

School Improvement as Violence

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Introduction

The previous chapter discussed Galtung's structural and cultural violence, and the ways that this relates to schooling. This chapter sets out the case for school improvement as an example of cultural violence. We have argued that cultural violence in schools creates mechanisms of structural violence, leading to acts of direct violence against school staff and students. This chapter discusses the current hegemonic discourse around school improvement, and assesses the cultural, structural and direct violence that can result from it.

On the one hand, school improvement is hard to argue against; it is one of the new orthodoxies of the education world. It is one of a number of related concepts, alongside the 'standards agenda' and 'evidence-based practice', that have become 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1991), with their own sets of technologies and practices. They each hold a strong rhetorical appeal - for who can argue against schools being improved, standards being raised or practice being based upon evidence? On the other hand, as with any immediately appealing rhetoric, it is essential to probe beneath the surface and to question how rhetoric contributes to the evolution of discourse. In line with the postmodern perspective discussed throughout this book, we draw in this chapter on Foucault's notion of discourse, which, "defines and produces the objects of our knowledge" and "governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about" (Hall, 1997: 44). Here, we critically analyse school improvement discourse to reveal the assumptions on which it is based, the mechanisms that sustain its influence, and the implications of the priorities that it sets. This analysis brings to light some of the ways in which school improvement has come to embody cultural violence enacted through institutional structures and practices.

A Brief History of School Improvement

School improvement as a movement (and latterly as an industry) evolved from research into school effectiveness in the 1970s. Initially, school effectiveness provided a framework for academic researchers to investigate how schools do what they do, and how they might do it better. An important cornerstone for school improvement in the UK was the *Education Reform Act* (1988), and in the USA it was the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001). Since the 1970's, school improvement discourse has become increasingly hegemonic and globalised. It can no longer simply be considered at the micro level of the school, district, or even State. Education has become yet another aspect of people's lives that has effectively shrunk at the same time as expanding globally, so that it is now possible to compare what happens in schools in Hackney and Hong Kong. Not only is it possible; it is desirable, and is an influential driver of change.

Writing in 2014, Pasi Sahlberg discussed the phenomenon of the global education reform movement (GERM), grounded in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tables:

GERM is an unofficial education policy orthodoxy that many formal institutions, corporations and governments have adopted as their official program in educational development. This global movement includes some welcome elements that have strengthened the focus on learning, encouraged access to education for all, and emphasised the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are relevant in the real world. But GERM also has symptoms that indicate it may be harmful to its

host; driving education reforms by competition, standardisation, test-based accountability, fast-track pathways into teaching and privatisation of public education.

Sahlberg, 2014: 50

Thus, in communicating notions of harm, Sahlberg uses language of germs and infection, where we use the language of direct and indirect violence. Both refer to the same phenomena. In the UK, the 1988 Education Reform Act, “articulated six key elements of neoliberal and neoconservative advocacy around education policy” (Ball, 2013: 89), which included: the establishment of a national curriculum and its associated external assessment mechanisms with testing at ages 7, 11 and 14; budgetary devolution from local authorities to schools through the local management of schools (LMS); and the enshrinement in law of parents’ right to express a preference about which school their children would attend. In 1992, this was supplemented by the creation of Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) and local league tables of schools. It is not hard to see how these factors operated together to work towards the marketization of schools. From then onwards, devolution of budgets to schools, and the establishment of per capita funding, meant that income was overwhelmingly driven by recruitment of students. In a market-place where parents can ‘choose’ which school to send their child to, Ofsted ratings, examination results and league tables take on new and increased importance. School improvement has become increasingly conflated with improved attainment in public examinations.

This narrow definition of school improvement has become rather monolithic, and (rather ironically) stunts creativity and growth. In the UK, Barbara MacGilchrist of the UCL Institute of Education has said of this, “the government's definition of an improving school as being one with a linear, continuous, upward trajectory of test and examination results has passed its sell-by date” (2003: 1). We would go further to claim that it sews the seeds of structural and cultural violence.

Theoretical Perspectives on School Improvement Discourse

There are three main critiques of school improvement discourse that tie it in with structural and cultural violence: that it serves political interests; that it serves market interests; and that it harms teachers and students. We will now review each of these perspectives in turn.

School Improvement Discourse and Political Interests

Whilst it is of course both warranted and necessary to seek to improve schools, this can never take place in a political vacuum. Goldstein and Woodhouse (2000) present an engaging overview of the history of school improvement, and argue that successive governments have used research evidence selectively in service of their own ends. School improvement research often (though not always) presents an over-simplified diagnosis and intervention plan for improving schools, and can be lacking in theoretical depth and rigour. Politicians tend to warmly welcome (and fund) initiatives that fit with their political ideology, and to ignore or reject findings that contradict their preferred strategiesⁱ

Another source of evidence that governments use for political ends is school inspections. In England, inspections are carried out by Ofsted - a non-ministerial department of government. Ofsted has been used by successive governments to influence school practice without the need to undergo the usual parliamentary scrutiny and ratification, “When the Government wants schools to do something but feels constrained from making it statutory, it announces that it will be inspected by Ofsted” (ATL, 2007). The

result of such indirect political influence is that Ofsted has become the de facto arbiter of what matters in schools, and what counts as quality. School improvement has in many ways become a euphemism for Ofsted-readiness. The terminology deployed by Ofsted, “has become normatively accepted as the means by which to describe successful and failing education in England” (Clarke & Baxter, 2014: 481). This is problematic, “if this means decisions are being made that run counter to decisions the school would have otherwise made in the interests of pupils” (Policy Exchange, 2014: 44). Whilst it may seem illogical to argue against inspection and accountability, it is important to review the extent to which they may have become a vehicle for structural and cultural violence. What some have called ‘the new accountability’ is termed by Biesta “technical-managerial accountability”, which he contrasts to “professional-democratic accountability” (2010: 51). Biesta highlights how, “systems, institutions and individual people adapt themselves to the imperatives of the logic of accountability, so that accountability becomes an end in itself, rather than a means for achieving other ends (2010: 59). In England this translates into schools making ‘what Ofsted wants’ the primary (if not exclusive) focus of their work to ‘improve’. In a context of growing social and global inequality, which is at best resistant to decades of reforms in education, and at worst perpetuated by education, these systems of accountability become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

There are other ways that governments use school improvement discourse for their own ends. It can, for example be used to deflect criticism away from other policies. It is in the interests of ministers and policy makers to hold schools responsible for the effects of wider social problems. Holding schools accountable passes the blame, and makes the solutions look simpler than is really the case (Bauman, 2000; Pring, 2013; Hamilton, 1996). School improvement discourse can serve to “‘pathologise’ schools by implying that economic and other problems of society can be ascribed to the failings of education and those who work in the system, especially teachers” (Goldstein & Woodhouse, 2000: 354). This assumption essentially removes from politicians their responsibilities in addressing structural violence, such as unequal distribution of wealth, and the degradation of social cohesion wrought by anti-immigration posturing, for example. As previously discussed, this masking of structural violence is one of the key functions of cultural violence.

School Improvement Discourse and Market Interests

In addition to political concerns, there are related concerns about the undue influence of the market on education systems; enacted through school improvement discourse. One element of the philosophy underlying school improvement can be traced back to the New Public Management (NPM) movement of the 1980s (Clarke & Newman, 1997). The essential assumption of NPM is that what works in the private sector should be successful in the public sector. The enactment of this way of thinking can be seen perhaps most clearly in the ways that schools have become marketised in alignment with capitalist principles. David Marquand (cited in Apple, 2005) has summarised and critiqued this discourse:

The language of buyer and seller, producer and consumer, does not belong in the public domain; nor do the relationships which that language implies. Doctors and nurses do not ‘sell’ medical services; students are not ‘customers’ of their teachers; policemen and policewomen do not ‘produce’ public order. The attempt to force these relationships into a market model undermines the service ethic, degrades the institutions that embody it and robs the notion of common citizenship of part of its meaning.

Apple, 2005: 33

As both Marquand and Apple point out, the language of the market has replaced the language of social justice and progressive education. This language is expressed both through notions of utility and outputs,

and notions of, “value for money” and the “efficiency and effectiveness” of providers” (Clarke & Baxter, 2014: 485). The impression is created that school improvement relates primarily to raising standards of educational performance; and that this is quantifiable, measurable and comparable in the same way that other products and outputs of markets are. David Reynolds, for example, celebrates the new, “‘technological’ orientation” of education, which, “is simply concerned to deliver ‘more’ education to more children” and thus “eschews the values debate about goals” (1997: 99). The Dutch education philosopher, Gert Biesta gives short shrift to such a position:

The means we use in education are not neutral with respect to the ends we wish to achieve. It is not the case that in education we can simply use any means as long as they are “effective” ... education is at heart a moral practice more than a technological enterprise.

Biesta, 2007: 10

We would agree, arguing that a position that attempts to mask ideology through the ‘common sense’ of the market place, or through manipulation of performance markers and test scores, is a position of structural and cultural violence. The positioning of school improvement as a technological exercise directed towards increasing productivity and efficiency has real and harmful effects on students and teachers. Biesta challenges a technocratic conceptualisation of teaching and teachers; he argues that the drive for standardisation has the effect of rendering teachers as technicians who need only to learn and apply predetermined policy and practice. From this perspective, individual professional judgment is not to be trusted, and successful outcomes (invariably test grades) can be attributed to the fidelity of the teacher’s implementation of evidence-based practices. Ironically, this leads to an impoverished idea of what schooling can achieve.

School Improvement Discourse and Harmful Effects

Biesta and Sahlberg among others (e.g. Hammersley, 2013) contend that the current focus on technical-managerial accountability has a number of harmful effects and dangers. For example, the drive for external accountability has created an obsession with evidence, which means that teachers spend time and energy proving what they have done rather than doing it. This limits their effectiveness, as the Association of School and College Leaders point out, “the requirement for evidence at a particular time and in a particular form may inhibit achievement of that which is to be measured” (ASCL, 2010). It also places an additional workload burden on school staff. In the DfE’s own consultation, the *Workload Challenge* (2014), 53% of teachers reported accountability and the perceived pressures of Ofsted as the main driver of workload (DfE, 2015: 5). The harmful effects of Ofsted on schools and school staff are well documented by individual teachers through media such as the *Times Education Supplement* Community forum, by the teaching unions (NUT, 2015; NASUWT, 2012) and in the research literature (Courtney, 2012).

Technical-managerial accountability has damaging effects on professional identity and on professional relationships. Francis and Mills (2012) name the unrelenting focus on standards, accountability and evidence as drivers of the, “aggressive practices” to which teachers are subjected. They identify burnout, stress, and poor quality of life as some of the results of these practices, but they also identify more indirect psychic and existential effects. This can be summarised as, “accountability terrorizing teachers into becoming what they do not want to become” (2012: 262). Here, they draw on Stephen Ball’s characterization of reform not changing what teachers do, but changing who they are:

Ball suggests that reforms grounded in a performative culture represent ‘a struggle over the teacher’s soul’...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’

Francis and Mills, 2012: 262

In addition to the negative effects of school improvement discourse on teachers, there are significant negative effects for students. High-stakes, test-based accountability regimes enacted through league tables and Ofsted inspections are not without consequence for young people. Based on analysis of more than 9,000 students as part of the *Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England*, Foliano, Meschi and Vignoles (2010) concluded that an increased emphasis on test score performance was adding to the student disengagement. In seeking to improve outcomes for young people by creating the conditions in which the highest examination grades can be attained by the highest proportion of students, school can become unpleasant and irrelevant for many. In a report on the number of students at risk of what they term, ‘drop-out’ (a term designed to include those who absent themselves from school for their own reasons, as well as those who are excluded), Stamou et al (2014) found that many factors contribute to disengagement from school. Students reports include, “the structure of lessons in school, the low level of activity they involved, their relations with teachers and other school staff as well as their own difficulties with behaviour and anger management” (2014: 1). These research findings correlate with what we and others hear repeatedly in our regular visits to schools, that the narrow focusing on test results leads to an impoverished curriculum, standardised, uninspiring lessons, and more rigid relations between staff and their students.

Thus, school improvement discourse has real-life implications for teachers and students, and for what is taught, measured and valued in schools. The crucial point here is that school improvement has come to be understood and engaged with as a technological exercise, one that not only silences discussion of the fundamental purposes and aims of education and of schools, but actively excludes consideration of alternative, and perhaps more inclusive, peaceful and humane ways of seeing and doing things in education.

Positively Peaceful School Improvement

The premise of this book is to contrast cultural, structural and direct violence in schools with an alternative view, grounded in positive peace and the potential of young people to become fully functioning, compassionate, cooperative and contributing members of society. Our position is that the current hegemonic steamroller of school improvement discourse, and its ensuing priorities, structures and practices, are at best neglecting to create the conditions for students to flourish; and at worst actively damaging the life chances of certain young people.

We argue that the first challenge for developing peaceful schools is to rethink what is meant by school improvement. Here, we support the conclusions of a paper from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The authors’ principal recommendation is that:

The assessment of ‘effective’ education needs to be expanded to include broader education outcomes that reflect this goal, including individual and social transformation, empowerment and learners’ retention rates, rather than simple test scores

IDS, 2009: 26

This seemingly radical declaration may be useful in challenging and expanding current thinking around what constitutes good education, and how we measure it in both developing and developed contexts. It is possible to imagine a new conceptualisation of school improvement based on the criteria identified by the

IDS - one that privileges trust over suspicion, professional judgment over standardised judgments and collaboration over competition.

The second challenge is to rethink what is meant by accountability. Drawing on the experience of Finland and other Nordic countries, Pasi Sahlberg makes the point that:

The question is not whether schools, teachers and students should be held accountable or not. The challenge is how to establish an accountability system that would support worthwhile learning, increase social capital and thereby help schools to be active players in developing our societies.

Sahlberg, 2010: 58

Sahlberg builds on the work of bodies such as the Scottish Executive (2006) and the Secondary Heads Association in England (2003) in promoting 'intelligent accountability', which he defines as, "accountability policies that balance qualitative with quantitative measures and build on mutual accountability, professional responsibility and trust" (2010: 53). Biesta proposes a refocusing of accountability onto its professional-democratic rather than its technical-managerial function. Following Bauman, he argues persuasively that, "the culture of accountability ultimately makes relationships of responsibility impossible" (2004: 250). He suggests that individuals' sense of professional responsibility is eroded by the damaging practices of technical-managerial accountability. Reclaiming the professional-democratic focus and function of accountability, as Biesta proposes, would enable accountability to serve more effectively and justly as a mechanism for improving teachers' professional sense of responsibility, and the quality of their professional relationships with their colleagues and managers. This is the first step towards positively peaceful schools.

Conclusion

To summarise, we have argued here that the main way in which discourse around school improvement functions as a form of violence is that it establishes priorities, which then exert pressure on the actors within the school system to behave in ways that are to the detriment of their own and each other's optimum state. This top-down pressure is an example of what Galtung referred to as cultural violence. To counteract this, it is important to propose alternative conceptualisations and practices of school improvement that would contribute to positive peace. It is to this proposal that the remainder of this book now turns.

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ⁱ See the then UK New Labour government's dismissal of the findings of the *Cambridge Primary Review* (2009) for a stark example of political selection of educational research evidence: http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Simon_lecture_in_FORUM_53_1_web.pdf and <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/oct/16/cambridge-primary-review-government-reacion>