went further than just a hobby. His obsession with all things violent was so intense that he attended a forensic-themed summer program and took a high school course in forensics, both in the months just prior to the homicide with which he is charged. Not only did the class satisfy part of his academic requirements, but it surely satisfied his passion for the dark side of the human condition. This is not to suggest that the young defendant was inspired to take his lessons much too far--only that C.S.I.-type instruction may have reinforced his existing fascination with violence.



John Odgren in 2007 (File Photo)

Lincoln-Sudbury High is but one of the countless schools around the country that have adopted academic curricula focused on the interplay between science and the law. In recent years, high schools and even middle schools have exploited their students’ morbid fascination as a strategy for spoon feeding them science--to make chemistry, biology and other fields more palatable.

A few years ago the National Science Teachers Association partnered with then Court-TV to produce [a forensic science curriculum guide](#). In 2005, two teachers from New Jersey formed a national organization for high school science educators involved in this form of instruction. The group's [website](#) features the graphic image of a chalk body

outline.

Unfortunately, some schools have failed to show necessary restraint, recreating crime scenes so as to provide texture to the class material beyond that which is available from textbooks like "Forensic Science for High School Students." One instructor contrived a hypothetical "whodunit" in which the principal had been poisoned to death. Another teacher developed a fictitious exercise in which three faculty members had been fatally shot. Still another took students to the morgue to see a maggot-infested corpse.

Notwithstanding these stories of excess, the use of criminal and legal applications of scientific tools is undoubtedly well-intentioned. The poor performance of America's high school students in the sciences has been well-documented (e.g., recent MCAS science test results). Popularity, however, should not be a major determinant for assessing academic value. Otherwise, educators might be tempted to draw on the occult to teach religion or even pornography as a platform for sex education.

The irony behind the expanding implementation of forensic science classes in secondary schools is that administrators have endeavored in recent years (especially in the post-Columbine era) to keep violence out of the schools. Perhaps one of the difficult lessons to be taken away from the tragedy at Lincoln-Sudbury High is that pandering to students' darker interests, no matter how effective in promoting learning, may not be such a smart idea--at least for youngsters, like Odgren, with significant mental health issues and a wearisomely intense interest in violence.

For the sake of full disclosure, I admit to being a long-standing opponent of death sciences for impressionable young minds. And listening in court yesterday to stories of John Odgren's profound fascination with murder, I had to wonder if C.S.I. summer camp and forensic science class were wise choices for him.