

## Deschooling Twenty-First Century Education

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### *Introduction*

I was delighted to speak at the event honoring the memory of Ivan Illich, despite the fact that I could not “remember” him, at least not as other speakers could. For I really only became acquainted with his work in recent years, thanks to a dear colleague of mine who introduced me to *Gender* at the exact moment it was needed by one of my doctoral students. Next I read *Deschooling Society*, which was like suddenly seeing the vague notes of my internal music in front of me on a piano score. I found *Deschooling* to be one of the finest and most accessible examples of critical thinking I had ever read; so much so that it’s now required reading in my introductory educational leadership course. This perhaps was a risky move on my part. “Educational leadership” is supposed to be about preparing future teachers and administrators to create “21<sup>st</sup> Century schools” where 21<sup>st</sup> Century students receive 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills for 21<sup>st</sup> Century employment. This is because “times have changed.” Beat the drum.

But I’ve long been growing weary of the obedient rhythms of leadership on the march. With each new book or article I read about “what effective leaders do” or “what effective educational leadership programs do,” I felt ushered further down a narrowing corridor. Reading Illich’s ideas gave me confidence to leave the parade and deconstruct it so that others might understand its meaning and consequences. Would Professor Illich appreciate this? I hope so, and I hope that he would consider this a good way for him to be remembered. The following discussion represents my effort to remember him even more. I’ll argue that the deschooling idea is powerful, practical, and needed now more than ever. Even if total deschooling is politically impossible at the present, I’ll propose that those who love the idea of authentic and diverse educational opportunity will at the very least begin to promote the idea of *separation of school and state*.

But first, an apology. Many of the ideas and arguments offered here have likely been explored by others, perhaps with more theoretical depth or clarity. I feel I’m in the early stage of a journey and so I welcome ideas from those further down the road.

*Schooling Memes and the Expansion of Institutionalized Pupil-Teacher Control*

*Deschooling Society* was both invitation and warning. It was an invitation to consider an array of organic educational possibilities. It was a warning about the state controlled organization, institutionalization, and mobilization of educational “treatment.” It is perhaps because the warning was issued at a time when American public education was near enough to deschooling itself (e.g., through decentralized and flexible curricular alternatives) that it could subsequently be countered and neutralized by public fear mobilized through memes such as “A Nation at Risk.” This paper argues that American public school students and teachers remain at risk, not for lack of academic intensity or desire, but from an invasive apparatus of socio-technical systems of control, or *dispositif* (Foucault, 1980; Lianos, 2003).

American public schools have always been porous institutions, deeply influenced by outside forces. Traditionally, their diffuse and individualistic purposes coupled with technical uncertainty as to how to attain them rendered them as perfect receptacles for public desire. When such desire was locally based, one could expect some degree of curricular and instructional variation and diversity across schools. When local desire was heterogeneous, one could expect to find variation and diversity within schools as well. Over time, however, as uncertainty, variation, and diversity became marked institutional features, public schooling became more vulnerable to power-distant structures of socio-technical control (e.g., centralized authority and standardized educational treatment). Such control structures work by coordinating a consensus of fear or emergency with technologies of organizational efficiency. They may originate from formal policies, but gradually evolve into informal norms, memes, and narratives. As this occurs, oppositional ideas and practices become marginalized, silenced, and ultimately inconceivable.

For example, “zero tolerance” began outside the boundaries of public education in the early as a slogan of penological innovation; the legalized confiscation by state or federal law enforcement agencies of money or property belonging to those arrested for narcotics violations. Congruent with other slogans (“war on drugs” or “just say no”), “zero tolerance” constituted a highly robust “policy species” (Weaver-Hightower, \*\*\*\*). It also served as a unit of cultural transmission, or “meme” (Dawkins, 1976), readily adaptable to other policy habitats such as schools facing problems of student drug or weapons possession (Shouse & Sun, 2013). Older memes emphasizing uncertainty and professional discretion (“no two disciplinary cases are alike,” “let the punishment fit the crime,” etc.) were ill equipped to ease public fear or protect the

school from lawsuits. Zero tolerance thus rapidly became a successful species, capable of evolving into a dependable and malleable standardized routine for pupil control (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Ackerman, 2003). Its memetic power is revealed today as teachers and administrators, nested within a web of codified procedures and punishments, appear to unlearn and deconceive the possibility of reasoned discretionary disciplinary practices. In this way, zero tolerance fosters silence. Teachers and administrators must accept it, violate it surreptitiously, or risk sanction and marginalization by openly challenging it.

One may thus understand the march toward restrictive intensification of public schooling not as isolated custodial overzealousness, but as product of the capacity of technology, discourse, and structure to intertwine and mutate into new templates for action and cultural transmission. Memes, in effect, serve as cognitive labor saving devices, facilitating organizational action by sharply reducing the need, desirability, or awareness of reasoned alternatives. As cultural transmitters, memes not only change popular and professional conceptions of what schooling (and education) ought to look like, but also spawn outbreaks of moral amnesia and collective unlearning in and around school organizations.

The risk of harm is heightened by the ease and speed with which memetic templates migrate across school habitats, feeding on the natural uncertainties of teaching and learning, as well as upon the fears associated with newly perceived organizational “problems.” The so-called “bandwagon” (the rapid faithful collective acceptance of mandated novelty) is one example of this. A more insidious example involves the mobilization of fear regarding child sexual abuse and student-teacher sexual contact. The commoditized expansion of and demand for electronic “news” fosters an exaggerated collective sense of the frequency and novelty of the problem. Parents fear the potential for “incidents.” Schools fear the potential for lawsuits and negative publicity. Teachers fear false accusation or suspicion. Some teachers build spatial or emotional buffers to students, while others strive to preserve personalistic interaction. Emerging narratives produce memes of suspicion (“times have changed,” “keep your door open,” “don’t be alone with a student,” “even a false accusation can end your career”).<sup>1</sup> Schools seek relief from the burden of fear and uncertainty through the imposition of efficient organizational routines. Formal guidelines or rules are imposed to govern teacher-student relationships. But over time they become unnecessary as their corresponding memes morph into normative structures that may even exceed the “letter of the law.” Any “unusual” contact between teachers and students is

perceived as “unwise,” “suspicious,” or “inappropriate.” Whether teachers accept or reject the new social reality, they now live in a smaller and more restrictive world where resistance is hidden, viewed as annoying, or interpreted as evidence of possible guilt. School organizations gradually “forget” that hugs or handshakes were ever part of a teacher’s work.

It would be a missed opportunity to end this section without reference to “No Child Left Behind,” as it represents the epitome of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education and a prime example of how discourse, technology, science, and politics merge to create a “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1980). This is discussed in detail in the next section. For now, it is enough to point out that like the previous examples, the success and power of the NCLB memetic species grows from uncertainty, fear, silence, and invisibility.

### *Creeping Invisibility: Two Brief Descriptive Case Studies*

The evolution of invisible structures of social control has received wide scholarly treatment. In *Deschooling*, Illich’s key examples relate to the commodification of education and the shift of responsibility for learning from individuals to institutions. Consider, for example, changes in language and narratives used to describe educational processes. The slogan that “every child is entitled to quality education” seems benign until coupled with another, that “teachers are fundamentally responsible for student learning.”<sup>2</sup> The message becomes that whichever direction one faces in the classroom, education is both grant and mandate of institutional authority (e.g., students “get” their education from teachers; teachers unable to provide it to “every child” must be retrained with scripts and routines designed at a higher level of expertise or authority). To openly argue that students bear responsibility for their own learning becomes a risky act for those professionally connected to public schooling. Over time, however, such arguments become irrelevant or marginalized – indeed, “paranormalized” – via invocation of powerful sociopolitical narratives about standards, accountability, and equality of educational outcomes.

One notes that such narratives are formed as individual units of social fact emerge, interact, and mutate into new stable molecules of meaning, often distinct from that of the original units. This is the memetic construction of social reality. The two cases that follow help illustrate and deconstruct this process. For me, they seem so iconic that I’ve given them names; *No Sir With Love* and *What the Math!*<sup>3</sup>

*No Sir With Love*

Since the time I began teaching courses on school administration and leadership, I've used popular film as a teaching tool.<sup>4</sup> The first film I studied and later used was *To Sir With Love*, the mid-1960s story of a new Black teacher in a lower-working class London secondary school.<sup>5</sup> One key theme involves the innocent sexual tension between "Sir" and an attractive female student. Though Sir maintains professional distance, near the end of the film the two exchange warm words, a deep glance, and a meaningful dance at a well-chaperoned, school-sponsored graduation party. For years, my students almost universally responded with words like "touching," "inspirational," and "authentic." In 2004, however, I noticed an abrupt change. Responses included "creepy," "inappropriate," "he crossed the line," "times have changed," and "he'd be fired if he did that today." Such reactions have become common every year since.

When I ask "what has changed? Why would he be fired?" my students' awkward silence suggests that I've touched a sensitive cultural nerve. I press on. A student will then tell me of the growing national "epidemic" of teacher-student sexual relations. I ask, "Where is the sex in this movie?" to which students typically offer vague concerns about "crossing the line," "the gaze," "the dance." Recently, a student (a high school English teacher) recited her school's rule: "teachers may not touch students nor meet with them one-on-one in classrooms." Another student/teacher followed with "not even handshakes are allowed," then demonstrated her school-mandated "silent high five" by raising her hand high but keeping it a safe inch or so away from that of her classmate.

Persuading students to critically examine their responses to film scenes depicting what they perceive as "inappropriate teacher behavior" requires an often uncomfortable deconstruction of "facts," fear, silence, and obedience. As I engage further, suggesting that the scenes reflect popular long-held understandings of school social interaction, some students begin to tell stories of similar positive school experiences or about peculiar "unquestioned rules" they encounter at their schools ("they tell us what kind of *shoes* we should wear!"). This instructional process always seems to involve a great deal of classroom discomfort.

*What the Math!*

No longer simply a school subject, "Math" is now part of an ensemble of social memes which regulate school policies and practices. But "ensemble" may be insufficient to describe a process that has fundamentally changed the meaning of schooling among not only practitioners,

but among scholars and researchers as well. One might think the latter group might know better. But when a professor blasts the value of standardized math scores one moment, but then the next uses them to defend the quality or legitimacy of the greater public schooling apparatus, one must appreciate the invisible silencing power of “Math.”<sup>6</sup>

Two questions arise. First, how do we account for the explicit and implicit primacy of Math within practical and theoretical educational discourse? This question is often answered in terms of corporate demand, global economic competition, or a generalized fear that students in other countries are outperforming our own. Other answers involve the framing and privileging of math as a means of individual opportunity and success. Such answers are unsatisfactory and tautological, amounting to the argument that math became important because it is so important.

The second question concerns the various memes, assumptions, or other social structures that surround, defend, and strengthen math as a prime narrative of institutionalized education. These include the popular acronyms and slogans used to reinforce the importance of math and its use as a measure of school quality; e.g., “STEM,” “NCLB,” or “21<sup>st</sup> Century Education.” Yet one must not overlook the easy tacit acceptance among scholars and researchers of the validity of math learning not just as a measure of school quality, but also as one of social and racial equality.

The extensive power of Math is understood by examining the interactions of various socio-technical and socio-political events and trends over time and how these came to focus directly on the institution of schooling. For instance, from the late 1950s through mid-1960s, fear over Soviet technological advances (e.g., *Sputnik*) combined with concern over poverty and inequality (e.g., Harrington’s *The Other America*) to promote the idea that both problems might be addressed by improving and equalizing access to public schooling. This idea, which nicely coincided with efficiency trends and the availability of computing technology, led to the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare commissioning a study now known as *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, also known as the *Coleman Report* (1966). As one of the study’s major goals was to assess the impact of unequal resource distribution on student learning, a need arose for standardized indicators of achievement to serve as dependent variables in large scale regression analyses. Though the Coleman study included four such measures, it was reasoned that because math was taught primarily within classrooms, its test scores offered the most valid measure of school effectiveness.

The published results of the Coleman Report were fascinating, yet somewhat irrelevant to the fact that it had planted the seeds of a mindscape in which educational activity could be objectified and centrally manipulated, and in which math was not merely a “good” indicator, but the prime indicator of school effectiveness. This mindscape was further nurtured in an enlarging habitat of global comparisons, research grants, the regular production of large scale data sets, and fast-growing capability of researchers to conduct hundreds of sophisticated regression models in less time than it took for Coleman’s team to create one set of punch cards. Equipped with a “valid” metric, high technical capability, and a supportive system of incentives (grants, publication, demand for scientifically based research), researchers in both government and academia could both shape and respond to an emerging narrative about the quality and purposes of schooling. It was, in fact, a snowballing narrative which tacitly linked math scores to popular, scholarly, and political dissatisfaction with public schooling.

As it evolved, however, the Math narrative provided an effective buffer for public dissatisfaction. It reduced uncertainty by providing a focal point of attention, action, and evaluation. In addition, it heightened the significance of standardized testing as a *political* resource. Low scores – and the fear of low scores – could be used to mobilize voters at local and national levels. NCLB is just one obvious example. Less obvious is the further commodification of education as revealed in efforts to lengthen the school day, the school year, and the number of years students must attend school.

Two final points I hope are clear. First, math is cool. I used to teach it. I’d recommend it as a field of study to anyone. Second, however, readers should understand that *What the Math?* isn’t only about math. It’s about the gradual mutation of meaning of concepts like “learning,” “school,” “education,” “innovation,” “leadership,” and “educational research.” It’s about the growth of a regulatory mindset throughout K-12 and higher education. In fact, *No Sir With Love* can be viewed as simply an outgrowth of *What the Math?* Together, they’re about the “third face of power” (Lukes, 1974), the foreclosing of future educational alternatives, and the loss of our ability to imagine them.

### *Implications for Deschooling and Leadership*

Recently evolving educational memes (e.g., “21<sup>st</sup> Century Schooling,” “NCLB,” “Common Core”) work to efficiently convey the message that American youth achieve their greatest potential as learners and workers through state-centralized, standardized, and mandated

schooling structures. This is a complex, puzzling, yet attractive narrative that offers students future social and economic security and fulfilment in exchange for restrictions on their educational freedom and responsibility. In a real sense, the narrative frames educational opportunity and innovation as narrowly whittled commodities to be administered and distributed through the various arms of state public schooling policy. The practical deconstruction of this narrative begins as “21<sup>st</sup> Century Deschooling” is conceived not as ideal vision, but as a set of continual incremental acts of leadership and resistance to promote decentralized, local, and individual authority and responsibility over educational desire and design.

21<sup>st</sup> Century Deschooling thus becomes the process of imagining and gradually building a wall of separation between school and state. Such efforts will likely cause intense cognitive and emotional struggle for those tightly invested at various levels of the present public schooling apparatus. Consider, for example, the difficulty faced by scholars and educators who, though highly alarmed by current policy trends, cannot release themselves from various longstanding, shared, affectively toned entanglements among ideas such as “public schooling,” “democracy,” “learning gap,” and STEM. In short, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Deschooling requires suspending one’s belief in public schooling as an administratively manipulable tool for repairing large scale social or economic problems. Without this, public schooling will continue to serve not just as a structure of social control, but as a perpetual source of “crises” and “solutions” to be used for larger political ends.

The difficulty of letting go is evident in the peculiar tendency among education scholars and practitioners to decry state imposed standardized measures of accountability while using them as a basis for rejecting policies that undercut centralized state control. One example of this occurs when researchers or educators decry the testing regime’s threat to creative teaching and learning, but then criticize “choice” schools (or alternative teacher certification programs such as *Teach for America*) for failing to improve student performance on standardized math exams. Incongruous as well is the argument that parents lack sufficient information to make sound educational choices, while tacitly assuming they possess sufficient information to support public schooling or to vote against its political defenders. Educators and scholars critical of state-controlled education may wish to consider the wisdom of what seems to be a faith-based defense of current public school structures against the challenge of alternative visions.

A similar form of defense occurs when college of education leadership preparation



programs avoid or marginalize discussion of knowledge, dispositions, and principles conducive to professional challenge or resistance to prevailing structure. Instead, “educational leadership” is often presented in terms of professionals’ capacity to facilitate needs and aims determined at higher levels of authority – that is, to work more effectively within existing structures of public schooling. Colleges of education could certainly encourage 21<sup>st</sup> Century Deschooling by instilling within students a collective capacity for *critical* professional judgment and leadership. This seems unlikely, however, given the lack of serious scholarly challenge over the past decade to state and agency (e.g., NCATE) imposed curricular and instructional “standards.”

It is no surprise then that teachers are fearful or unaware of the possibility of resisting 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schooling, nor that administrators are paralyzed in its wake. The strong structural and philosophical linkages between colleges of education and public schooling have weakened their ability to offer and engage in the critical leadership needed to promote teacher and learner ability to judge, create, or innovate outside the “enshrined” agenda of “best practices” (English, 2003).

Yet, numerous deschooling strategies nevertheless exist. Parents opt their children out of standardized testing. Educators work with home school networks to design alternative learning opportunities and structures. Individuals everywhere create digital conviviality. Questions emerge about the value and necessity of teacher or administrative certification. Overall interest grows in forms of education that are immune to state control. One can almost sense how the apparatus of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schooling has overplayed its hand.

In the longer run, however, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Deschooling is likely to require bolder forms of resistance, some of which may be risky and painful. A student of mine, a high school teacher, recently described a faculty meeting at which her principal had teachers standing and chanting “core curriculum, core curriculum, 45 states, 45 states!” The principal then advised teachers that the time for opposing views had passed. Silenced, perhaps, by fear or frustration, teachers offered no resistance. I wondered to myself, “could it be otherwise?” and made a mental note to move Illich’s *Deschooling Society* to the first week of my introductory educational leadership course.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, outside of school, caution grows among adult males regarding possible interactions with unknown children, and among young children with respect to unknown adults.

<sup>2</sup> As a former high school teacher, I was hammered with this meme. As a professor, I find it still to be a driving belief of many students and educators.

<sup>3</sup> “What the math?” is a phrase often heard on the cartoon series *Adventure Time*, which portrays a post-apocalyptic future world where the word “math” is used as an oath or expletive.

<sup>4</sup> I now teach a course called “Leadership in Popular Film.”

<sup>5</sup> See Shouse, R. 2005. Taking Lulu Seriously: Theory and Meaning in ‘To Sir with Love.’ *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43:4, 357-367.

<sup>6</sup> “Math,” when capitalized, refers to its broad *depositif*. In lower case, “math” refers to a field of study.

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