

Sometimes “How Can I Fix It?” Is the Wrong Question

Nerd Teacher

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Too many educators see themselves as heroes, as saviours, as masters, and as necessary to the continuation of society. Many see themselves as the people who can *save the world* one child at a time, especially if the teachers are from a dominant demographic and the child is from a marginalised background.

This same logic is what enabled schools to become harmful spaces, to embody obscured versions of racism, ethnocentrism, ableism, and queermisia within their curriculum and policies. It's what gave way to schools being tools of literal genocides, such as the residential schools for Indigenous peoples across the globe. It's what allows for European countries to take oaths and sign declarations “to not discriminate against *anyone*” while simultaneously propping up segregated schools and classes for Roma and Sinti children. It's what gives countries the ability to outright deny Rohingya refugee children access to schools in places like Bangladesh, treating them as if they aren't worth the resources. It's what provides countries like Australia and the United States to keep refugees in so-called “detainment” facilities, denying them access to almost everything.

Teachers are not heroes or saviours. We are humans, and we cannot (and should not) believe that we are responsible for solving every problem we come across. This is particularly true since a lot of teachers *also* embody the same beliefs and bigotries that our system does.

But what we really need to do is stop asking *how* we can fix things and start questioning whether or not we should even bother fixing what was clearly designed to hurt people in the first place.

“How Can I Destroy It?”

At first glance, this question seems incredibly negative. Many people often associate destruction with harm and immediately refuse to look at how answers to this question can be useful to all learners and community members. But it's a question that helps you start from a fresh perspective, which most people don't have when they're seeking to *fix* something.

After all, if you're trying to *fix* something, you're trying to get it back to what it was or what it was believed to be. However, if you were to completely and permanently remove something, you have to figure out what you're going to replace it with. That is, if it's even worth replacing.

Fixing and *reforming* things are often the first ideas that people have, even when they've been tried repeatedly; *replacing* or *removing* something are often the last things people want to do, especially because this frequently requires *more work* than simply altering it little by little or repairing the supposedly "broken" elements to be slight "less broken." This is especially true when it comes to schools and models of learning, despite the fact that the concept of schools that many of us have in our heads are *almost entirely new* and didn't exist as we know them prior to the 1900s. (And for many communities, there are still people within living generations who remember school being *much different* than it is now.)

Yet, this question is one of the most enjoyable and most useful because it invites people to *be creative* if you prompt them to view *destruction* as *creation*, to view *deconstruction* as being able to *construct something new*, and to view *abolition* as *an opportunity* for something healthier.

Sometimes it's a thought experiment that, for the moment, can't be fully implemented because the resources are missing. Sometimes people are able to try it out and find that it doesn't work but are still able to reflect on *why* and to address those issues. Other times, it's something that can be done and improved upon; it's something that develops and grows, allowing people the opportunity to have more control over the world around them.

In nearly every case, when I've presented this question to a (usually hesitant) colleague, we have found *better* solutions to the problems we're trying to address by inviting ourselves to pretend we could smash something that bothered us into oblivion and that we could do *anything*, so long as it didn't cause harm.

What if more people entered these institutions asking that very question, looking to make their positions or that organisation obsolete in the future because they could replace it with *anything* at all? How many different structures could we implement and how might that make it better for people to learn? What could we all achieve together if we collaborated to create learning environments that supported *us* and *our interests* instead of supporting global systems that none of us consented to in the first place?

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It's also extremely freeing to be able to look at an institution, particularly one that you may be employed by, and wonder how it can be dismantled and replaced with something that actually *can* aid in the liberation of all people. If you can see your profession as being temporary in the world, you're less likely to see it as your *identity*. This is particularly true of a profession like teaching, since a lot of people who enter the field often view their profession as integral to who they are. This isn't helped by the ways that teaching programs frame a lot of the work that we do, often promoting the idea of self-sacrifice; it's not helped by the fact that there are so many schools that see it as our duty to *also* work as much as possible, even outside of the academic calendar.

In fact, this excessively idealistic view of the profession is so common in so much of the propaganda around the profession, even inside of programs that *hurt* public schooling like Teach For America and its international cousins, that the author and teacher Roxanna Elden parodied it in her novel *Adequate Yearly Progress*.

Obviously, I wasn't immune to this when I first started, either, but I've since found comfort in being able to utilise the title of 'teacher' in my work towards school abolition. Despite the many years of both training and working as a teacher, despite all of the efforts of my professors and administrators trying to push the identity upon me through propagandistic lectures and speeches, I've found that today the title of 'teacher' is no longer something that is so integral to who I am.

Much of this is simply the result of reframing how I view schools and the questions I ask upon entering them. If I don't tie my own identity to something that I think needs to be destroyed and replaced, I can't really be bothered if my job ceases to exist in response to the development of healthier education and learning spaces.

It also has opened up the ability to recognise that we can *all* teach something in our own right. There has *never* been a year where I have worked in a school where a student hasn't taught me something; more than that, they have always been able to impress me with skills I never knew they had because they weren't seen as valuable or important in the current model. We really need to be creating a world where their knowledge, their understanding, and their talents are truly valued instead of snuffed out because they can't be 'profitable'.

“Do We Even Need This?”

Occasionally, the process of 'destroying' something can actually highlight its futility and how useless or harmful it can be. Within the 'school' context, there are clearly systems that cause harm for students *and* communities. This is regardless of whether or not we talk about the compulsory system of primary and secondary schools or the supposedly "voluntary" (but increasingly more *necessary*) tertiary schools.

Primary and secondary schools have *a lot* of problems. The most obvious is the fact that they are effectively "silos" for children that remove them from their communities and enforce guidelines that "teach" them what "correct" culture and "proper" languages are, often eradicating local customs, languages, and dialects in the process. They create arbitrary lines for how to exclude children from them, be it through entrance exams and policies, transfer exams to change schools, or final grade reports at the end of the year or upon graduation. All of these create systems that allow our societies to limit the experiences of a person to what is deemed "appropriate" *and* to potentially deny them access to future opportunities because they are believed to "not be good enough."

Rather than working with students and their communities to understand their needs, culture, or values, we create systems that punish them for acting outside what we deem as "proper" behaviours and manners. For young children who ask too many questions, they are often told or shown that they are disrespectful, frequently pushing them to become quieter and less overtly curious as they get older. People who are too quiet are seen as being insufficiently communicative, even if we haven't worked to understand what *they* might need or want. Learners who need spaces with *fewer* people are forced to sit in classrooms with a lot of their peers all at one time and are never allowed to leave, which frequently hinders their learning; those who need *noise* in the background or may need to *talk* to their peers about what they're learning are forced to sit in quiet places that make it impossible for them to work.

We've built our schools and universities to effectively manufacture "proper" citizens who meet whatever the state desires. In doing this, we have also created an overabundance of potential workers for certain positions, allowing the capitalist class to create excessive competition between them and severely underpay the people they hire. This is made even more clear when you see that schools are literally defunding arts programs, designating more and more of the scant resources they receive to be used in the service of STEM fields.

I mean, how else do you explain why a country like Australia *increased* the tuition for most arts and humanities subjects in universities (more than doubling some of them) and decreased

the tuition for STEM and “needed” jobs? Or how do you explain why the University of Western Australia completely dissolved their anthropology and sociology disciplines?

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And none of this goes into detail of all the ways in which schools have been tools for genocides among *so many* different peoples. It doesn’t explain all the ways in which schools have harmed, tried to erase the culture of, and literally murdered Indigenous peoples across the globe through the use of residential schools. It doesn’t explain the historical interaction of churches with schools and governments and how that continues to influence things like dress codes for all people and the subjects that teachers are allowed to teach to this day, even in so-called “secular” countries that claim to believe in the “separation of church and state.” It doesn’t talk about how governments have *closed* schools meant for communities who felt *ostracised* and *harassed* within their countries, such as the case of the *only Muslim school* in Paris (though Catholic private schools were curiously *left alone*). It doesn’t discuss how some countries continue to segregate *both* Roma and disabled children into either entirely different sections of schools or completely different schools altogether, perpetuating systemic abuses to *both groups of people*.

All of this is why, when we’re deconstructing something, we have to be critical of the pieces we’re working with. We have to recognise which pieces are genuinely useful while also understanding which ones have caused immeasurable harm to people, communities, and whole entire cultures.

Not everything is worth saving if we want to create something that benefits *everyone*.

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