

# **'If you tolerate this, then your children will be next.' Compulsion, compression, control, and competition in secondary schooling**

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This paper argues that certain taken-for-granted features commonly found in schools can create regimes that are inimical to democracy and the principles of a liberal education for all. Schools in England can be theorized as particularly oppressive institutions that create the conditions that make their children the unhappiest amongst the industrialized nations, generating precisely the disaffection with schooling that they then criticize and punish. They do this through institutional processes that are politically ideological rather than pedagogical. Four distinct features of schooling that synergize in a negative way are compulsion, compression, control, and competition. In presenting this model, the paper notes the demise of the anti-schooling debates of the twentieth century in the contemporary setting in England and other industrialized nations, and argues that the schooling system is needlessly harsh, especially for a substantial minority of young people. The paper draws upon media reports and adjacent research to conclude that compulsory schooling without debate allows punitive authoritarianism to thrive.

## **Introduction**

Our time at school is often referred to atavistically as the happiest days of our lives. For many children this is true; they are intellectually stimulated and rewarded for their achievements, and their social world revolves around their school friends

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and school activities. These children are the beneficiaries of a system designed around them, but other young people are not so fortunate. As a teacher in a high school I was always struck by the cluster of young men and women around the school gates at home time waiting for their friends to be released from class at the end of the school day. These young people, I knew, had been excluded for 'inappropriate behaviour': the catch-all label given to those who had demonstrated their disaffection for a system they felt did not meet their needs. But, intriguingly, these excludees seemed loath to leave the school environs in case they missed something. Observing these casualties of the schooling system I often wondered what it was that they were actually missing.

This article argues that the schooling system in England, and also across the industrialized world, has a set of institutional features that actively produces disaffection amongst those unsuited to comply with them, creating resistance, refusal, and aggression. These features, either by bad luck or cruel design, test the resolve of children who are obliged to suffer them and result in systematic exclusion from the system for a substantial minority. The four features I explore below may be seen as a dystopic sorting-mechanism through which the less able and the less willing are identified and re-assigned from the benefits of a formal education to a miserable residuum that serves only to warn others of the dangers of non-compliance. However, it is not only those children that are affected by these processes; all children are under its duress, and this is reflected in the UNICEF (2007) report that places UK children at the bottom of the league table for happiness, and 16th out of 20 for reporting 'liking school a lot' (19 per cent).

The taken-for-granted wisdom regarding schooling is that it is a universal benefit for a socially just democracy. Rarely are voices heard that suggest, for instance, that schooling should be anything other than compulsory, despite that condition itself doing violence to the notion of democracy. The title quotation 'if you tolerate this then your children will be next' is taken from a republican propaganda poster from the Spanish Civil War in 1936. It also inspired a song of the same name by the Manic Street Preachers in 1998. Both are statements that, if one does not resist authoritarianism, it will only grow stronger. I use it here as a polemic call to reorient schooling as a benevolent child-focused opportunity, rather than an ever-harsher competition that consigns many to failure.

## **Life in schools in England in the twenty-first century**

Between the ages of 11 and 16 years, the huge majority of pupils in England are educated in state-funded institutions known generically as secondary schools. It is

notable that only 7 per cent of the population are educated in fee-paying schools but that elite are hugely over-represented in political and social power. For example, 66 per cent of current government ministers have had that privilege and, of those who were not privately educated, many choose to educate their own children privately (Sandbrook, 2010). This fact in itself is key to understanding why many of those with political and legislative power are not motivated to improve the quality of life in ordinary state schools: they have little personal investment in them.

State schools, that is to say, ordinary free-at-point-of-use schools, are rarely out of the news as governments of all persuasions battle over 'standards', teacher performance, discipline, exclusions, grade inflation, truancy, and so on. Education, and schooling in particular, exposes more similarities between political right and left than it does differences. Avis points out that:

It would appear that within the Coalition as well as the Labour Party older dichotomous notions have broken down, replaced by rather more ambiguous, shifting and opportunistic conceptualisations.

(Avis, 2011: 428)

In the case of schooling, the main arguments are about who is the 'toughest' on standards, and rigour, and discipline, and over incessant bureaucratic tinkering with processes rather than meaningful change. As time passes, it seems that there is little that is stable and consistent for schoolchildren to experience, but four features of schooling that do appear to be unmoveable are:

- compulsion; children must attend school or their parents face imprisonment
- compression; children are enclosed in small architectural spaces where they are contained for most of the working day
- control; almost every aspect of a child's existence in school is surveyed, monitored, and disciplined for conformity
- competition; children are made to compete against each other, creating a pool of disaffected resentful losers.

These features are ubiquitous in our secondary schooling system. They are more evident in some places than in others but are so omnipresent that they are generally accepted as inevitable and natural. They are not natural. They are instituted because they suit certain interests and could be changed if there was the political will to do so. If we choose not to tolerate them, then the first action is to describe, analyse, and critique them.

## Compulsion

In England, ordinary pupils must attend school from the first day of September following their fourth birthday until the first day of July following their sixteenth birthday, spending between 9 and 15 thousand hours in schooling over eleven years, depending on local school arrangements. Although children in England already spend longer in the compulsory national schooling system than they would in virtually any other country in the world, young people without employment or a place on a training course are soon to be compelled to continue their education until 18 years of age (DCSF, 2008).

The act of missing school for unauthorized reasons, sometimes referred to as truancy, has been a longstanding concern for government (Carlen *et al.*, 1992) and there have been two main reasons for this. Firstly, education is such an important right that missing any schooling does the young person damage. Secondly, school performs a policing function by controlling young people while their parents are at work, evidenced by many studies of truancy that explore its links with crime (Wilson *et al.*, 2008).

As part of New Labour's inclusion agenda, enormous sums of public money were expended on reducing the numbers of children missing school: £885 million between 1998 and 2004 (National Audit Office, 2005). The most recent statistics available at the time of writing indicate the scale of the phenomenon, with over a third of a million pupils being classified as 'persistent absentees' (missing more than 15 per cent of sessions):

### State-funded primary, secondary, and special schools (England)

Total number of pupil enrolments	6,382,835
Number of pupil enrolments that are persistent absentees	392,305
Percentage of pupil enrolments that are persistent absentees	6.1

Extract from Table 1.2 Statistical First Release (DfE, 2012)

One cannot have compulsion without concomitant sanctions to enforce the compulsory act in question. In 2003, the UK government brought into force the Anti-Social Behaviour Act, which encouraged police, local government, and schools to use new powers to prosecute parents for the continued unauthorized absence of their children from school. By 2007 there were 10,000 such penalties issued (fixed fines of up to £100, but further fines for subsequent offences could be £2,500) and between 2004 and 2008, more than 19,000 parenting contracts had been issued (Donoghue, 2011). When parents are unwilling or unable to pay the fines, or the child still refuses to attend satisfactorily, then parents can be imprisoned. About 25

parents per year are put in jail for this reason (Curtis, 2009), with public and media discourse representing them as social failures who draw public tax monies away from more worthy causes.

Hardcore truants cost the economy £8.8 billion over their lifetime, according to a study published yesterday. While the child, hampered by poor qualifications, can expect lower earnings, the price paid by society includes lower tax receipts, higher crime plus increased pressure on health services and benefits.

*(The Telegraph, 2007)*

From a child's point of view, however, imprisoning their family is perhaps not the best way of encouraging engagement with education. Whilst the numbers who suffer this fate are small in proportion, they are vilified in the disproportionate press coverage and by schools wanting to flex their legal muscles, thus creating a climate of fear and oppression. It seems that the state expects an eleven-year relationship with schooling to start with a threat nesting inside a promise: 'Welcome to your new school! We hope you will be happy here, but if you try to escape we will put your mother in prison.'

It is impossible to quantify how many children perceive as unfair the coercion to attend school, as the mass of children attend with enthusiasm (in the early years at least) and such normalization makes those who are resistant to schooling appear deviant. But by adolescence almost a quarter of a million pupils are regularly refusing to attend state secondary schools despite all the coercion the government can bring against them (Donoghue, 2011). It seems safe to suggest that many more would refuse if they had fewer hostages held against them. The Taylor report *Improving Attendance at School* states:

As children move up through the school system, the numbers of children who are persistently absent grow, most significantly in the final years of secondary school. Despite a lot of focus on these children under the last Government, this figure is still too high. They tend to be children who have become disillusioned with school and have stopped turning up.

*(DfE, 2012a: 3)*

Instead of interpreting their own 'disillusioned' analysis as a problem with what schools 'offer', and the way they offer it, they instead interpret it as a deficit in the individual child (hundreds of thousands of them). The authoritarian response to nearly a decade of ineffective fining and imprisoning parents is to hit them harder:

Parents who allow their child to miss too much school should receive a fine of £60. If they fail to pay within 28 days then the fine should double to £120 and the money should be recovered directly through their child benefit.

(DfE, 2012: 10)

Perhaps the most alarming point here is the confiscation of child benefit, one of the last universal allowances given on behalf of every child until 16. Withholding this small amount as collateral against school attendance is a powerful indicator of the government's will to punish those who resist its compulsory schooling.

## Compression

Each day, large numbers of young bodies are compressed within the architectural constraints of school buildings. The formulae for determining space within schools are complicated by the different activities and the ages of pupils using those spaces. In 2008 the government abolished the regulations for pupil space in favour of advisory guidance, but the basic parameter is between 1.8 and 2.4 square metres per person. In offices, the *minimum* space for adults is 3.7 square metres, with an average of 11.1 square metres in the private sector (Kavanagh, 2011).

A significant amount of literature exists on the occupancy density of schools relating to the exceptionally high numbers of humans inside buildings, but it tends to be concerned with meeting energy efficiency targets rather than potential effects on social relationships (Clements-Croome *et al.*, 2008). However Edgerton *et al.* (2011) reported that 'the physical learning environment impacts on students' thoughts, feelings and behaviour' to the extent that anti-social behaviour decreased and self-esteem and pro-sociality increased under progressive building design. Government policy from 2012 is to reduce the size of all new school building plans by 15 per cent to reduce costs. Alongside this stricture are highly prescriptive regulations forbidding curves, soft materials, translucent roofing, and so on. Following these plans the Royal Institute of British Architects released a press statement claiming recent successes in designing-out behaviour problems:

... corridors were designed to eradicate bad behavior (sic) and isolation, which was prevalent in the school's previous 1960s building. The new circulation spaces are compact and easy to monitor and since moving to its new building, Christ's College has been named as one of the country's most improved schools.

(RIBA, 2012)

The effects of the school's physical environment on pupil behaviour are under-researched, but Barker *et al.* (2010) presented intriguing findings on the theorization of 'seclusion units' in one school. The unit is described in terms of a Foucauldian

panopticon, a technology for school-rule compliance where the severe, distraction-free environment ensures compliant on-task pupils. But on return to the classroom and the 'normal' environment they quickly resume their difficult behaviour. The question here is that if 'normal' classrooms produce that effect in those pupils, why not improve the classrooms for all rather than punish the individual 'deviant'?

It is not just the four walls that make the prison of schooling; classrooms and furniture also play their part. The restrictions of seating under desks limit movement in two ways: a good deal of movement and effort is required to free oneself from the furniture, and doing so is officially coded as disruptive. 'Out-of-seat behaviour' is a classification of pathology for which you can be referred to psychological services for 'support':

In school settings it is common for students to be referred for high levels of out-of-seat behavior, defined as leaving their seat or seated position or their weight not being supported by the chair.

(Martens *et al.*, 2008: 78)

Expectations of being in your seat for extended periods suggest that the seating is appropriate, however Murphy *et al.* (2007) found, as others before, that school furniture is one-size-fits-few: 'of the physical factors assessed in this study, characteristics of the school furniture were found to have the strongest association with pain' (802). Pupils themselves are vociferous about this adult-ignored issue when they are given the chance (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003: 143):

In my classroom we are all squashed up because there are too many of us in a small space. Our desks should be high enough to get your legs under. The trays should not be built in under our desks, because you knock your legs on them and they rattle when we move and then you get told off for making a noise.

(Kimberly, 11 years old)

Since the mid-1990s, following a gun attack on Dunblane Primary School in Scotland and the fatal stabbing of a head teacher outside his London school, security fences have been erected around most schools in England and ingress/egress is controlled by staffed single-point entry with ID challenges. The effect of this is not only to make schools safer from stranger-danger, but to bring them closer in character to military installations or penal institutions. In this regard one technology is supreme: CCTV surveillance. The proliferation of closed circuit television cameras in schools in England is nothing short of phenomenal. In England generally, CCTV has been embraced with more enthusiasm than anywhere else in the world. Using the Freedom of Information Act, the BBC (2009) established that Wandsworth

Borough Council had 1,113 cameras: more than the police departments of Boston, Johannesburg, and Dublin *combined*.

Taylor (2010) found that schools were being encouraged by government grants to set up CCTV in their buildings and that many had even installed cameras in the pupils' toilets to reduce 'horseplay' and control the 'misuse of soap'. Her study illustrated the anger and frustration felt by pupils regarding invasion of privacy as articulated by this female pupil:

For some individuals it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you are always expecting them to be up to no good then they might decide that they might as well misbehave because they are being treated like they are doing anyway.

(Taylor, 2010: 391)

These technologies of compression appear unconnected, but the corralling of multitudes of pupils in a tight architectural space, then further restricting their movements and activities by perimeter fencing, classroom furniture, video surveillance, and disciplinarian intervention, means that they are bound in ways that exceed anything in the past.

## Control

Schools and teachers are perennially criticized by the news media, public, and politicians for their failings in discipline. The pressure on teachers to have supreme authority in the classroom is relentless. *The Telegraph* enthusiastically reported Conservative party plans for:

... encouraging teachers to make greater use of physical force to maintain good order. Although its use is permitted legally in classrooms, provided pupils are not injured, it is rarely used by teachers because of fear of prosecution.

(Winnett, 2010)

*The Daily Mail* reported Chief Schools' Inspector Christine Gilbert's remarks on the characteristics of ineffective inner-city schools:

They may aim for children to be 'happy' but have less focus on achieving well academically. They are also more likely to tolerate incompetent teachers.

(Clark, 2009)

For all the *Every Child Matters* rhetoric about schools developing well-rounded young people who can 'enjoy and achieve', the key mission of the school system in England is to produce 'docile bodies'; well-informed and highly qualified pupils who are disciplined and compliant with school regulations: 'happy' appears to be

a word ill-suited to school life. This is reinforced by the priorities of the 2010 Conservative party draft manifesto, which began its pledge with:

- better teachers and tougher discipline
- a rigorous curriculum and exam system.

'Pleasant', 'friendly', 'caring', and 'happy' do not make such a high profile appearance in the document. It may have been significant that, as one of its 11 key points, their final manifesto pledges to 'give anonymity to teachers accused by pupils and take other measures to protect against false accusations'. These promises were followed up later in the year at the government's annual conference where the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, was reported saying:

I do believe that teachers need to know they can physically restrain children, they can interpose themselves between two children that may be causing trouble, and they can remove them from the classroom. ... They would also be given the right to search pupils for anything that is banned by the school rules. The important thing is that teachers know that they are in control and that this department and the justice system will back them.

(BBC, 2010)

Control is a major public and political discourse of schooling, specifically an ever more overtly physical, hierarchical, and authoritarian control. In secondary schools in England, the head, the deputy heads, the heads of department, the assistant heads of department, and the teachers themselves, all sit above a substrate of non- or para-professionals like higher level teaching assistants, TAs, and ancillary staff. Below them in order of power and prestige come the pupils. But the official hierarchy does not stop there. It is common to have emblematic differences conferred on pupils depending on age and compliance with school values (special badges or coloured neckties). Privileges such as access to 'leisure' areas like common rooms or libraries, preferential seating in the cafeteria, permission to go off-site at lunchtimes, and so on, are also common for older pupils in English schools. Through these means the tiny but hugely significant differential strata of hierarchical power between the adults replicate themselves amongst the pupils.

Reay found that unofficial hierarchies were well established by the age of 8, and that 'powerful hierarchies like the ones operating in (the research school) militate against fairness, a sense of community and the development of positive learner identities' (2006: 179). Some hierarchies are official but have unintended effects. Hallam *et al.* (2004) found that primary school children were very aware of their valuation by teachers through the setting and grouping practices in the classroom,

and this had impact on self-esteem and on ‘teasing’ behaviour with 44 of 132 pupils reporting being teased due to the ability group to which they had been allocated. At the bottom of the official hierarchy, school pupils are controlled in just about every aspect of their being: their location, movements, speech, and thoughts are all micro-managed:

Imagine being told what to wear down to the tiniest detail, being forbidden expressions of personality such as jewellery or make-up. Imagine being forced to cut or to grow your hair until it met with someone else’s approval. Imagine being so controlled in every way that even your bodily functions are at someone else’s discretion and you need permission to eat, drink or go to the toilet.

(Duncan, 2008: 137)

Most recently in England, this micro-control has extended to children’s diet. The Department of Health have published a series of initiatives including *Choosing a better diet* and *Choosing health, making healthy choices easier*, though as Daniel and Gustafsson (2010) point out, healthy food *choices* are not a freedom to be offered to children; they must be controlled. Government campaigns against obesity have directed much money into controlling what children and their families eat, and whilst the government cannot control food consumption in the home, it can at school.

This initiative has led to the removal of vending machines and sales of chocolate and soft drinks from school premises, and even the banning of birthday cakes by some schools (*The Telegraph*, 2011). It is now common to check children’s lunch boxes as they arrive at school, where snacks and drinks not on the government’s approved list are confiscated and returned to parents. The news media broadcast bizarre scenes of parental rebellion, where disgruntled families met on either side of the school fence for mothers to smuggle burgers and pizza across the perimeter (BBC, 2006). The point here is not against healthy eating, but against the presumption that schools ought to exert that level of control over children’s lives. Hartmann refers to ‘body-fascism’ throughout schooling as:

... severe intolerance in self and others of any weight or shape that does not resemble idealised bodies portrayed in media images ... often resulting in the rejection or bullying of those who do not conform to a specific body type.

(Hartmann, 2003: 4)

This long-standing inter-peer problem can only be exacerbated by the current intense focus on obesity: an attempt to regulate and control young people rather than improve their health (Harwood and Wright, 2012), which cascades down

through government, 'experts', school adults, and ends in hyper-criticism and aggression between children.

## **Competition**

The final feature of schooling to be considered here is that of competition. Competitiveness has become woven throughout every layer of schooling by way of target-setting. Since the 1988 Education Act, and through much subsequent legislation, performance league tables have forced competition between local authorities, between schools, between teachers, and between pupils (Farrell and Morris, 2004). Indeed, pupils themselves have become subject to intense pressure to compete even against themselves through the constant exhortation 'to excel'. The political rhetoric of competition is that it will 'drive up standards'. In other words trying to be better than one's peers helps pupils to achieve their full academic potential as measured by standard attainment tests. In pursuit of competition, the humanistic qualities of collaboration and cooperation are annihilated. The lack of competitive spirit is presented by the press as a creeping sickness in the national character and as a reason for dysfunctional pupils in school. Right-wing pressure groups are given column inches to express pro-competition views as facts:

A 'cotton wool culture' and lack of competitive sport has led to one in five aged 13 or 14 being suspended from school last year, according to the Bow Group think-tank.

(Clark, 2007)

The absence of supporting research evidence, even from schooling free-marketeters (De Fraja and Landeras, 2006) does not dampen the fervour of the establishment in pressing forward the competitive ethos in schools. However, the research is not needed if logic applies. The logic of competition is that it will produce some winners and some losers, almost certainly more of the latter. Fendler and Muzaffar (2008) expertly critique the concept of the normal distribution pattern, the bell curve that educationists and others use to plot the mass of normality at the middle and the tails of exceptionality from 'gifted and talented' at the positive extremity, to 'special needs' at the negative end. In their carefully argued analysis they describe how this seemingly neutral statistical concept has been used for decades as a powerful tool to frame and limit human possibilities. They conclude:

The bell curve is deployed ostensibly as a means to prevent, manage, or at least keep track of failure. However, by locking in the idea of normal-as-average, bell-curve thinking guarantees some degree of failure in all educational projects and makes sorting appear normal.

(Fendler and Muzaffar, 2008: 82)

We know what the outcomes will be for the winners in the schooling system, but what provision is made for the losers? Tracking back, we might arrive at the notion that it is largely the same children who have been losing since they began their 11 years of compulsory schooling, the excludees outside the school gates. For children whose standard attainment tests do not deem them 'gifted or talented' and especially for those whose natural behavioural characteristics do not allow them to sit at a desk for five hours a day, the prospect of 11 years of reinforced failure is unnecessary, as they will know who they are and how much the school values them within a couple of years. The stability of one's place-value in school is a powerful and depressing one. Children know very early who is the cleverest, who is the strongest, and who is the least liked by the teachers. Gest and others found that inter-peer knowledge at elementary school was very strong and peer academic reputations were highly predictive of later education outcomes:

... daily school routines put youth in close proximity to each other during academic work tasks, and peers may interact directly during joint learning activities such as small group assignments and informal academic helping. This proximity to and direct interaction with peers may permit unique observations.

(Gest *et al.*, 2008: 633)

The degree to which low-achieving students are exhorted to try harder in the education competition is an ethical issue for educators. Competition might be fun or healthy over a short period, or even a long period, if it is voluntary. If one can choose what one competes in, the competition is humane; if not, then it is nothing more than a form of bullying.

### **Compulsory schooling as a failure of education**

Whilst mass compulsory schooling has been regarded as a general good by the majority of writers, researchers, and educators, a few thinkers have critiqued its undesirable effects, particularly from the base of Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s. Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, and Hansen and Jensen's *Little Red School Book* were powerful polemics against educational authoritarianism, but, as with all polemics unpalatable to the establishment, their importance was dismissed as ideological puff. New life was briefly breathed into the critiques of compulsory schooling in the 1990s by the acclaimed US pedagogue John Taylor Gatto (1992) and more recently, Alfie Kohn (2011), but these too have made comparatively little impact on public consciousness, and in England their names don't even register on the education barometer.

Not all indictments of compulsory schooling in England come from radical politics, however. In 1967, almost a thousand children entered a competition set up by *The Observer* newspaper on the theme of 'The school that I'd like'. The entries constitute a huge amount of primary data that should be recognized for the precious, honest insights that it delivers, rather than written off as schoolchild whimsy. 'Oppressive and humiliating', 'boring and pointless', were common descriptors of what these hopeful children had experienced in their actual schools, and they were now writing about their dream schools. Blishen, the editor of a subsequent book drawn from the children's writing remarked 'when I was reading these essays, the image of the prison returned to me again and again. We imprison the courage and curiosity of our children' (Blishen, 1969: 4).

Three decades after Blishen's book was published, *The Guardian* newspaper invited a new generation of children to write about their ideal school. Despite intensive and expensive decades of 'school improvement', many of the writings of the new generation of children raised the same issues as their parents had (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003). From those times to this, the system is still recognizable. It has a modern face, and a more humane one for younger children, but behind the facade is still an unparalleled social power working for the traditional values of the establishment (Gore, 2001), and causing huge collateral damage in the process.

The technologies have improved, and the money spent on support staff, buildings, and equipment has been staggering. Between 1996 and 2008, inputs increased by 33 per cent, with £64 billion spent on schools in that last year alone (Ayoubkhani *et al.*, 2010). But improvements in academic outcomes are highly debatable. Indeed, where improved test scores are proclaimed, there is always a counter-claim of declining standards (Massey *et al.*, 2003). Despite all the efforts at improving schools, according to UNICEF (2007) children in Britain were the unhappiest of all Western nations.

## **Conclusion**

This paper does not offer detailed solutions, as it does not pretend to know all the answers. Instead it seeks to bring to wider attention how the four features of schooling outlined here – compulsion, compression, control, and competition – work together synergistically but in a destructive way. They are not discrete elements in schooling for there is great overlap and fusion, however, in prime position is compulsion. Add compulsion to any of the other features and it catalyses them into oppression. Compression might not be so bad if there was an option to come and go. Some of us enjoy the closeness of humanity in football crowds or nightclubs

but we rarely choose it for six hours every day; herded and lined up, corralled in painful seating arrangements then punished for fidgeting or trying to personalize our working environment.

Control is necessary at times to keep us safe and to make things fair between us. That control should always conform to the rule of 'least restrictive environment necessary' and be humane and dignifying to its subjects. To control appearance, speech, movement, eating, and observing toileting under CCTV surveillance might be taking things too far, especially when the penalty for infraction is exclusion, with all its long-term implications. Competition can be fun, stimulating, and inspiring, but forcing people to take part in a competition makes for great unhappiness and, when the criteria for success are always the same attributes – scholastic ability and compliance – we can expect the same winners and losers on each occasion. In England, profiles of these young people typically show over-representation of some minority ethnic groups, children looked-after by the state, and white working-class boys (Osler and Starkey, 2005).

There is insufficient space here to debate more humanistic alternatives to compulsory schooling. Whilst the majority of young people voluntarily attend school, even more would do so if they were less oppressive regimes. Some would still refuse, but perhaps fewer than do so already, as even the most hardened excludees retain some desire for what schools can offer. However, the astonishing amount of money currently wasted on whipping disaffected pupils into schools could be spent on carrots rather than sticks, making the offer more relevant and enjoyable for teachers and students alike. Raising a debate on compulsion in education might at least concentrate the mind on why we need it. There ought to be compelling attractions for children to attend schools rather than coercive sanctions for when they do not, and if we really must tolerate the forcing of children to attend school, then the elements of compression, control, and competition need urgent reconsideration, for their excesses are unchecked in the current compulsory system.

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