

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

The Monster is Compulsion

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For a while I have been trying to write about my experience of my UK PGCE course (for teacher qualification status)—of being a “critical novice”; an inexperienced trainee teacher apprenticed to a system they feel is fundamentally flawed, but who has nowhere else to go to learn.

I started out knowing there was something of interest I wanted to say, but for a while my writing just wouldn’t take shape. Causes and effects of the struggles I wanted to describe were slithering all over the place. I couldn’t pin down a coherent argument. My PGCE itself had been an utterly disorientating experience of trying to survive crushing self-doubt and the constant noise of inner voices pitched in dualistic battles. It took me two attempts to pass the course and it almost drove me crazy. The crippling confusion and self-doubt that were such a core aspect of my PGCE experience were now preventing me even being able to understand my own experience in hindsight.

Then, recently, I was thinking about some of the dilemmas I am facing in the PRU where I am currently working, when suddenly I realized something. In all of the educational settings I have been in so far (bar one), the thing that has made my position so uncomfortable is compulsion.

Compulsion is the essential and intrinsic quality of the mainstream education system. I have been trying to develop as a practitioner within this system and yet I am fundamentally opposed to this intrinsic quality. What is more, to fight the compulsion of the system, I would have to submit myself to it. I knew all of this already, and also thought I understood the idea of “Catch-22.” But I suddenly realized that this is how it actually feels. Compulsion needed to be foregrounded in discussing my experience. It was the culprit, and deserved centre stage.

The mainstream system compels not only its students, but all who work within it. There is no forum for debate, and no place for dissent. The deepest discussions are limited to “how.” How can we increase access to education? How can we better deliver the curriculum? Never, “what the hell are we doing here that we are calling education?”

It can be hard to describe the absolute authority of mainstream education, to someone who hasn’t felt it. Maybe prison officers might understand. Our education system is deeply hierarchical, and as a trainee, you are under constant scrutiny and critique from the very beginning. The workload is heavy, and unrelenting, and there is a constant sense of time pressure,

and pressure to perform. I have come to know a new world of ice cold sweats, and calculations of time involving subdivisions of minutes, where one jammed photocopier can make your heart palpitate. Teachers are expected to absorb these stresses, and “get on with it.” This expectation is reflected in staffroom culture by the stoic, self-mortifying acceptance of stress as a badge of “caring about the kids,” and is shadowed by a trench humour that revels in cynicism. To assert your need for self-care is taboo, as is pretty much any criticism or questioning of the system.

So with no place to voice my dissent, the voices were driven inside and forced into dualities, which raged like a battle in my head. With no community within which to share the debate, I felt I had to have all the answers. Yet I was a novice, and not naturally prone to certainty at the best of times. This self-doubt can often be a strength; it makes me reflective. But here it nearly drove me crazy.

This is why I have struggled with almost every aspect of developing my practice. This is why, despite the obviously greater skill, knowledge, experience and efficacy of the teachers and tutors trying to guide and mentor me, I have struggled to take on board their advice. This is why I have felt at sea, looking for a frame of reference of my own by which I could judge the advice and guidance, and know what was wheat, and what was chaff.

My PGCE was as much a battle of internal voices as a journey of development of external practice. In trying to grow as a teacher, I felt as if I was tackling some multi-headed monster. Each time I tried to knuckle down and “get on with it,” I got hit by a curveball. I have been unsure whether the battle is within or without. My

assessment of the problem I was tackling swung wildly from one pole to the other. One day I would feel an overwhelming urge to run screaming from a system which is so inherently oppressive, so hegemonic, that I could never be more than a colluder, another brick in the wall. The next day, I would be contrite, painfully aware of my own flaws and limitations as an educator. My mentor called me out on a classroom observation where he said that my lesson is teacher-led and controlling. I berated my own hubris and arrogance: I was unqualified to judge a system in which I am so incompetent, even by my own standards. Then, a few days later, I saw a child pinned against a wall by a female teacher who was screaming into his face. Another teacher looked on, tacitly condoning and participating. The child’s crime was repeatedly talking during the lesson. Later I asked another teacher whether this is something condoned, and they said that whilst it’s not a tactic that suits everyone, it’s one that all the staff acknowledge they can all benefit from. This is an “outstanding” school. The cycle begins again.

And in the middle of all this, a part of me was saying that maybe there is a middle ground, a line to hold. I know that dualities are often simplified constructs; I believe that the path of change is not about wild swings from one paradigm to another, but a gentler, more organic nurturing of spaces where change can take place. Change requires critical practitioners within the system to hold that line and open up those spaces. Yet I couldn’t hold the line, and another debate developed in my mind, another duality. “If you were a skilled, experienced teacher already,” one voice would say, “then perhaps then you could

hold the line.” “But”, says another, “you can never become that experienced teacher because it entails being a part of this for years. Years of doing something to children that feels inherently wrong. Years of developing a practice which is founded upon principles you cannot accept...”

The only way out I saw was that all-bar-one exception: my three day visit to a democratic school. It wasn't perfect, and it offered no blueprint. In fact, it is subject to constant, gentle, fluid change, as successive generations of students challenge and shift their own rules through the weekly school meeting. Perhaps because, rather than in spite of that, the democratic school was a place where I found those inner voices falling silent at last. Perhaps because that school acknowledges that while we need rules, we humans are all beautifully unique and there will always be exceptions to the rule.

In the quieter head space which took root in my three-day visit to that democratic school, and which is growing now, I am naming compulsion my enemy and getting more confident in my critique. For me, there are two legitimate arguments for compulsory schooling and they concern those functions concerned with safeguarding and citizenship. Firstly, how do we as a society protect children from neglect, abuse, domestic violence or economic exploitation? Secondly, how can we transmit some shared understanding of our roles and rights as citizens? For me these are legitimate concerns, but I am beginning to wonder why they need to be tied to “education” at all.

From what I have seen, these functions are often relegated to the bottom of the pile of priorities, only forming a tiny part of a school's activity or focus. I have

seen a child with learning difficulties weeping all the way through a test she couldn't understand, and no action taken by the class teacher to remove the damn test. Again, this was in an “outstanding school.” I have seen an email sent round teachers by a pastoral head of year, dismissing a child's self-harm and her reports of suicide attempts as “attention-seeking.” And I have seen lessons on important aspects of citizenship squeezed into ten minute gaps in Form time, reduced to hollow mantras and Youtube videos.

With a little more distance, and the confidence gained from naming my enemy, I can identify and let go of this last attachment to the compulsion of the mainstream system. I can start to wonder what might happen if we freed education from the shackles of compulsion and looked at another way for the state to perform these other legitimate functions. What would it be?

I also begin to wonder what is indicated by the fact that there is so much top down, hegemonic control in mainstream education. Certainly not an organically growing, learning, self-sustaining system. When you have to push ideas and practices down from the top like that doesn't it mean that they aren't strong enough to stand on their own two feet?

For my sense of myself, which took such a beating through my PGCE, this realization of the violence of compulsion has helped enormously. Firstly it has helped me to understand that I do not need to be a perfect practitioner, nor have all the answers to hold a legitimate critique of the system. Nor does my critique of the system implicate me in a denial of all the human skill, wisdom, experience and effort at work in our schools. Secondly, it has

allowed some kind of integration of my more dualistic views of myself and of the education system, and of me within it. I can stop buying into mainstream's view of itself as "the only way," which forces those of us who dissent to label ourselves as "outsiders." I am not alternative. It is a ridiculous thing for anyone to assert themselves to be. I am radically critical of our education system and the compulsion within it. If the system cannot accommodate dissent, that says as much about it as it does of the dissenters.

However, the time for being a novice is over, because there is important work to do, and I can only be a beginner for so long. I have had to learn that my own flaws and weaknesses are my problem, and in the spirit of an organic, growing, continually evolving education, they always will be. They should not and must not get in the

way of working towards changing our education system, which is all of our problem. I will stop agonising about whether to "stay within the system," or leave and try to build an alternative without. I am a part of our education system whether it likes it or not, and here's to being a thorn in the side of compulsion, wherever I am.

Much as this realization is freeing, it does not solve the problem of how to work for change, as there is no ready-built democratic school where I live to which I can happily send myself and my two children to learn. But at least naming the monster decreases the self-doubt to a healthier level, and frames the problem in a clearer view of the world.

Author Details

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