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The evil of authoritarian education: Banality and compliance in the neoliberal era

Introduction

Education is typically seen as a force for good, enabling people to access and secure their human rights[1], transforming lives[2] and fostering hope for better individual and social future [3-5]. We are therefore aware that to place the words evil and education together in a sentence is unsettling and possibly distasteful to some, yet this is our argument: we contend that neoliberalised education and education policy, has perverted the lofty ideals of education articulated above [6, 7]. Specifically, we are concerned about the growing acceptance of authoritarian schools, implementing "hyper-behaviorist school discipline plans for both teachers and students" [7] and characterised by the alienation, disaffection and exclusion of teachers and students, frequently working in exam factory conditions [8-11]. In order to analyse these developments, we draw on the work of Hannah Arendt, and her notion of the 'banality of evil' [12], and Elizabeth Minnich's notion of extensive evil [13, 14], arguing that these concepts offer a fresh critical perspective on the growth of authoritarian schooling within neoliberal education regimes such as those in England and the USA.

Since the 1980s, education has been neoliberalised, with students, families, teachers and institutions positioned in competition with each other, in terms of behaviour, academic results and economic success [15-17]. More recently, as Nancy Fraser charts[18], the meritocratic, progressive-neoliberalism of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has been supplanted by a more reactionary, populist version of neoliberalism. In this version, and with echoes of previous populist moments [19], the plight of the poor and oppressed is not due to structural inequalities, or the failure of those unable to fulfil their meritocratic obligations, but rather the responsibility of the deliberate disruptor of the good life, be this immigrants, the leftist blob [20] or the "wokerati" [21]. Neoliberalism has thus brought about a denial of our dependence and interdependence, while those daring to criticise the system encounter blame and opprobrium as their reward [22]. If this wasn't bad enough, the punitive effects of neoliberalism have been redoubled by its convergence with neoconservatism, with its valorisation of family, nation and tradition, and intolerance of diversity and difference [23, 24].

In education the effects of the conflux of neoliberalism and neoconservatism – in what we refer to as the neoliberal-neoconservative matrix – can be seen through the dominance of

zero-tolerance and no-excuses behaviour policies in many English schools. Indeed, the English government has feted schools that follow punitive behaviour policies. Prominent here is the high-profile Michaela school, led by England's self-proclaimed 'strictest headmistress', Katherine Birbalsingh. Plaudits for the book based on the work of the school, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers* [25], include endorsements from the English government's behaviour Tsar, Tom Bennett, who refers to the school as a 'trailblazer', while Boris Johnson, referred to it as 'a revolution in education' and Michael Gove described it as his 'gospel'. Such behaviour policies are deemed to be an essential ingredient in the development of highly aspirational students, able to succeed in the high stakes tests that comprise the measures by which schools are held to account [26, 27].

Authoritarian schooling is not new: as Diane Reay [28] points out, the simultaneous civilising and suppressing of the working classes has been an integral part of the education project since the earliest days of the industrial revolution. However, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of authoritarian policies in many schools – a development actively endorsed and encouraged by politicians, policy makers and the media. Importantly, these policies are aimed at the poorest, most marginalised students, with authoritarian practices, including isolation, strict dress codes, tracking the teacher and walking silently [26], enforced through elaborate systems of demerits and consequences, and legitimated with references to empowerment and social justice as part of a quest to save learners from a life of disorganisation, lack of achievement and, in turn, poverty [25]. However, it should also be noted it is not just those who fall foul of the rules that are punished, the wider cohort of children are also differently-punished; watching their classmates punishment, helps to internalise and embody the discipline, for fear of consequences, thus ensuring compliance for all.

These disciplinary practices, however, are not in themselves sufficient; to achieve success, in the eyes of education's new authoritarians, requires emulation, including learning to comport oneself like prosperous people, memorising culturally esteemed knowledge and endorsing the dominant values of late capitalist society. As such, the construction of successful subjects requires corporeal, intellectual and epistemological compliance [29, 30]. These practices may be objectionable to those (like us) with differing educational ideologies - but do they warrant the term evil? To explain why we feel justified in employing this term requires an exploration of Arendt's and Minnich's thinking on the links between evil and banality, after which we will link these ideas specifically to the practice of placing students in isolation.

Evil: horrific and banal

We are so used to thinking of evil as something *extra*-ordinary – the genocidal horrors of the twentieth century are perhaps examples par excellence of this notion of evil, along with more recent terrorist attacks in European cities, spring to mind here – that to associate the word with Education or schooling seems outrageous and irresponsible. Crucially, however, our focus in this paper, however, is on a different register of evil—the *banal* as opposed to the *horrific*. In making this argument and asserting that education systems are perpetrators of a form of evil that escapes notice beneath a layer of bureaucratic respectability – our inspiration, as clearly signalled in the paper's title, comes from Hannah Arendt's [12] notion of the banality of evil and contemporary philosopher, Elizabeth Minnich [13, 14], who builds on Arendt's work in order to make the case for what she refers to as the evil of banality.

Banality and evil

Arendt coined her phrase, 'the banality of evil', to capture her realization that Adolf Eichmann – the Nazi functionary captured in Argentina in 1960 by Israeli security forces, put on trial in Jerusalem in 1961, and executed by the Israeli government the following year – far from representing some demonic force of malevolence, embodied an extraordinary thoughtlessness. This thoughtlessness was manifested in his difficulties thinking and speaking in anything other than clichés and platitudinous phrases – that is, in banalities.

Arendt's ideas have been subsequently built upon by Minnich when she articulated the distinction between intensive and extensive evil [13, 14]. When we think of evil, for instance in the context of horrific acts of crime or terror, we are usually referring to what Minnich describes as intensive evil. By contrast, what Minnich refers to as extensive evil is a less dramatic affair. Indeed, the crucial aspect of extensive evil is that it 'requires that it be conventional to do its work as one's job, daily, day after day, with supper at home and picnics on the weekend'. The critical point is that whereas intensive evil requires individuals who may be warped, sadistic, delusional and dangerous, extensive evil relies upon thoughtlessness and routinized behaviours:

> It just takes a practiced conventionality, a clichéd conscience, emotional conformity, susceptibility to small-scale bribery by salary, goods, and/or status, a sense of isolation, and distrust of the reliability of others that works against taking a differing public stand.

> It just takes, that is, much of what in better times keeps a society provided with reliable and ambitious workers, status-anxious consumers, polite neighbors, agreeable team players, and citizens who make no waves: an ability to go along thoughtlessly, to play the game [13].

Following the work of Arendt and Minnich, an emphasis on the banal nature of evil focuses our attention on its bureaucratic and systemic, rather than personal and individual, dimensions. This is important, as our intention in this paper is not to blame or pathologise individuals. Instead, we seek to highlight the role of systemic discourses and practices – of blame, coercion, compliance, discipline, docility, punishment, and humiliation – that have to a large extent become naturalised and normalised in schooling in England. Our point is that our education system encourages and condones practices that undermine our humanity and, as such, represent 'an attack on the structure of being' [31], even though individuals may see themselves as enacting practices that are deemed to have moral value within the understandings of the neoliberal-neconservative education policy discourses that these practices are located within.

In our reading, the banality of education policy is reflected in the extraordinary pressures that are routinely brought to bear on schools, leaders, teachers, parents and students, *at all levels*. This pressure is intended to enforce adherence to the precisely detailed requirements of what are deemed acceptable appearances, behaviour and comportment, and to hold people accountable for achieving pre-set outcomes. As such, the banality of education policy involves cajoling and coercing individuals and institutions to comply with detailed, yet arbitrary and contingent, behavioural codes and performative requirements that are monitored and enforced through observation, measurement and evaluation methods. Crucially, such methods are part of a system that is inimical to thinking as a free or non-coerced act of discernment and judgement [13, 14].

The of banality within school discipline

Our overall unease regarding the new authoritarian culture in English schooling, pertains to the emphasis on compliance through the use of corporeal, intellectual and epistemological discipline. However, we are particularly perturbed by the extensive employment of seemingly banal practice of placing students in isolation - a mode of punishment that has gained acceptance in many school communities. Often called 'reflection', 'internal exclusion',

‘inclusion’, ‘seclusion’, ‘consequences’ or even more banal codes such as ‘S3’ (Sanction level 3)', isolation has become commonplace in school behaviour policies. Isolation is often framed as a last resort before formal exclusion. Mills and Thomson [32] found that forty percent of schools were using isolation or ‘inclusion’ units to keep children in school rather than excluding them for fixed terms or permanently. However, we found that 19 of 20 North Yorkshire Secondary Schools, mentioned some form of isolation in their behaviour policies as a sanction for a variety of misdemeanours including forgetting equipment, uniform infractions, lateness and ‘defiance’, as part of what is, in effect, a curriculum of compliance.

Isolation is more commonly (but not exclusively) used in secondary schools; misbehaving students are removed from class and sent to ‘isolation’ which can be in the form of a room of desks or commonly booths with panels which stop the child seeing or communicating with other children in the room. Some offences, such as defiance lead straight to isolation, smaller offences, for example forgetting a pen, if repeated also result in isolation. This sanction is often in a specific room for offenders with desks facing forward, sometimes with booths, with solid panels which enforce secluded sitting (often with little or no work) by the pupil. Depending on the school, the aim may be to remove disruption from the classroom, to provide time to reflect on their actions and reset themselves before re-entering the classroom. Whilst in itself this might sound sensible and effective, it is clear that some children spend hours, if not days sitting in such rooms and booths. As Martin-Denham [33] found in her research in Sunderland, it was not unusual for children to spend every day for several weeks or more, in isolation, with little contact with adults or children. More worryingly, Martin-Denham [33] and Mills and Thomson [32] found that if a child has special educational needs they are more likely to be sent to isolation. Whilst the effectiveness of such behaviour management is highly questionable [34], there is evidence of impact on mental health and welfare of these children, not to mention their education, with some saying they have found themselves unable to read and write due to the lack of education whilst in isolation [33]. The fear of isolation, is part of a ‘pedagogy of punishment’ that attempts to coerce the child into becoming an obedient, compliant and productive subject [7]. Isolation and other such authoritarian practices are an attempt to eliminate the risk of a more singular, spontaneous subject, that is central to an education philosophy based on democratic flourishing of both the individual and society [3, 35, 36]. Yet, isolation, and the wider pedagogy of punishment which it represents, is clothed in, and legitimated through, notions of care and social justice for the

most marginalised in society - why would any right-thinking person be against it? That fact this apparent tool for social justice impacts particular minorities more than others appears to be a moot point [34].

Despite isolation, and the wider 'behaviour management' approach it represents, purportedly being seen as key weapon in the battle against what Michael Gove [20] framed as 'the soft bigotry of low expectations', Menzies and Baars [37] found clear evidence of systemic structural bias within exclusion from classrooms and schools. If a child is black, poor, has mental health issues, or has special educational needs they are significantly more likely to be excluded temporarily (through isolation) or permanently from class. Yet this merely compounds already existing issues, in that challenging behaviour is more likely to be displayed by those who have experienced trauma and therefore more commonly experiencing isolation too [38]. Consequently, the experience of isolation may lead to ongoing 'retraumatisation' [38]. Concerns for children with SEND and mental health difficulties led solicitors Simpson Millar [39] to take legal action against the UK government, who subsequently promised a review of guidance for the use of isolation booths. However, no reviews, reports, policy or guidance has been forthcoming.

Champions of strict no-excuses and zero tolerance behaviour policies argue that far from damaging already marginalised children, they are in fact benefiting them. Isolation and other disciplinary measures are deemed necessary to provide important capital, enabling disadvantaged children to succeed [25, 30, 40, 41]. However, providing the correct capital, tends to mean converting disadvantaged students into successful students by becoming white, middle-class and able-bodied. That is to say a 'white logic' is employed, reinforcing 'structures of white racial domination deploying a narrative that obscures the mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality' [42], through the expectation to become compliant subjects. It is pertinent to note that whilst zero-tolerance behaviour policies were used widely by KIPP charter schools in the United States, and since emulated by many in the UK, the founders have announced significant changes to their policies including the removal of SLANT (Sit up, Listen, Ask and Answer questions, Nod, Track the speaker) acknowledging how "some of our practices perpetuated white supremacy and anti-Blackness" [43].

Far from a place of rehabilitation and inclusion, students who are placed in isolation are invisible – out of sight and out of mind [34] Outwood Multi Academy Trust's policy stated, 'the

rule when in detention and in the consequences room is occupy and ignore' [44]. Notably, the policy specifies precise comportment of the body. 'Students cannot sleep or put their heads on the desk. They must sit up and face forward… when in the booths, children are not allowed to 'tap, chew, swing on their chairs, shout out, sigh, or any other unacceptable or disruptive behaviour'. Guidelines on toilet visits belie the expectation of children being isolated for long periods of time: 'You will be allowed to go to the toilet up to a maximum of three times during the day (maximum five minutes per visit)' and 'you must use the closest toilet and go directly there and back'. The rehabilitative potential of isolation, is undermined by the disciplinary bodily messaging employed by 'politics of humiliation', as a means of social control [45].

Isolation and the wider zero-tolerance behavioural policies it reflects embody what Minnich calls 'of course politics' [13]. Such politics typically takes root with little fanfare and minimal resistance; as Minnich [13] notes, 'it is all part of normality and it is not done by devils incarnate. It is done by respectable citizens and job holders right out in the open, with legal and political support'. Indeed, many of these policies in education are 'hidden' behind seemingly neutral, indeed valorised, concepts, like effectiveness, efficiency, management, order, discipline, rationality. As such, isolation as an educational policy and its effect on the educational practices, have become ordinary parts of everyday life - in a word, banal. As a result, they have become increasingly invisible; and consequently, more and more difficult to challenge.

Conclusion: The importance of thinking in education

> What I propose, therefore, is simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing [46].

As repeatedly emphasised, we are not arguing that any individual, involved in these banal practices, is evil. On the contrary, we recognise that many educators and politicians are acting out of a sense of benevolence, a desire to improve the situation for their students. However, acting from a place of benevolence does not necessarily escape evil, for, as Butler [47] argues, 'moral sadism is a mode of persecution that passes itself off as a virtue'. Critically, we are concerned that contemporary education policy's orientation to disciplining 'unruly' subjects through isolation, typically targets individuals from disadvantaged communities, punishes a

particular sector of society, whilst passing over, and hence strengthening the standing of, the offspring of the most powerful and rich.

The problem arises from a policy environment in which individuals are discouraged by powerful and pervasive systems of sanctions and rewards from stopping to think what they are doing and questioning the categories, practices and processes embodied in institutionalized language and discourse. Indeed, within the neoliberal-neoconservative matrix, with its pressures to perform *and* conform, the individual is subsumed by and subordinated to the institutional. 'Evil becomes the understanding of a person through the frame and the effect of general speech, whereas the experience of oneself as unique can protect us from such evil' [48]. This unique self, experienced corporeally, singularly and in relation to others, is distinct from the subject of legal representation and political discourses and offers a starting point for resistant discourses and practices. But such resistance also requires a critical sensitivity to the instrumental co-option of individuals as the means to others' ends. We hope that this paper has contributed to the development of such sensitivity while also embodying the Arendtian charge to think what we are doing and to continually interrogate seemingly banal policies and practices.

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