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Thinking About the Role of an Anarchist Educator in Our Educational Systems

Nerd Teacher

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Most school years seem to start with the same question: *What is the purpose of education?* For many anarchists, we recognise that education is really important in developing the core of how social values are shared throughout our societies. Those of us working in currently existing education systems often find ourselves frustrated by a range of issues, namely the overly restrictive rules that are enforced on all people within the school ‘ecosystem’, the conflation of education with schooling, the hyper-focus on choosing the ‘correct’ educational path in order to achieve a career, and the lack of community inclusion in the development of any educational programs.

Sitting through a number of meetings taking place throughout the school year, it’s hard to figure out exactly *how* to function within current education systems and whether or not it’s even beneficial. There are a lot of questions that run through my mind when I’m participating in these meetings:

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<https://nerdteacher.com/archives/role-of-anarchist-educators>

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Why isn't the school run in such a way that more voices are heard? These meetings are often run by someone who holds a title like 'coordinator', 'principal', 'school manager', or 'educational director'; many of these people give presentations that *tell* teachers what they will do, even though they will never be responsible for implementing those programs or policies. It's unclear to me what their purpose is when they refuse to collaborate and only wish to dictate, especially when they seem to hide in their offices away from everyone else.

Where are the student voices in the development of an environment that's supposedly made *for* them? Why are we dictating what is best for them and how they ought to learn? How come we always assess the students in the *same* ways, either through standardised tests or identical assignments? Why aren't we asking them to look through their past work and showing us where they think they improved? And how come we can't allow them the opportunities to design their own projects and learn or showcase skills they're interested in?

Why are we forcing students to complete subjects or participate in classes where they're uncomfortable? One of the few things I remember from my (*really bad*) teacher training class for history content is that the instructor said you "need to be prepared to explain why your subject matters." What he seemed to have forgotten is that I don't get to choose *what history* is taught in my classes; that is set by the state or national curriculum.

How do I justify to my students focusing so much on *cis men* in our history and literature classes and seem to forget about the accomplishments of literally everyone else? How do I justify the focus on white people, the glorification of colonialism and imperialism, the excessive use of euphemisms about slavery or genocide in many materials, and systematic erasure of the achievements of Black and Indigenous people? How do I justify books leaving out the systematic displacement and murder of Romani in World War II and those that pretend nothing's wrong today? How do I justify

ignoring and overlooking the existence of disabled people because able-bodied and neurotypical people are uncomfortable acknowledging us? And what about the constant erasure of any and all queer history? Y'know, just to name a few.

I can't justify any of that, and I shouldn't have to. The only thing I can (and actually) do is *try* to add in sources that increase the range of history and literature my students are exposed to, but that doesn't guarantee my students' future teachers will do that or that students will acknowledge the information now. How can I teach equality and freedom when the curriculum tries to hide everything that proves we aren't as free or equal as we're told? How do I encourage my students to explore when the school doesn't support it and often actively works *against* explorations of curiosity (either through blocks to websites or selections of library books)?

Why do we force students into the same schedules? Teenagers often need a later starting time, but not all people live on the same schedules anyway. Why do we deny the learning that people do *outside* of schools, which is often more effective than what they learn *in* schools? Tons of students have shown us that they're learning more *outside* of school, especially with regards to their own activism.

And how do I, in this current economic system, maintain my job without getting fired because I might work for the one person who *hates* what I do and *hates* me for doing it? Teachers who try to expand upon the curriculum to highlight the reality of events, to encourage students to remain curious, and help them access more information or opportunities are often the people most targeted by administration with abuse and/or firings.

So again, I have to ask, *where does an anarchist educator fit in?* And how can we exist if we're required to uphold the status quo that we disagree with? And more to the point: *Can* we fit in at all?

That's the crux of the debate which is one I have with myself all the time. There's never going to be one single correct answer. I believe my existence in a school helps to *normalise* anarchism even if I'm not directly talking about it, as it's better for an *actual* anarchist to discuss the idea when it comes up and to address confusion (like when people use the word 'anarchy' to refer to 'chaos' and then assume the same of *anarchists*). It's probably better for us to exist, even if we're doing most of our work indirectly, than for us to be completely removed from the current society.

Plus, a paycheck is helpful to continue working on *other* activist causes.

But I also know that I'm stuck in a system that forces me to act in ways that are antithetical to my beliefs and often invalidate my identity. The state, unless students acquire paperwork to be excused for a reason they consider 'valid', requires that students be at school a certain number of days or risk failing, which I don't agree with *at all*.

I'm required to teach certain topics because they exist on a test or a state curriculum. If I overlook too many of the rules I disagree with, I get targeted for harassment (affecting both my mental health and financial stability). And it's *not always safe* for me to be an open non-binary queer person or to talk about my disabilities, and I've received complaints for "indoctrinating children" for simply recommending novels with openly queer characters and "scaring" them for including stories centered around disabled people.

In Slovakia, they openly segregate disabled children from mainstream schools. While they have developed schools specifically for children with disabilities, many public schools don't even have the proper equipment to accommodate physical disabilities, such as a stair lift or elevator (and I've been told about public schools where the *parents* had to do fundraising to get an elevator installed instead of the *state* doing the job it claims to do).

I've visited another school in the country that is split into *two*, segregating Slovak Roma children from "Slovak" children because

the "Slovak" parents retain anti-Roma beliefs. For the Roma students, almost none of their teachers are Romani or have connections to their community, forcing them to participate in the dominant culture and ignore their own (or risk getting in trouble). And, by the way, this segregation is *illegal*. (And while the European Commission called on Slovakia to desegregate their schools? It's not like anything happened, which would only be shocking if anyone expected states and "political unions" of states to do anything useful to protect *all* people.)

Working in education systems requires some form of a desire to want to *reform* them, to *alter* them while still maintaining what's "good" about them. But how do you improve schools like the ones above? How do you make them work for *everyone* when they were never designed for all people? COVID-19 has shown that a lot of our whole system is inaccessible and broken; students (along with their parents and communities) have found alternative ways to learn and work together, but we're still pushing everyone to go back to normal.

And so I keep finding myself in a predicament: Do I continue working in schools and hope that I influence the next generations to continue pushing for gradual change? Or do I find another avenue, as an educator, to work towards organising a philosophical shift that just isn't happening?

Because I don't feel good *in* the schools, and I don't feel good *out* of them (for as long as they exist).

I guess I'll just have to keep doing *both*. For now.