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To cite this article: Becky Francis & Martin Mills (2012) Schools as damaging organisations: instigating a dialogue concerning alternative models of schooling, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 20:2, 251-271, DOI: [10.1080/14681366.2012.688765](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2012.688765)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2012.688765>



Published online: 29 Jun 2012.



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Schools as damaging organisations: instigating a dialogue concerning alternative models of schooling

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Various injurious effects of schooling have been documented in the literature over the years, leading some authors to characterise schooling as violence. In this article we draw together such research to present an account of the ways in which schooling in the Global North damages young people (and their teachers). The range of damage includes: the reproduction of social inequality via schooling and the psychological injury and practices of harassment and exclusion this involves for pupils; institutional structures of discipline and surveillance; brutalisation of young people; and the effects of participation and experiences of these practices for teachers. As well as drawing together this research, the article also seeks to precipitate debate on forms and structures of schooling. We argue that it is insufficient to simply criticise existing practices; rather, we seek to instigate a dialogue as to possible alternative forms of schooling that would avoid the damaging effects of the present prevalent model.

Keywords: schools; inequality; social justice; damage; reproduction of inequality

All in all you're just another brick in the wall. (Pink Floyd 1979)

Background

It may be a truism that there are diverse understandings of the nature and purposes of education. Some see education as holding radical potential to empower students via access to knowledge (e.g. critical theorists); while others see it as a vehicle for oppression (e.g. Marxist understandings of the education system as a mechanism for the reproduction of class inequality). Likewise, for some, education should be about intellectual curiosity and creativity for its own sake, while others view its function as meeting the demands of the economy. The debate is revitalised in current policy circles,

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following more than two decades in which education in many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries has been dominated by notions of ‘standards and effectiveness’ as indicated by exam credentials (see Slee, Weiner, and Tomlinson 1998). This approach has resulted in, for example, English pupils being among the most tested in the world. This trend is not so different in Australia.

In 2008 the Australian Federal Labor government introduced the yearly National Assessment Program (Literacy and Numeracy) – NAPLAN – tests for years 5, 7 and 9; with every school’s results being published on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) website, My School, since early 2010. These test results have been used to compare schools with schools and States with States. The high stakes nature of these tests and the publication of results have led to government reviews, ‘cheating’ by teachers and principals, and a refocusing of curricula and pedagogies in schools towards the perceived demands of the tests (see Lingard 2010, for an overview and critique of these Australian developments). However, in England, at least, there is creeping policy recognition of the limitations of this policy trajectory. For instance, the claims by Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2009) that standardised assessment test results, the league tables they support, and the ‘credentials game playing’ by schools that these systems perpetuate, are harmful to a quality education appear to be acknowledged – at least to some extent – in some UK policy circles (e.g. Rose 2009; Sykes 2010). Albeit such recognition is articulated in a particular (problematic) way, as we shall see.

This policy soul-searching concerning the nature of education, and its relation to social justice and children’s ‘wellbeing’, is however circumscribed by human capital models of the purposes of education; and neoliberal premises that centralise as immutable to the education system those very mechanisms of distinction that widen educational inequality. By which we mean, the quasi-market in education and mechanisms characterising it such as selection, summative assessment and publication of results, streaming and setting, school diversification and ‘choice’, and so on (Ball 2007). What we seek to do in this article is engage a rather more radical agenda with regard to the future of the education system. We will argue that the current schooling system modelled across many OECD nations – including our own locations of England and Australia – is inherently damaging: damaging both in its institutional impact on children/young people and teachers as individuals, and in its fundamental perpetuation of social inequality.

In writing this article we have had long discussions as to which word best represents our arguments about schooling. We began by using the word ‘violence’, which has already been associated with institutions (Hearn and Parkin 2001) and indeed with schooling (Harber 2004). In their work, Hearn and Parkin adopt:

a broad, socially contextualized understanding of violence as violation. Accordingly we define violence as those structures, actions, events and experiences that violate or cause violation or are considered as violating ... Violence can thus be seen as much more than physical violence, harassment and bullying. It can also include intimidation, interrogation, surveillance, persecution, subjugation, discrimination and exclusion that lead to experiences of violation. (2001, 17)

Such a description of violence we would suggest aligns with many of the practices within and effects of contemporary schooling. Nevertheless, we remained uncomfortable with the word, concerned that perhaps it is readable as melodramatic, hence jeopardising our arguments. Hearn and Parkin recognise that the word 'violence' is complex and contested – it is also highly emotive. We returned to the thesaurus, yet associated words such as 'malign', 'oppressive', 'damaging', 'injurious', 'harmful', or 'pernicious' did not satisfactorily capture our argument either. However, we were drawn to 'damaging', 'injurious' and 'oppressive'. 'Oppressive' is, of course, a somewhat outmoded word in our postmodern times, but perhaps it most accurately captures what we are trying to express, in its evocation of power relations. That being said, its somewhat reductive 'them and us' implication cannot fully articulate the complexity and multifariousness of the injurious practices normalised within schooling. Therefore, we have opted for the word 'damage', as perhaps less emotive and hence less open to accusations of hyperbole than 'violence'; we believe it is also broad enough to capture some of the meaning implied by both 'oppression' and 'violence'.

In suggesting that schools, as they are predominantly structured, are damaging, we wish to challenge researchers of education and social justice by precipitating a revitalised debate on what a socially just education system would look like.¹ We gently suggest that, while the sociology of education has offered a powerful analysis and critique of inequality in education, it has been less effective in positing alternatives (Francis 2009a). There are a variety of explanations for this reticence/absence, including an often yawning gap between educational research recommendations and policy practice which may have discouraged researchers from seeking to impact policy. Nevertheless, it is arguable that there remains a moral imperative for those of us committed to the pursuit of social justice in education to offer potential alternatives as well as critique of existing models. In the following article we set out our argument regarding the injury perpetrated by the existing schooling model, with specific attention to the practices and impact on students, and teachers. In relation to students, we consider in turn institutional practices of distinction, discipline, and 'brutalisation'. We then attend to the impact of such practices on teachers.

In his stimulating book, *Schooling as Violence* (2004), Clive Harber maintains that schools systematise violence, and by harming children and institutionalising violence they harm society more broadly. We share some

aspects of this view, but as poststructuralists we see schools more as institutional expressions (albeit often heightened expressions) of discourses and resulting structural arrangements perpetuated by society. And while Harber (2004) focuses on aspects of schooling which can conventionally be seen as connected to violence (bullying, militarism, discipline/punishment, psychological damage, etc.), we wish to argue that schooling for inequality is itself injurious, and a fundamental impediment to social justice. We shall elaborate the evidence that schooling reproduces (and even exacerbates) social inequality in the sections below. However, unlike Harber, we do not want to construct *schooling as violence*. Instead, while we suggest that schooling is currently damaging, it need not be so. Therefore, having mapped the case for our analysis of schooling as damaging, in the final section of the article we outline our incipient impressions of alternative models, in order to stimulate and provoke further debate. We maintain that constructive and imaginative thinking is urgently needed to prevent the ongoing subjectification of children – and teachers – to the schooling panopticon.

Damage to students

Schooling for inequality: processes of distinction

To observe that schools reproduce social inequality is by no means novel. Analysts from philosophical and political perspectives as diverse as Ivan Illich (1971) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) among others have articulated this point. Bowles and Gintis (1976) hypothesise how the ‘hidden curriculum’ embedded in the systems of schooling socialises a future compliant proletarian workforce; while Illich (1971) elaborates how schooling credentialises rather than educates, inevitably facilitating advantage to those who can afford to access better credentials (via smaller class sizes in private schools, access to elite universities, etc.). With the arrival of the New Labour government in 1997, education in England underwent a range of drives intended to increase social inclusion, such as Widening Participation in Higher Education, Sure Start in the Early Years, targeted interventions such as ‘Excellence in Cities’, and the ‘back to basics’ agenda of primary school literacy and numeracy hours. Similarly, since the election of the Australian Labor Party government at the Federal level in 2007, and again in 2010, the national government in that country has also indicated a concern with improving the educational outcomes of economically and socially disadvantaged students. As in England, that concern has largely been driven through testing regimes and public accountability measures such as the My Schools website.² Yet the continuing commitment to neoliberal agendas in education, including the marketisation of schooling, has undermined efforts to improve social inclusion and rendered them superficial. For instance, various large-scale studies illuminate the strikingly unequal patterning of wealth (and poverty) across contemporary Britain, showing levels of segregation

between the advantaged and the disadvantaged not seen since the 1930s (Thomas and Dorling 2007). Statistical studies illustrate such socio-economic patterns in relation to education attainment, demonstrating the primacy of social class as a predictor of educational achievement in the UK (Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Blanden and Machin 2007; OECD 2007).

Such findings are not surprising, given that the quasi-market in the English education system (precipitated by the Conservative governments of the 1980s and consolidated by New Labour), and its integral practices of differentiation, further advantages those with capital (financial and social), and disadvantages those without. Tropes of 'excellence' and 'standards and effectiveness' saturate a policy landscape wherein competition is supposed to ensure success. Yet, 'success' cannot be delineated without reference to its Other, failure (Reay and Lucey 2003; Britzman 2009). Thus, the interpolation of 'success' integrally involves the identification and demonisation of those not succeeding – be these local authorities, state school systems, schools, or individual teachers or pupils. Reay and Lucey's work (2003; Lucey and Reay 2002) documents the ways in which these institutional practices of distinction and selection mark this 'failure' out, and the psychic consequences for young people produced as 'failures'.

Lessons from England provide a salutary warning about the violations to already marginalised groups of the population that can occur through the increasing focus on standardised forms of assessment. Processes of testing (notably beginning with the Key Stage 1 SATs exams at age 7) in England inform children and their parents early on that they are successes or failures, and such messages are compounded via practices of streaming and setting, increasingly implemented from the earliest years onwards within English primary schooling (and increasingly standardised in secondary education across Australian states). Setting and streaming are well established in the research literature as processes of distinction, as working-class pupils and those from certain minority ethnic groups are over-represented in low sets (Dunne et al. 2007; Cassen and Kingdon 2007). Such differentiated messages of success and failure are exacerbated via the process of application to secondary schooling (supposedly reflective of consumer 'choice' in both England and Australia, but in reality more usually dictated by the market position of different schools, and how far they can be selective of their pupil intake). The impact of this competitive marketplace for pupils who cannot access their school of choice and instead must be relegated to the local 'rubbish' school is profound (Reay and Lucey 2003). Not surprisingly, selection and methods of access to 'good' schools favour middle-class parents, who are advantaged in these processes by both material and cultural capital (Connell 1993; Reay 2009). Cassen and Kingdon (2007) show that working-class students are more likely to attend lower-quality schools: moreover, pupils in lower-achieving sets (disproportionately working class) can miss out on the best teaching if they are considered unlikely to

contribute to their school's league table position. Qualitative research amply demonstrates the traumatic and de-motivating effects on children of receiving messages that they are 'failing' (see e.g. Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007; Lucey and Reay 2003; Reay 2009; Osler 2006).³ Hence a broad-scale self-fulfilling prophecy is perpetuated, as working-class pupils disengage. While education tends to be held up by governments as a panacea for addressing social inequality, in Britain and Australia it actually functions to reproduce and exacerbate inequality (Francis and Hey 2009; Teese and Polesel 2003).

The undeniable gap in educational attainment according to social class, so plainly highlighted by its own systems of attainment data collection, comprised an embarrassment for the previous UK New Labour government. As one of us has discussed elsewhere, it was in response to such findings that the narrative of 'aspiration' (or 'lack of aspiration') emerged as articulated by government ministers and the media (see e.g. Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008). This narrative maintains that what is required to narrow the socio-economic achievement gap is a raising of working-class aspirations: a subtle sleight of hand pointing the finger of blame away from social policy, and instead to a deficit in educational aspirations on the part of working-class families (Francis and Hey 2009; see also Reay 2009). This move typifies neoliberal policy practice: there has been extensive academic analysis of the ways in which neoliberal discourses of individuality and meritocracy project responsibility for failure away from social structures and institutions and on to individuals (see e.g. Rose 1999; Walkerdine 2003; Bauman 2005). Neoliberalism produces the individual as a flexible entrepreneur, seizing the opportunities available to them: society has a duty only to *offer* not *ensure* opportunity. This facilitates production of those failing to thrive as feckless and wanton, their failure explained by their own character deficiencies. As Bauman observes,

If poverty continues to exist and grow amid affluence, the work ethic must have been ineffective. But if we believe that it stays ineffective only because its commandments are not properly listened to and obeyed, then this failure to listen and obey can only be explained by either moral defectiveness or criminal intent on the part of those who fall out. (2005, 77)

Conveniently, moreover, such positionings enable justification of a rejection of collective social responsibility for individuals produced as having only themselves to blame (Bauman 2005). Hence, in the case of educational 'aspiration', as Francis and Hey argue,

The pithy sign of 'aspiration' is, in the discursive context of neoliberalism and socio-economic inequality, overwhelmed by the moral charge of its reviled signified: that of the feckless, parasitic individual who has failed to grasp the opportunities open to them. (2009, 226)

Such tropes were directly invoked by the former UK Prime Minister with regard to educational aspiration, when he responded to the evidence of widening social inequality in Britain by stating:

I want to see a Britain that is far more upwardly mobile. But it cannot be achieved without people themselves adopting the work ethic, the learning ethic and ‘aiming high’. (Gordon Brown, July 2008, cited in Reay 2009, p. 74)

This production of lack of hard work and ambition as exclusive explanations for socio-economic inequality in educational outcomes is, we would argue, brazenly deceitful and abhorrent. The psychological and material consequences for working-class families of being interpolated into these discourses is profound.

Hence we would argue that, in their reproduction of socio-economic inequality, schools are damaging – symbolically, but also more viscerally. They distribute (unequally) the credentials that facilitate access to material wealth, hence denying such access to some children. Moreover, the psychological implications for these children who are daily reminded of their ‘failure’ through the relentless ritualised distinctions of schooling further undermines their life-chances (see e.g. Perry’s 2010 analysis of the connection between school underachievement and criminality). Arguably, while social inequality begins with the family, it is schooling that formalises it, certifies it, structures and entrenches it.

Institutional structures and classroom management: schooling as panopticon

One of the fundamental structural aspects of mainstream schooling systems argued to facilitate numerous aspects of violence is teacher–pupil ratios (see e.g. Illich 1971; Harber 2004). As Illich analyses, this model whereby pupils substantially outnumber teachers, is driven by economic imperatives. In other words, it is a cheap way of providing education that is compulsory for all young people between the age of 5 and 16+ in Britain and Australia (5–18 in Australia, and soon to be extended to 18 in England). Teacher–pupil ratios are likely to be influenced by the extent of governmental ability or will to raise taxation. The subsequent arrangements wherein a single teacher manages a large class of pupils necessitate particular authoritarian practices of discipline and surveillance, which characterise dominant models of schooling. These ratios and ensuing structural arrangements and authoritarian practices themselves in turn promulgate particular behaviours in children, including hierarchical peer groupings, bullying, social segregation, and so on (Mills 2001; Harber 2004; Ringrose and Renold 2009). The size of pupil groups permits particular discourses of distinction to appear: for example, those of gender, social class and ethnicity (Barrie Thorne 1993 observes how local children on the same street/close will usually play together in

spite of gender differences, but segregate at school). Many schools maintain interventions to mitigate against such tendencies (anti-bullying strategies, equalities policies, etc.); and it is increasingly vogue to facilitate 'the voice of the child' through student councils, 'circle time' and so on. Many of these initiatives are well-intentioned but must inevitably be undermined by the primacy of the model in which they are enacted.

Such structures and practices, for instance, often reflect Bentham's vision of the panopticon, encouraging self-regulation and surveillance. While Foucault may be seen to have selected a rather extreme example of schooling in his focus on the 'école militaire' in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), his description of the practices by which students are categorised and graded according to a specific norm reflect those found in mainstream schools. Indeed these various practices, from school assemblies, to uniform, to methods of discipline and punishment, are carefully documented from precisely this Foucauldian perspective by John Whelen (2011). Foucault (1977) and Whelen (2011) observe how production of this norm in turn disciplines, as students are individualised and hierarchised according to their compliance to the norm; and how the norm functions as an instrument of power by imposing homogeneity, but simultaneously producing distinction (see also Perry 2010). As sociologists have extensively documented, pupils' self-discipline may be limited, and active rebellion an integral part of some student identities. However, it is important to consider two points: firstly, that such rebellion must operate within constraints of toleration by the school, otherwise perpetrators will be expelled from the schooling system into other systems of constraint and/or punishment. And secondly, that such rebellion is often the product of, and/or enacted within, pupils' own systems of peer regulation and production of acceptable behaviours (even while these may differ from these of the school) (see ethnographic accounts from Willis 1977 to our own work, e.g. Francis 2000; Francis 2009b, 2010; Mills 1996; Mills 1997; Mills 2001; Lingard, Martino, and Mills 2009). Mainstream schooling is a system predicated upon surveillance and regulation.

It may be argued, of course, that this does not matter, and/or that given wider society is now so closely surveilled, there is no reason schooling should be different. William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* is premised on the need for social rules and hierarchies to prevent anarchy/humans' inherent bestiality emerging. But clearly, one only has to read the news – let alone observe classrooms – to know that the sorts of acts of 'mob rule' and violence articulated in *The Lord of the Flies* do occur in schools, army barracks, prisons and young offenders institutions, and other highly 'disciplined' environments. Our argument, building on the observations of the likes of Harber (2004) and Ringrose and Renold (2009) is that schools, and their systems of distinction, discipline and surveillance, actually exacerbate such practices of hierarchisation, exclusion, and bullying amongst pupils.

Pupil brutalisation

Students' experiences of violence at the hands of other students receives substantial attention in the media and academic literature for teachers and pre-service teachers. Bullying as a form of violence is regularly raised as a key issue facing students in schools. Much of the material expressing concerns about levels of bullying and other forms of violence often pathologises the perpetrator and the 'victim' (Osler and Starkey 2005; Ringrose and Renold 2009). In many instances the populist concerns about violence in schools are infused with a class and racial/ethnic prejudice which often have consequences for students from marginalised backgrounds in terms of exclusion (Osler and Starkey 2005). However, as much research has shown, students brutalise each other, to paraphrase feminist lawyer Jocelyne Scutt (1990), 'even in the best of schools', not just those located in low socio-economic status areas (Stoudt 2006; Saltmarsh 2007). These forms of violence are regularly performed by boys and are underpinned by discourses which serve to maintain existing hierarchies by punishing difference. For instance, the work of Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) provides disturbing narratives of the violence and other forms of oppression experienced by students who identify as gay or lesbian, are perceived as not fitting normalised constructions of gender or are physically disabled.

The extent to which violence and harassment underpin production of the gender/sexuality binary in schools has been extensively documented, including in our own work (Mills 2001; Keddie and Mills 2007; Francis 2000; Francis 2010). Girls as a group are regularly reminded of their place in the gender order through acts of harassment and intimidation (Robinson 2005). Not only are girls subject to sexual harassment though, but also many boys are engaged in constant violence ('fun' or otherwise) amongst each other within a perpetually constructed and contested 'hardness hierarchy' (Skelton 2001). Ethnographic work vividly reveals the disturbing manifestations of these practices in which bullying of boys deemed insufficiently masculine is established as a crucial aspect of other boys' productions of masculinity (e.g. Keddie 2003, 2005, 2006; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Kehily and Nayak 2006; Renold 2004; Renold 2007). Dalley-Trim (2007) illustrates how these brutal practices, often produced within a discourse of 'having a laugh', are normalised and unremarkable within the systems of the school; often unquestioned, or accepted as inevitable by teachers (see also George's 2007 work on the bullying practices among girls in schools). We are arguing here that the school as an institution actively produces these behaviours. This point is equally applicable to the production of 'race' binaries and racism within schooling, which has again been extensively documented by sociological researchers (e.g. Mirza 1992; Wright 2005; Wright, Weekes, and McGlaughlin, 2000; Wright, Standen, and Patel 2009; Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Archer 2003; Archer and Francis 2007; Gillborn 2008). It is salu-

tary to observe that the minority ethnic respondents in Crozier's (2009) work saw the racism that they regularly experience at school as inevitable, and specifically, 'part of school'.

Whilst we recognise that student violence against each other is affected by factors beyond the school, especially in relation to gender, we are concerned that rarely is the institution of schooling held up as a possible stimulant for such violence. As Alice Miller's (1987) work suggests, it is perhaps the 'poisonous pedagogies' as transmitted through the authoritarian structures of schooling that provide lessons to young people about effective ways to address conflict and to shore up one's privilege. Within such structures young people are educated in various techniques of domination and oppression. It is perhaps thus not surprising that students resort to violence when in conflict with others. Interestingly, research conducted in democratic schools has indicated that where students are educated within non-authoritarian structures and have greater involvement in decision-making this can reduce levels of violence (Osler and Starkey 2005).

Damage to teachers

As we have argued, schools can be violent places where many students feel oppressed, their freedoms denied, and particular forms of advantage and disadvantage reproduced. However, in arguing that schooling is oppressive to students, it could be easy to construct teachers as the perpetrators of this oppression. Whilst some teachers are clearly complicit in the perpetuation of inequalities from which they personally benefit, and whilst some teachers do actively engage in the oppression of some students, there are also many teachers who experience schooling as damaging. As with students, this negative experience has a multiplicity of forms. Teachers as a group experience anxieties and stresses produced by the changing nature of the profession and from being disciplined into a particular form of teacher that conflicts with the construction of the teacher they would like to be. Furthermore, schools are also workplaces where various patterns of inequality within gender, sexuality and race/ethnic relations are reproduced amongst the teaching profession (see e.g. Robinson 2000; Martino and Frank 2006; McDonald and Wingfield 2009; Santoro and Reid 2006; Daly and Maguire 2009). Clearly there is a certain distinction between student and staff experiences, in that for students attendance of school is mandatory, hence they are forcibly obliged to attend and submit to the system. Whereas teaching is taken up by choice, and practitioners can in theory select to leave the profession (albeit such agency may be somewhat constrained in practice). However, we consider it important to dedicate a section of this article to highlighting some of the key evidence on teachers' subjection to oppressive practices within schooling, to support our argument that schooling has injurious impacts on staff as well as students.

The nature of teachers' work and its relationship to the state has changed over time. Various histories of teaching have provided indications of the different attractions teaching provides (see e.g. King 1987; Lortie 1975). Within this literature it is apparent that many people come to teaching with a desire to support the growth and wellbeing of young people through enriching their lives by exposure to new (for the young person) knowledges and ways of seeing the world. Often combined with this has been a commitment to promoting a more democratic and socially just society through education, including as a pathway out of poverty. Teachers have often found that such ideals have continually had to be tempered by the other purposes of education, for example, as indicated by Althusser (1972), ensuring the compliance of the populace with the dominant ideology of the state. This has meant that to some extent it is not only students who have been rendered 'docile' but also teachers (Smyth and Shacklock 1998). As Helsby (1999, 21) has noted, 'controlling the teaching force has always been seen as an important state objective'.

This control has often meant that teachers have had to set aside their own agendas for entering the profession to meet the expectations of various policy and organisational demands. The effects of such expectation on teachers have only recently been of significant concern to researchers. Ivor Goodson (2003, 50) has pointed out how the lives of teachers in the first part of last century were often ignored, with the focus of research being on the role of the teacher. He then indicates how this focus changed somewhat in the late 1960s and 1970s on how teachers oppressed their students (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 1976) and that it was only in the 1980s that some consideration was given to the ways in which teachers were constrained by 'the system' within which they worked (see e.g. Connell 1985). Since that time the increasing impact of neo-liberal market politics on education has precipitated a growing concern with the ways in which teachers' lives are transformed in ways that leave them frustrated and disillusioned with teaching (e.g. Mills, Haase, and Charlton 2008). These concerns have opened up spaces for considering the ways in which teachers often experience schooling as oppressive.

As accountability pressures increase, as teachers become assessed and judged on their students' performances on standardised testing (which many teachers are opposed to on educational grounds), as teachers are increasingly blamed (along with teacher educators) for poor literacy and numeracy levels, as teachers and their schools are rewarded and punished for their achievements or failures and the consequences of these made public (through such means as the controversial Australian Commonwealth government's My School website), teaching as a transformative occupation becomes less attractive. Furthermore, as teachers increasingly become measured and judged by accountabilities that are often perceived to be irrelevant to providing a caring and rich educational environment, teachers can experience an ontological crisis. As Ian Menter has indicated:

In the rolling out of new approaches, whether it be performance related pay or new accountability regimes, there has been no evidence at any time that policymakers have taken any significant cognisance of the enormous and deep commitment felt by many teachers towards their work or to the personal investment involved for many teachers. (2009, 222)

In writing about the ‘epidemic of educational reform’, Stephen Ball (2003, 215), notes how reform does not change what teachers do, but ‘changes who they are’. He suggests that reforms grounded in a performative culture represent ‘a struggle over the teacher’s soul’ (2003, 217). He then goes on to say that within this culture: ‘We become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others’ (2003, 220). The current focus on forms of accountability in most OECD countries is thus often terrorising teachers into becoming what they do not want to become (see also Maguire and Pratt-Adams 2009; Perryman 2006). It would, however, be a mistake to suggest that life for teachers was better in a golden era before neo-liberal discourses had become so dominant within the field of education. There have long been pressures on teachers that conflict with idealised notions of being a teacher. Whilst teachers’ sources of dissatisfaction appear to have changed over time (Klassen and Anderson 2009), it is apparent from many studies of teachers’ work that for teachers significant within their levels of concerns has been the quality of relationships between students and teachers and the damaging effect of schools’ selective processes on that relationship and on teachers’ sense of self. For instance, as Connell indicated:

teaching, as well as having joys, also means failing kids, streaming them down, creating a good deal of boredom and frustration, and inflicting occasional punishments. In short, it involves inflicting a good deal of pain. This must have its effects on teachers in the long run. (1985, 152)

Schools as they are currently constructed are therefore, we suggest, places where teachers committed to young people and principles of social justice, have harm done to their sense of self. We would thus suggest that making schools better places for students would also make them better places for teachers.

What’s to be created in place of the existing model? Precipitating a discussion

In this paper we have argued that schools are damaging institutions/organisations. However, we do not want to suggest that they are inevitably so. There are schools that we know, both in the UK and in Australia, that have sought to disrupt the potential that schools have for violence (Mills and McGregor 2010; see also Thomas, Enloe, and Newell 2005; Apple and Beane 1999). In this final section we thus wish to sketch some initial

possibilities as to what alternative non-injurious models of schooling/educational communities might look like. In order to provoke further work and discussion we also provide some questions with which we are currently grappling.

As we have noted, there is a distinct lack of speculation on preferable models of education among both policy-makers and researchers. Within the various critiques of the schooling system, tentative alternatives have been posited, but these accounts remain scant. Existing suggestions range from an elimination of schools, with education being provided rather by a model of apprenticeship selected by the student (Illich 1971); to alternative schools based on specific ideologies/understandings of 'childhood' and education (e.g. Steiner schools, schools in the Summerhill tradition, Quaker schools, etc.). These various models raise key issues integral to any such consideration, including: the aims and parameters of schooling; the nature of any institution for educational purposes (and whether attendance is mandatory or chosen); the shape of the curriculum (including understandings of what everyone should know); and balances between freedom of choice and social demands/responsibility (e.g. is it acceptable for a child to choose not to be formally educated, or is it the responsibility of the state to ensure that every child receives 'an education'?).

Discussion of such questions immediately evokes particular existing models of schooling; which in some countries represent 'alternative' models of schooling and/or alternative curricula. These examples may include schools which seek to engage the processes of distinction outlined above *further* than is possible in mainstream schools: an example may be provided by those private schools, and in both Australia and Britain also some government schools, pursuing the International Baccalaureate as a perceived marker of 'more rigorous' educational qualifications than available in mainstream education. But they also include 'democratic' models, and 'flexible schooling' models, wherein hierarchies are often minimised and students have some control over their attendance and curriculum (McGregor and Mills 2011). It is interesting to observe how 'the Swedish model' of 'Free Schools' has been adopted as a fundamental aspect of education policy by the UK Coalition government, pursuing the mechanism established in Sweden which empowers parents to set up new schools. However, in invoking 'the Swedish model' there is comparatively little reference to the more progressive aspects of 'Kunskapsskolan', a large provider of Free Schools in Sweden, who now run two schools in England. These include pupils being able to choose when and whether to pursue their studies. There is also little mention of the lack of setting and streaming indicative of the Swedish system as a whole. Such educational practices sit rather less easily with Conservative education policy!

Our ideas are at this stage extremely iterative, and possibly contradictory. Attempting to formulate them has been notably challenging. However, for

these very reasons we felt it important to articulate our incipient ideas, however sketchy, in order to stimulate further debate. A first question is whether we are committed to what Illich disdainfully calls 'publicly prescribed learning' (1971, 65). Here we feel caught between different ideological discourses: as Illich perceptively observes, 'Even the seemingly radical critics of the school system are not willing to abandon the idea that they have an obligation to the young, especially to the poor, an obligation to process them' (1971, 67). Hence, whilst liberal perspectives would emphasise the undemocratic, disengaging and damaging aspects of forcibly subjecting children to the schooling system, socialist perspectives would insist on the importance of the state in providing for all and mediating the inequality which would be exacerbated without state intervention. Our position is one that incorporates both perspectives. We do subscribe to the notion that the state should provide a quality education to all, and such an education would have as its focus addressing the inequalities and injustices underpinning the current social and economic order. However, we would suggest that such an education can only be provided within a democratic context that facilitates the engagement with and commitment to the learning process by both teachers and students in the school. Thus, the provision of a non-damaging education would require attention being paid to the organisation of schools, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, with a more democratic, collaborative ethos underpinning all these.

Dewey's vision of schooling is still one that has salience for those concerned with the provision of progressive schooling. He urges that we 'make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeate it with the spirit of art, history and science' (cited in Illich 1971, 66). Here a meaningful, relevant curriculum is centralised, as is school as a community space. But such liberal democracy cannot be ensured in the existing school system, and nor can social justice; for the reasons outlined above. Hence structural change of schools as institutions must preclude changes in curriculum.

A priority has to be making schools places students and teachers want to attend. We would suggest that central to making schools attractive options for students and teachers is the minimisation of hierarchies within schools. More meaningful student and teacher input into decision-making and running of schools is likely to breed commitment to schooling. Schools as they are currently run have a closer resemblance to authoritarian regimes than they do democracies, especially for those young people who do not conform easily to school expectations (McGregor 2009). This is not to suggest that there are no teachers within schools working to address issues of social injustice in schools – many are (for documented examples, see e.g. Mills 1996; Mills 1997; Keddie and Mills 2007). However, many such teachers are working against the system and sometimes experience sanctions from colleagues and senior administrators. Other organisational features of school-

ing that need to change include class sizes, levels of professional support for teachers and greater commitment to understanding issues of diversity.

Closely aligned to making schools more attractive to students and teachers than they currently are is ensuring that students are able to attend school. Multiple factors can impact upon student attendance at school, this is particularly so for students who experience oppression beyond the schooling system, for example, students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, in Australia Indigenous young people and in the UK young people from particular Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. Many of the structural barriers such students face in terms of school attendance include: homelessness, mobility, parenthood, sickness. In order to ensure that *all* students can attend, schools will need to offer more than curriculum content. Schools need to provide crèches for those students who are parents, social workers to help young people facing issues like homelessness engage with the relevant social service agencies, job centres for those students requiring employment, advocates for students who may have legal, financial or work-related problems. They need, in other words, to become full service schools (for examples see Mills and McGregor 2010).

There also need to be curriculum changes, with greater student control over the content of their learning. It is arguable that the internet has potentially facilitated the very sorts of student-selected learning that Illich envisaged. More and more, children exercise choice, skill and discernment in their leisure pursuits, notably on-line. Such choice – which facilitates investment and ownership in learning – is largely absent in contemporary national and state curricula.⁴ Yet in the ICT age of the twenty-first century, where a world of learning is available on-line (and many are already taking the bespoke learning opportunities afforded), Illich's vision is less of pipe-dream and actually tangible. We consider it perfectly possible that, once the foundational basics of literacy and numeracy are ensured, students could exercise far greater control concerning the content of what they learn. This might be done within the broad bounds of a traditional curriculum: for example, in History one small group of students might select to study fashion in the eighteenth century, while another might study the origins of hip-hop music. However, these examples in themselves suggest a potential blurring of curriculum boundaries precipitated by such an approach: studies of aspects of society inevitably draw in elements of history, geography, sociology, psychology, politics, philosophy, art and so on; just as the study of science inevitably draws on mathematics and other disciplines. We would see the articulation of this disciplinary inter-relationship as essential in facilitating criticality.

Indeed, there are hints of this increasing flexibility and student autonomy emerging in a range of alternative models; notably those that set pupils regular learning targets which they can choose to address in a variety of ways, rather than formal teaching (from Summerhill to the Swedish

Kunskapsskolan system). This would suggest that changes need to be made to traditional assessment and pedagogical practices within sites where learning occurs. Assessment regimes that are used for the sorting and ranking of individuals, teachers, headteachers, schools and national schooling systems, rather than for engaging students in rich and meaningful learning, are likely to produce narrow and non-demanding forms of pedagogy. These latter forms of pedagogy, consistent with what Freire (1972) referred to as 'the banking concept of education', are unlikely to undermine the injurious forms of schooling we have outlined in this paper. Instead, we would suggest that progressive schooling, along with student flexibility and autonomy, has to be concerned with pedagogical practices that foreground a commitment to active citizenship and challenging various forms of oppression that limit such citizenship.

In this paper, we hope to have illustrated how issues of schools as damaging implicate 'the best' as well as 'the worst' schools. In so doing we are seeking to encourage debate about the purposes of schooling and to promote a consideration of alternative forms of schooling. For us there are still many questions with which we wish to engage. For instance, there is the question as to whether schools should be mandatory or voluntary. There is no doubt that students who make choices about their schooling are more committed to engaging with the school than when compelled to attend. However, at the same time, we know that where school is not compulsory it is the marginalised who miss out on the benefits that schools do provide. There are also questions about the 'essential learnings' that young people need, that have to be answered. Along with this question are questions relating to who determines these learnings, what are the best ways of teaching them, and how to assess that they have been achieved. We do not want to be overly pessimistic about the future of schooling. There are schools that embrace many of our concerns. However, many of these schools are targeted to certain sections of the population. Ironically these include the rich (e.g. elite private alternative schools) and the socially excluded (second-chance schools). Our position is that these questions and concerns should be the province of all schools.

Notes

1. This was the topic of a recent Keynote Debate at Roehampton University, organised by Becky Francis as Director of the Centre of Educational Research in Equalities, Policy and Pedagogy (CEREPP), which had a similar agenda in stimulating intellectual debate. Of course, it may be argued that the term 'social justice' has been rendered meaningless by banal overuse (and notably its hijacking by the Conservative Party and right-wing think tanks in the UK). However, we wish to re-assert the concept as underpinned by notions of social equality, care, and redistribution.
2. See <http://www.myschool.edu.au>.

3. The association between selection/streaming and social differentiation in achievement is highlighted by the OECD's PISA study report (2007). It is noted that a long-term trend across OECD countries has been to *reduce* the amount of separation and tracking in secondary education. Schools that divided students by ability for all subjects tended to have lower student performance, on average. The PISA study shows that early differentiation of students by school is associated with wider than average socio-economic disparities, and not with better results overall.
4. Albeit certain initiatives are working towards more democratic, collaborative curriculum designs which include young people in the co-creation of the curriculum: see for example the RSA's 'Area Based Curriculum'.

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