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What is School?

Sheffield Action Group

February 2024

As students at university, we have a lot more to say about the global and national role of our institutions — this will come at another point. For now we will focus on primary and secondary school. Many reading this will have left 13 years of schooling, likely hating most of it, and may not have thought a lot about the scale of its impact on our lives and how things could have been so, so different.

School is a class stratifier along eugenic lines. Those deemed more intelligent by their ability to absorb and spit out information in tests are seen as more suited for higher paying jobs and therefore, by this society's logic, 'deserve' more. This creates a system that differentially exposes those who emerge from it to death and precarity as, if someone is unable to do well in an exam they are less likely to get a high-paying job and therefore more likely to experience difficulty paying for rent, fuel, and food. This is what educator Paulo Freire calls banking education. An education where students are seen as banks to be filled with knowledge in lessons, which is spat back out in tests, and where their ability to do this determines their worth in the job market (or whether they get to have a job at all). For Freire, a liberating education is one which flattens the hierarchy be-

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From Sheffield Action Group's *Troublemakers* zine, this important piece stands on its own

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tween student and teacher and allows both parties to become conscious of the world around them and to learn together how to change it.

Within modern schooling are two curricula: the overt and the covert. The overt is the content of lessons, the miseducation of history, the overfocus on STEM, and the same canon taught over and over again. This functions to shape the scope of approved knowledge and brings about ideological conformity to bourgeois ways of knowing the world. The covert curriculum is all about control. From needing to ask to go for toilet breaks, to gendered school uniforms, to having to be quiet in lessons, to timetables, to school rules, to “British Values”, to the constant “yes sir, yes madam” and so on and so forth. We were taught to obey, to be efficient Fordist workers, to show up on time and to not step outside the box unless you want to spend a day in silence in isolation writing lines. School bells were introduced to get children used to working in factories. The covert curriculum is the gendering and racializing aspect of schooling, the aspect which encourages us to reproduce the nuclear family, racial hierarchy, and the world of work.

People who function better within the schooling system are those who are most likely to be best at reproducing the current system. They have learned to take orders, passively and uncritically absorb and spit out information, and have caused few problems for their teachers. All of which serve to crush and assimilate the revolutionary spirit of youth.

Schooling sits alongside the state and the family as a tool that brings youth into the logic of patriarchy. School teaches an ideology of the ruling class in the form of reified histories, narrowed sciences and the western canon. School is also a gendering machine where gendered uniforms, gendered bathrooms and patriarchal learning environments naturalise the domination of feminised people through this essentialism. School is

the convening point where the state and family enacts upon the youth. The superiority of the teacher and of domination within the family means that youth cannot escape attempts to inculcate us into systems of domination and oppression.

The conformity brought about by schools is a tool of colonisation and bringing about global hegemony. Starting off as Christian missionary schools – with the last only closing in 2007 – indigenous boarding schools (for example in the US) stole children from their families and sought to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man”. These words by Captain Richard Henry Pratt speak clearly of the purpose of these schools – cultural cleansing. Pratt founded the first of these schools and his model and curriculum was then rolled out as a national system. This is a conscious recognition of schooling’s function of assimilating cultures into western modes of thinking, into producing western subjects. If you can change what and how children think, you change how they act and you change the future and shape the direction of society.

In so-called Canada, over the last few years, thousands of bodies have been found on the grounds of these schools. Children were not just banned from speaking their own languages and practicing their own cultures, they were murdered as part of the ongoing genocide at the heart of settler-colonial states like the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. From this we can clearly see why the UN, global business, the IMF and World Bank care so much about educating every child. They seek to proletarianise the world, to crush cultural difference and to quash the potential for global uprising.

We need an education based in community, where we can learn about the land around us, learn from local flora and fauna just as we learn from each other. Where the application of our knowledge is the focus of our efforts and where remaking and learning become synonymous. This education cannot be reserved only for younger generations but has to span across

society such that we all become teachers and all become students.

We seek the abolition of all schools, the freeing of all children and the reintroduction of play into everyday life. We seek the opening of new youth centres, new forms of educational institution, and the freeing of all human potential. The route towards this future doesn't sit with government education policy or radical university departments — it sits with us and the expansion of autonomous youth space.

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” — Paulo Friere

“When education is not liberating, the dream of the oppressed is to become the oppressor.” — Also Paulo Friere