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Like a fool, I entered my career as a teacher believing that you could work within the system to change it. As a person with a range of undiagnosed disabilities who had been harassed and verbally abused by a range of teachers who claimed they were “ensuring I was ready for the real world” or “needed to learn discipline and respect in order to succeed,” I wanted to ensure that other children didn’t go through that. As someone who repeatedly had to *fight* with school systems because of misogynist teachers who tried to fail girls who took their classes, because of teachers who refused to accommodate documented disabilities, because of teachers who’d outed me as bisexual way before I was even ready or prepared? I wanted to be someone who could enter schools and change that and make sure the environment was safe for students.

I learned very quickly that you can’t do that. It’s all bullshit.

I blame a combination of my own youth and inexperience along with the persistent messaging that we give young people all the time: If they participate in the system, they’ll be able to enact the change we need and “make everything better.”

Yet, we constantly ignore the pleas of young people and enable adults to harass autistic teenagers who merely state the obvious in their activism. We tell young people to participate and punish them when they try.

Right now, there are more than enough examples of younger adults entering systems "to change them." We've seen this exact same narrative in our political battles of the past decade, though it's been around far longer. We watched as people went out in numbers to elect some of the youngest and "most progressive" people to the United States Congress, but that narrative both helped to *hide* things that were happening simultaneously. It hid the fact that people had also voted in some of the youngest members of the conservative party who also sought to make changes (most of which would harm the most vulnerable among us) and obscured the fact that the very voices that gave so many people who still believed in the system hope were mostly capable of doing very little (with many of them sliding into the same behaviours that they once critiqued of their 'establishment peers').

And we don't even need to look at recent examples because we have an excess of historical ones, too. Just plow through any moment in labour history, read about how the AFL-CIO continually let workers down because they kept siding with the government (particularly because many of the members 'at the top' would go on to get roles in government offices, and they couldn't very well *fight* the people they sought to *work with*).

The system can't be changed from the inside. The only change that happens is to the people who enter it. We should all know this by now, and it should be widely discussed.

The number of teachers and other educators who believe in this exact trope astounds me. The fact that, at one point in my life, I believed in it still amazes me when I reflect upon my growth and

learning. You'd think that we'd be better at recognising it because our field is almost entirely built right on top of it. It's right there all the time. It's baked into every single thing we do, and we just can't seem to escape it.

Yet, while it sits right in front of our face and influences everything we do, we miss it. We claim to teach so-called "critical thinking," and yet we're so easily manipulated into believing that we're saints, that we've been "called" to teach, that (as it exists in our current situation) it's "more than a job." It becomes an identity that we refuse to let go of, fearing we might lose something about ourselves if we stop clinging to it.

It's not healthy. We need to stop.

I think it's part of the moralising of the work that takes place across many of our cultures, simultaneously holding teachers up as heroes while also condescending to us as if we're completely incapable of doing anything at all. Many of us enter the field, viewing it as a "noble cause." And honestly, why wouldn't we? It's the exact narrative that is constantly on display, particularly when it comes to explanations for why we can take on enormous sums of debt in the university but receive next to nothing in a field that requires absurd amounts of credentialing, constant professional development, and steals as much time as possible both after school and on the weekend. It's the kind of bullshit you hear professors claim in the beginning of a first-year class of a teaching program, as if they're trying to sell you on the idea of constantly giving everything you've got in return for buying your own supplies and materials just so you can get shit done.

Hell, it's the precise story that sells in Hollywood movies *about* teachers. Especially if it's about a *white* teacher going into a *non-white* neighbourhood and trying to "save" them all from themselves.

How else do you get people to pretend the work is even worth it? How else do you get people to buy into a field that, if we talked about it honestly, would probably make more people run from it

than support it? How do you get people to even overlook the pain and frustration *they* felt as a student in order to continue enabling it within the school *as a teacher*?

What other strategies do you have to get people who *claim* they care about children's well-being to engage in a field where *harming* some of the most vulnerable people is seen as necessary? It's because we dress up all of the harm in the trappings of that so-called "necessity" and apply labels about who "deserves" access to any of it that we can get people to overlook all the psychological, social, and cultural damage that is done through our schools and educational institutions.

It's probably because of our proximity to that very structure that teachers often fail to register the moralising component of it all. We feel the tension that comes from the conflicting views about how teachers and educators are somehow one of the "most important" jobs for society but also should have little autonomy because families should "be responsible for" choosing what children get to know. That conflict is a weapon created of a false dichotomy, built on top of an artificial community, and sharpened through a tension that will never be slackened because they *need* us to see ourselves as "more capable" than the families we work with and to feel as if we're constantly *against* them even as we claim to be *helping* them.

They trap us in an area of complete condescension, both on the receiving and giving ends. It's a spectacular use of a classic tactic that helps maintain schooling as a necessity: divide and conquer.

And even *that* aspect of our job, tied so closely to the increased professionalisation of the field, enables us to be so easily fooled to think we could even make a real difference *inside* a school. We're set up to fight everyone all the time, we're pushed to "think about the children" and do our work "for them," and we're never allowed to really think about ourselves or what our work *actually* means for the world we live in. When do we get time between all the paperwork, lesson preparation, and teaching hours to even stop and consider that maybe what we do *causes harm*?

The school system reinforces all of that.

With all that in mind, I struggle to understand why people continue to think school is even remotely useful. Why is it that we keep trying to 'fix' them, even as the State or corporate owners continually show us that *they* think schools aren't worth caring about? Why is it that we let *them* set agendas, even when *we* know what our communities need?

Why don't we stop to recognise that building these 'silos' for children actually ensures we're building our own obstacles for a healthier society? We should be questioning how more young people can participate in the building of our world if they're being segregated into spaces "meant" for them. We should be ensuring that *all* of our spaces recognise that children *should* be there, especially because we should be learning *everywhere*.

It should be obvious that we can't prefigure *any* kind of healthy and liberatory society if we continually *leave children out* of everything.

Schools *cannot* be reformed. They shouldn't be. Let them fall so that we might be able to actually move on.

people who'd been assaulted were the children of teachers *or* autistic students.

I've worked with a head of school who only managed to get his position because, as a teachers' assistant, he helped to provide information to the owners so that they could oust the founder of the school. I've worked for owners who blamed the staff for all of their *own* short-comings: choosing an inappropriate location for the school, not having certain facilities available, not having adequate marketing, and so on.

Hell, I've even worked somewhere that told me, as I was being *forced out of my job*, that I was one of the "best teachers they'd had" but I couldn't stay because "I wore jeans."

But I've also worked in public schools with equally abusive structures. I've seen the police *called on students* who were struggling with a mental health situation while working in the United States, and I've watched the same police hand abused and terrified (usually white) children *back* to abusive parents, with precisely zero care or concern for what would happen when that child got home. I currently live in a country that segregates both disabled and Romani children from schools, even as the EU tells them they shouldn't.

Why should we try to reform any of that?

The last public school I worked in was during the early part of the pandemic, and I stayed for two months before I gave up. I *left* after I got severely sick and couldn't work. I *quit* because my department coordinator *pulled my mask off my face*, complaining that they "couldn't understand me." I shouted at them for even *daring* to touch my face, let alone remove my mask during a global pandemic for which (at the time) we didn't have a vaccine. The school principal sided with them, claiming I was being "irrationally upset" at a "harmless interaction." (Granted, the school principal *also* didn't seem concerned that someone had signed all of our emails up for conspiracy theory newsletters, either.)

Every school is abusive in some way, and none of them give a single shit about the people in them.

We're supposed to view ourselves as saviours (especially when it's useful to the State so we *don't* fight back and we *don't* stand in solidarity with everyone else around us), and we're supposed to sacrifice whatever we can to ensure the kids have what they need and are taken care of.

I hate that absolutely shitty world, and I want to abolish it completely.

So many of us believe that we can change the school if only more of us entered it and worked to support initiatives that would "improve quality" and "increase access" for more kids. But we fail to recognise that the narrative of "improving" the school and "making it better" works just as well across the board and regardless of political affiliation. After all, we all have our own definitions of what it means to make something "better."

The first school I ever worked at used its status as the *only* school for foster youth that could help provide a "more stable life" for them. Most of the people who worked there were insistent that they could "improve the lives" of the students who went there, that they could make sure they *weren't* a statistic. The people I was forced to engage with the most during my time there were the wealthy people responsible for all the charitable contributions, the people who came to *say* they were "doing good" without ever stopping to consider whether that was true, the people who just wanted to make it *look* like they gave even one iota of a shit.

But no one stopped to consider the *harm* going into that school (and they still fail to account for it, focusing only on how it is "better than nothing" for kids who are defined as at risk of entering foster care, unaccompanied minors, or being in the juvenile justice system). How many people have stopped to consider that "unaccompanied minors" also include children whose families have been deported, while they've been left alone and at the mercy of

the State? How many people have stopped to recognise how both foster care and the juvenile justice system target Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children far more than any others?

No one stopped to consider *how often* we heard from our students about being scared of social workers or of feeling isolated from others because of how far away the school was from the city and how difficult it was to leave without permission. I can't remember the number of times that I saw school administration ignore students' concerns *about* certain social workers, especially when they made it clear that one of their friends was being coerced into an inappropriate relationship with an *adult caretaker*. It wasn't uncommon for students to hitchhike to town, trying to find any possible way to go visit what family they had nearby.

Surprisingly, no one stopped to really ask *what the consequences were* of having such a campus specifically devoted to a specific population and what that could do to them or others in the future. Could it, like our other carceral institutions, perpetuate and increase the population through a warped sense of "justice" that helped line people's pocketbooks and control entire demographics of people?

Everyone was happy to completely ignore what was happening there. They were more upset that I, a person who had been given literally *nothing* to do my job (not even an indoor space of any kind) had "done very little" to build a complete curriculum within a given year. It was fine that more than a few of our recently graduating students at the time had, almost immediately, entered into *openly acknowledged* relationships with people who had once been their *social workers*. It wasn't fine that someone who was intentionally set up to fail had actually done so.

You can't reform any of that. There is no way to *fix* that because the system is structured to *enable* all of it. You can only abolish it and build something better in its place.

forcing a range of unnecessary tests). They want to "inspire the world's future leaders," and they all read as if they took the hollowest of statements straight from the mouths of the world's most boring techpreneurs.

At best, they're bland. At worst, they're dangerous.

Though most of those pages are clearly designed for the obvious goals of enticing parents to enroll their child(ren), they're also designed to meet the vague requirements of accreditation bodies. Mostly, they seem to be geared toward the meaningless drivel provided by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), though they also attempt to meet the requirements of other accrediting bodies and the people who pretend to care how 'good' a school is.

They don't *actually* care.

That much should be obvious by now, and I wouldn't include them if they did. Though it's a non-profit organisation, the IBO is certainly making quite a bit of money on the backs of schools paying fees to be accredited by them. They make quite a bit every time they host a professional development seminar (especially of the online variety), and they pull in a pretty chunk of change for taking exams in the final year of the DP (especially if kids need to retake them to meet university requirements).

They also keep a lot of their fiscal information close to the chest, so it's pretty difficult to *really* know what their financial statements look like. That should really raise far more questions than it ever seems to, and it's likely because of their connection to a paternalistic goal of "educating children."

These schools are run by people who have stepped all over others in order to achieve their status. I've worked with a school manager who chose to ignore multiple instances of sexual assault in the school because they "needed to keep tuition-paying students," though they also claimed it was because the victims were either "unreliable" or "over-emotional." It should be unsurprising that the

easier to control or get rid of people who are forced to survive under the precarity they create. They've created a group of people who are genuinely more beholden to the whims of the school.

It's all an elaborate façade, even if it is one of grandeur. It's another arm of how private schools function, and it's often one that goes entirely neglected because people simply don't *know* about it (nor do many people *care* to know, including many labour organisers).

Therefore, the teachers who arrive to work in these schools are often subjected to disgusting environments, both in terms of actual facilities *and* in terms of openly hostile administrations. We arrive at schools already filled with broken promises that are entirely unenforceable, especially because it requires that we already know and understand the *labour laws* of the places we're working in from day one. Even if we learn those laws, many of the places will still side with our employers. In fact, one of my first experiences with trying to get out of what *should* have been an illegal contract, I had to negotiate through the labour board to get a "better" deal that still required I pay the company back for wanting to leave early, even though *I* had presented a clear cut case of deceptive hiring practices.

That was almost a decade ago now. It was also one of my first experiences that *really* made me question *who* the law was for, something I'd rarely done before that.

While I still remember that moment vividly, I know the conditions *can* and *do* get worse. That's the point.

There's no way you can reform it.

So many of the schools I work with infuriate me. They present themselves as institutions of beauty, of wonder, of curiosity. They have elaborate values and mission statements all claiming noble goals, wanting to create "student-led" environments (while still en-

Today, I see my job in a school as "harm reduction." That's the answer I give a lot of people when they ask me why I still teach. I say that I care about kids and that they deserve to have someone who supports them, who advocates for them, who does what they can to ensure that they have access to a safe and healthy environment with less stress. I've talked a lot about how I try to create a space where kids have access to an understanding adult who won't punish them for trying and doesn't slam their grades through the floor because they turned something in late. I try to be someone who recognises that kids have lives outside of school and give them that courtesy.

But it's killing my mental health, and I come home crying most of the time.

Largely, it's because the system is self-reinforcing. Something somewhere will always come back to force you on to the 'correct' path of how a school should operate. You try to bring in a range of diverse texts in a class? Some parents will always complain, and the school will tend to err in their favour. Just in case.

You want to turn your classroom into a creative learning space where kids can do whatever they want for even a moment? Well, many of them will also struggle against that because it's unfamiliar and doesn't match their continued expectation of what a school is. It's not because they *want* what the school offers, and it's not because they *aren't* creative; it's because many of them just want to get it over with, since that's how school has been for most of their lives. That's how the system is designed for them, and they *feel* it. So they respond accordingly.

Meanwhile, your head of school will look at your classroom management and deem it "too unorthodox" and "too chaotic." They will sit in your room to observe you, coercing you back into a more rigid classroom management style. The choices you made, even if you highlight all the research supporting your decisions, will be deemed unfit for the desired "school culture." They will force you to sit through weekly meetings during your single prep hour, comb-

ing through to make sure you comply with whatever it is that they deem "appropriate."

You want to build a space that encourages diversity? Well, at some point, you really can't. Of course, diversity will exist in the most superficial of ways possible, especially if the accreditation body of your school requires that you have one "world literature" unit or international comparisons in the history curriculum. You'll be stuck choosing from a list of pre-determined "books in translation" that you can use, and none of them will be truly diverse. It'll just be the same few names, the same few books, and a complete and total rejection of whole demographics because their chosen examiners "can't examine student work if they haven't read the texts they discuss."

It's not that no one wants the change; it's that people keep looking to the same systems to *do* the change. And it can't happen. It's literally impossible.

The most our schools, including universities, can do is co-opt the language of radical pedagogies so that they can water it down and sell it back to us, pretending to "liberate" us from all the confinement. This happened to critical pedagogies, to unschooling, to self-directed education, and to other alternative pedagogies. It's a *huge* part of the ungrading movement, which seems to be full of university professors who think that the academy can be the center of all change (they can't). All of these things found their way into the sphere of marketing, either as schools designed mostly for the wealthy or sold back to poorer schools through shoddier resources.

None of these things will "fix" our schools. Our schools were built to work the way they do and accommodate very little change beyond what's necessary to continue as they are.

Nothing is broken. They can only be dismantled and replaced. There's nothing more to do.

Some of my frustration is because of what the schools I work in tend to focus on, as they're international schools. They view children as bodies that generate profit, nothing more. Many of them have been set up as schemes to turn a short-term profit, while others have been established as ways to launder money. They're often owned and run by some of the most irresponsible people, all of whom attempt to feign that they give a fuck about kids while often dealing with issues through profit incentive as opposed to health and safety of the people in them.

Their websites are full of bullshit claiming some kind of high-minded and noble goal of being 'for' the students and encouraging 'well-rounded learning' of the 'highest quality'. Meanwhile, they underpay and overwork their teachers, often leaving them to spend their own money on any supplies they need to teach their class because they refuse to provide an actual budget to buy even the most basic things. What this means is that we spend as little as we have to, trying to avoid incurring any costs because they will never be recuperated. It also means that the 'highest quality' tends to be whatever a person can offer by creating something out of nothing.

It's also harder for the teachers and staff to organise because of both the structure of these schools and how immigration functions. Not only are many of them located in places where labour unions barely exist (and if they do, they're more often attached to the State than they are the workers they claim to support), the teachers and staff working in them often are trapped by the fact that their employer holds an absurd amount of control over their residence status and visa.

How loud can you really be when your employer holds all the cards, having the ability to change your life in an instant?

That's part of why international schools function the way they do. People who run them will make the claim that it's about "having access to teachers who speak a language natively" (be it English, Spanish, German, or French) or "having access to the world's best and brightest" (a joke on its own), but it's largely because it is far