

Are Schools Deteriorating? Learning, Education, and the Problem of Scarcity

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A few years ago at the sixty-fourth annual meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Nel Noddings and Richard Bernstein passed a microphone back and forth during a session with the ominous title “Evil and Education.” I recall that at one point Noddings admitted that, despite decades of sustained work in public education, she never felt as depressed as she did then about the future of schooling. Her honesty prompted me to reflect more deeply on my own considerable experience working in public schools. Over the last fifteen years, working in a preservice teacher education program, I have taught hundreds of teacher candidates who were placed in a range of school settings in the greater Toronto area.

And while I have met some pretty remarkable teachers and students, my sincere verdict is that these public schools have generally deteriorated since I first started visiting them. The primary problem, to state a complex matter bluntly, is that they have become increasingly authoritarian spaces. In the province of Ontario right now it is not an exaggeration to say that in public education there is a Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession so detailed no one can live up to it, a curriculum so content-driven no one can possibly cover it, and controversial standardized tests for three grade levels that monopolize educational planning and priorities. There is patently more bureaucracy and centralized control in the public schools I have seen than ever before.

Since it is safe to conclude that I am not the only one working in public schools who has noticed or is talking about such changes, in order to conceptualize what has been happening generally I am convinced that the ascendancy of neoliberalism as an economic and political ideology is the most promising point of departure. In the discourse on neoliberalism the concept of “scarcity” in particular stands out as relevant here. In response to the question “What does scarcity have to do with education?” for example, Ivan Illich explains:

If the means for learning (in general) are abundant, rather than scarce, then education never arises — one does not need to make special arrangements for “learning.” If, on the other hand, the means for learning are in scarce supply, or are assumed to be scarce, then educational arrangements crop up to “ensure” that certain, important knowledge, ideas, skills, attitudes, etc., are “transmitted.” Education then becomes an economic commodity, which one consumes, or, to use common language, which one “gets.” Scarcity emerges both from our perceptions, which are massaged by educational professionals who are in the business of imputing educational needs, and from actual societal arrangements that make access to tools and to skilled, knowledgeable people hard to come by — that is, scarce.¹

The intensification of such scarcity, I argue, can largely account for what has happened in public schools generally. In a political environment where the “means for learning” started to dry up since available public capital at all levels was being

diverted elsewhere, public education in the 1990s became more and more an “economic commodity” rather than a public good. “Scarcity” was then augmented by the perceived necessity to suddenly meet specified targets like standardized test scores and other imposed benchmarks to help “ensure” that students “got” learning.

I have situated my response in this way since I want to suggest that Alexander Sidorkin contributes to our understanding of the role of scarcity in contemporary public education. As I understand his provocative and timely essay, he boldly considers whether schools as they currently exist are “improvable.” His argument hinges on the premise that schooling is “positional” in the sense that its social value is relative since its “benefits can be redistributed, but not increased.” After examining the arguments for and against the positionality of schooling, Sidorkin claims that once we see school-based education as dependent on student labour, its positional character is reinforced through student perception. We thereby make students “prisoner’s of each other’s intent” by making schooling both a “group” and a “competitive” endeavour, one that successfully resists attempts through either “efficacy” or “effort” to improve them. Sidorkin concludes by proposing that we see education as separate from schooling, and then offers two possibilities worth exploring further: “on-line schools” and “paying students to learn.”

If I have him right here, Sidorkin’s argument extends Illich’s by showing in greater detail exactly how, in Illich’s words, “scarcity emerges from our perceptions.” In Sidorkin’s case, however, it is drawing attention to the perceptions of *students* that constitutes his primary contribution. He reveals the rather depressing reality that as long as parents and their children see schooling as the place where students competitively invest their labour, not for immediate economic reward, but future social success, then trying to improve schools through either “efficacy” or “effort” will fail as long as so called “good” schools contrastively require the perception that some schools are “bad.”

As Sidorkin himself acknowledges, it is indeed a troubling thought that schooling may be an “intractable institution” whose “very premise prevents us from providing equal and good educational opportunities to all children.” However, I do believe that it is vital to seriously pursue such uncomfortable questions and thoughts, and that there are many aspects of contemporary schooling that deserve philosophical scrutiny. For example, take “Tribes” co-operative learning structures and how they shape the ways kids work together, or Howard Gardner’s “multiple intelligences” as a model of human personality. More prosaically, perhaps, consider even the “Credit Recovery” programs that are devoted to increasing the number of kids who obtain a high school diploma through alternative accreditation plans. All of these entities have enormous influence in contemporary public schooling, and yet philosophers of education rarely seem to discuss such curricular details.

Matt Hern suggests that the problem is the taken for granted quality of much of contemporary public schooling. He rightly observes that “there is hardly another institution that is so universally deified, lauded, supported and desired,”²² with the result that “arguing against school is swimming upstream in a pretty serious way.

Everywhere in the world there is the idea that schooling equals education which equals development which equals prosperity.”³ What I find most appealing about Sidorkin’s analysis is that he is willing to “swim upstream” by articulating an argument about the positional nature of public schooling that has serious implications for any attempt at broad-based school reform.

The final section of Sidorkin’s essay is called “Education without Schooling.” Taking my cue from some of the best deschooling literature, I would suggest that Sidorkin might be better served by calling it “Learning without Education.” In his essay “Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No, thanks,” Aaron Falbel claims that “A person who is active, curious, who explores the world using all his or her senses, who meets life with energy and enthusiasm — as all babies do — is learning.”⁴ Education, for Falbel, is by contrast nothing less than “forced, seduced, or coerced learning — except that you can’t really make another person learn something that he or she doesn’t want to learn, which is why education doesn’t work *and has never worked*.”⁵ Although Falbel is perhaps guilty here of making the sort of “rhetorical overstatement” that Sidorkin himself worries he may have made, I find the contrast between “learning” and “education” much more productive than that between “education” and “schooling.” Following the deschooling literature again, I can imagine plenty of scenarios where alternatives to schooling, which may have immediately escaped the conforming pressures of the institution, only end up reproducing education in the bad, authoritarian sense. Perhaps the best and simplest answer to the problem of educational scarcity is not to attempt to derive educational alternatives outside of schooling, but to abandon school-based education in its entirety in favor of a learning that could, at least potentially, act as a genuinely nonpositional good.

1. Ivan Illich, “Foreword,” in *Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader*, ed. Matt Hern (Oakland, Calif.: AK Press, 2008), v.

2. Matt Hern, *Field Day: Getting Society Out of School* (Vancouver, B.C.: New Star Books, 2003), ix.

3. Hern, *Field Day*, 3.

4. Aaron Falbel, “Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No, thanks,” in *Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader*, ed. Matt Hern (Oakland, Calif.: AK Press, 2008), 62.

5. Falbel, “Learning?” 63 (emphasis in original).