

# The IFAA Student and Youth Social Theory Reader

June 2017

Reimagining Education



**The IFAA Student and Youth Social Theory Reader** is a bi-monthly publication featuring papers delivered at the IFAA Student and Youth forum or submitted for review by the IFAA team. IFAA also prepares a further recommended reading list on the theme of each edition.

This current edition titled *“Reimagining Education”* focuses on the theme of educational change in South Africa and across the globe.

This issue features two pieces in the “Critical Essays” section. Josh Platzky-Miller titles the first *“Radical Democracy and Educational Experiments.”* Sara Muller titles the second piece *“Bourdieu on the Barricades: understanding the symbolic violence of education institutions in 21<sup>st</sup> century post-apartheid South Africa”*. Both Josh and Sara presented their papers at the IFAA forum.

The *“Recommended Readings”* includes the following pieces: Muhammed Nakhoda’s *“[Decolonised curriculum: A matter of mindfulness](#)”*, Nurina Ally and Daniel McLaren’s *“[Fees are an issue at school too, not just university](#)”* and Birgit Weyss, Nurina Ally and Daniel McLaren’s *“[School funding: South Africa can learn from the world](#)”*.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the IFAA Social Theory Reader.

\*Past issues of this Reader and all other IFAA Student and Youth Publications are available [here](#)

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# Critical Essays



## Radical Democracy and Educational Experiments: From Rojava to Rio de Janeiro

By Josh Platzky-Miller

### Introduction

Coming into its own in 2012, the revolution in Rojava (northern Syria) has been ideologically guided by women's liberation, ecological harmony, and a form of anti-capitalist radical democracy. It has provided fertile ground for a profoundly different education system from the statist, authoritarian models previously imposed in the region. A quarter of the way across the globe in Brazil, following the 2013 mass protests and uprisings, waves of students occupied their schools and universities starting in 2015 in the 'primavera estudantil'. Their challenges ranged from school infrastructure investment, to the quality and content of their education, to the creation of a more caring and democratic experience within the educational environment and society at large. Although these contexts are not strictly similar to one another, they both open the space to imagine possible political and educational pathways. They can thus help us to think beyond the immediate political context of South Africa today, towards a liberatory future.

### Brazil

From November 2015, high schools in São Paulo were occupied by their students as a confrontational means of saving a number of schools threatened by closure from a heavy-handed, bureaucratic policy of state school restructuring (Campos, et al., 2016). By March 2016, schools had been occupied in Rio de Janeiro and other cities, around issues including education financing, with claims that the sector had been 'abandoned' by the state. Teachers and support staff had not been paid their wages, or had de facto pay cuts, and their strike action had had little impact. These issues

were linked to broader processes of neoliberalisation: students blamed the state for trying to run down public education so that privatisation is easier to justify, and many problems faced by workers were related to *terceirização* (outsourcing). Thus, throughout 2015 and 2016, these forms of education-centred protests had interrelated with other socio-political issues, with occupations of up to two months long alongside other tactics. At the end of August 2016, there was a controversial change in federal government (labelled a 'parliamentary coup'), followed shortly by national austerity measures, including deep and long-lasting cuts to public education. In October 2016, students at over 1,000 schools and 200 universities responded in protest and occupied institutions across the country.

The occupations were part of a struggle for a better, more meaningful, education – in contrast to existing education, described as 'shallow and stupid', or as training to be cheap, alienated workers. Indeed, the occupations themselves were educational, affecting students' perceptions, values, and understanding of the world. Students, with some sympathetic teachers, ran classes around the formal curriculum and beyond, with topics including their rights under Brazilian law; Indigenous, African, and AfroBrazilian history and movements; and feminism and gender issues. Formal classes ran alongside cultural activities and life skills. Students have reflected on how the quality of their education during the occupations was actually better than normal, because they had taken responsibility to learn about what was not usually taught, with multiple diverse perspectives encouraged and acknowledged.

Simultaneously, better relationships were formed with teachers who worked with them. Teachers were often placed in the role of students, learning about the lives of young people, and even about modes of political struggle. The forms of organisation developed in the occupations changed relationships and produced new forms of social relations, which was a crucial success of the movements (Campos, et al., 2016, p. 12).

These struggles also affected changes in students' self-perceptions and political consciousness, occurring at a formative time in their lives. The students were fiercely autonomous (Catini & Mello, 2016, p. 1182), with a deep sense of 'protagonismo' (of

being “our own protagonists”), arising from having taken the school “for ourselves”. Students created ‘comissões’ (commissions), for activities from administrative tasks to cooking, cleaning, teaching, organising classes and cultural activities, to organising security and taking care of one another, ensuring that they were safe and doing well. These approaches are particularly significant in cases of students whose identities are regularly marginalised in Brazilian society, such as those identifying as black, women, and LGBTI+. For these students, the occupations can also be read as an assertion of their existence and their presence, in a socio-political context that often denies them their humanity or their identity (Aspis, 2017). Students’ spatial organising reflected this challenge, by creating gender-neutral bathrooms, and focusing specifically on women’s security in occupied spaces.

Students also took their demands to the state, engaging with broader political processes and forcing schools and education departments to engage constructively with their demands. There was thus some acknowledgement of the need to engage with political life generally, while simultaneously practicing more radically democratic decision-making on their own terms. Nevertheless, students recognised the need to understand political processes actually work in order to engage with the world as it is, and to prepare so as to be able to challenge subsequent political developments.

There were thus multiple forms of politics at play simultaneously: from political claim-making on administrators and governments, with strategic claims around the state’s ‘responsibility’; through to a self-asserted politics involving the students “seizing the means of their own education” (Branford, 2016). Through their struggles, a prefigurative politics was formed which was directed towards creating a new society – within the schools and more broadly. This generated a sense of solidarity, which challenged aspects of the status quo ranging from gendered norms to the individualism that had often previously been inculcated in students. These actions are not simply about the here-and-now, immediate problems in schools, but

extend to how the students see themselves, each other, and the future of their country – and act to change it through their insurgent politics.

## **Rojava**

In Rojava (northern Syria), home to roughly 2.5 million people, radically democratic experiments are taking place that prioritise anti-statist, localised, people’s self-governance; ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious plurality and inclusivity; women’s liberation; and a social and ecological economy which provides for everyone’s basic needs, even in the midst of war. These approaches stem from ideologies that draw on a “consciousness of the fact that different forms of oppression are interrelated”, with patriarchy, capitalism, and the state seen as foundational to interlocking systems of oppression (Dirik, 2015b), which manifests as a rejection of the oppressive histories, particularly against Kurdish minorities, of the regional nation-states (Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran) and the contemporary brutality of Daesh/ISIS.

Largely initiated by Kurdish liberation movements, people in the autonomous territories of Rojava have begun experiments in self-defence, and the creation of their own terms of liberation – rather than relying on anyone else creating it for them. Even so, political activity can be seen in terms of two complementary processes: of autonomous organising alongside institutions operating for all. This exemplifies a kind of pragmatic, hybrid politics, also visible in approaches to political institutions, in the creation of collectively-run alternatives that, over time, undermine the need for the state, which then “dissolves” (Kendal & Oak, 2016).

These ‘dual-power’ processes are clear in Rojava’s education sector: the Syrian state schooling system still exists, but its pedagogies of fear, compulsory patriotism, and distorted histories are being challenged from within, and from the broader democratic society. Meanwhile, people’s alternatives are being constructed through revolutionary academies, which are “oriented to meeting the basic needs of the broad population” (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 181), and provide “training for the construction of the social life, social change and transformation, and also to train

people for leading social institutions” (Akif & Aydın, 2014). Covering a wide range of topics, with regional localisation, academies often focus particularly on learning Kurdish language, history, and literature, which had been repressed under successive state regimes. Women’s history and experiences are interwoven with ‘general’ topics, while also being the focus of dedicated courses (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 182). Designed for the transmission of “liberatory values to people”, they teach “everything from...local languages to philosophy, history, and science. Even European philosophy...is on the curriculum” (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 182). Thus, content includes whatever enables people “to own ourselves, our society, and to understand the social reality”, to improve people’s lives in contextually-relevant ways (Akif & Aydın, 2014).

Education is not limited to particular institutions: political education has taken place in women’s military forces, and ‘all-women’s houses’ have been created, accessible for women to live in for as long as they like, and where they can take part in free education (STW, 2015, pp. 24-5). Moreover, educational institutions produce their own materials and people are encouraged to teach others about what they have learnt (Knapp, et al., 2016, pp. 180, 182). This manifests principle that education is for everyone, no matter what age or position in society. Significantly, there is an emphasis on caring for the most vulnerable: even amongst scarce resources, the city of Kobani reallocated resources in 2016 to build “the first school for disabled and special needs students”, led by a specialist blind teacher (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 184).

These experiments draw on a non-hierarchical pedagogy, in which “dialogue is central”, and where “sharing and collective behaviour are valued” – thus, staff and students are equals whose roles change over time as they work together to develop their knowledge collectively (Knapp, et al., 2016, pp. 180-2). For example, instead of final exams and memorisation, students offer their teachers critique on their teaching method, encouraging them to improve in their roles as teachers. Providing a framework for these pedagogical approaches is the fact that many of the academies’ courses are run as separated training sessions in which people live, cook, play, and

learn together; mixing book and classroom learning with audio-visual and discussion-based approaches (Akif & Aydın, 2014).

The education system and the radically democratic political system are mutually-constitutive. Students cover practical matters while “searching for meaning” and thinking for themselves, to “become the subjects of their own lives” and to “participate in Democratic Autonomy” (Biehl, 2014). This emphasises knowledge that is “based on understanding, explaining and the shared experiences of life”, according to the principles of a “democratic, ecologic-economy and gender emancipatory paradigm” (Akif & Aydın, 2014). Rather than being designed for status or signalling, qualifications or job prospects, the system develops knowledge based on local social dynamics; fundamentally oriented towards the question, “how does society want to live?” (Akif & Aydın, 2014). As a teacher in the town of Rimelan framed it, “we want to think freely now, without boundaries, and question everything... our goal is to broaden [heretofore] limited school learning and enable people to perceive themselves as conscious subjects”.

## **Conclusion**

In both cases, there is a clear rejection of education being commodified or used to reinforce structures of domination. Moreover, they both move beyond a rejection, emphasising the ways in which students are their own main actors in ‘making their world real’ and charting their own fate going forward, drawing particularly on marginalised and liberatory histories. At times this involved a political rejection of some forms of representation, while strategically using representatives that were deeply accountable to localised, deliberative, direct democratic structures. Many of these practices relied on collectively creating spaces for people to be ‘at home’, understood and cared for by those around them – and thus able to chart collective ways forward that encompassed everybody, rather than a select group.

Interestingly, the approaches to solidarity in each context overlapped significantly, starting with the imperative to know about what is happening, to share the story, to be inspired by their actions – and, crucially, to “care about their politics” (Dirik,

2015b). Following this was an emphasis on building a “strong revolutionary movement in your own country”, from which various movements can “learn from and support one another” (Knapp, et al., 2016, p. 257). This kind of educational process is itself a form of liberatory pedagogy that contests the model of ‘knowledge production in the global north, consumption in the global south’. Finally, the success of such movements requires challenging the “pillars of the system that caused this situation to begin with” (Dirik, 2015b).

The political-educational struggles summarised above are not simply about the closure of schools, or language rights, or any single issue. They call for a reimagining of the relationship between education and society, of ways of engaging with the world, of relating to one another, of thinking and being – of collectively building a more human society. “Seizing the means of one’s own education” is a critical act in its own right, and lays groundwork for subsequent endeavours.

But pursuing these paths means learning and teaching together; being able to critique each other and self-critique for survival and growth; it means rethinking the modes, forms, content, and purposes of our own education, who that serves and why it serves them – and, ultimately, how it could be different. As one YPJ fighter, Amara Cudî, affirmed: to succeed, it is “vital to know what you fight for”. Let us thus continue to work out liberatory visions for the future of this part of the world.

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# **Bourdieu on the barricades: understanding the symbolic violence of education institutions in 21<sup>st</sup> century post-apartheid South Africa.**

*By Sara Muller*

## **Introduction**

This essay seeks to ask whether the sociological framework of the twentieth century French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, offers useful insights into understanding various fractures and ruptures in South African schooling in the twenty-first century.

Starting in 2015, student protests have discomfited schools and campuses around the country, particularly prestigious and privileged institutions, with students expressing deep dissatisfaction with their educational experiences on multiple levels including curriculum, administration, financial access and inclusivity.

At the university level, calls for change have primarily taken two forms: firstly, as pressure for free education to improve access for the poorest; and secondly, as a demand for decolonized curricula that critique and problematize dominant ethnocentric forms of knowledge, most of which position 'Western' scholarship as the fundamental bedrock for advanced learning. At the secondary schools, students have demanded reform of school policies that are narrowly premised on normative Anglophone and Eurocentric learner identities.

In this essay, I argue that while Bourdieu's canon originates from the heartland of ethnocentric Western scholarship, his tools nonetheless provide important insights into the current events on South African campuses. I will outline why his sociological analysis of French schooling at that time is in fact *more* relevant to South Africa now than it has been previously, and how his analysis of schooling as a socially *conservative* force assists us in understanding the failure of education to provide economic and social emancipation for the vast majority of South Africans 23 years after the demise of Apartheid.

Having established this basis, I then turn to ask what responses might be available to students faced with such structures of schooling. Using Bhabha's notions of *mimicry* and *hybridity*, I open questions of what might offer genuinely liberative learning experiences for the vast majority of South African students.

## **Bourdieu's sociology framework**

A very brief outline of Bourdieu's key concepts<sup>1</sup> relevant for this analysis is pertinent prior to analysing their applicability in SA schools. Such an outline is presented against the backdrop of considering what is the *objective* of the sociology of education.

A sociological analysis of schooling attempts to excavate 'generative structures' (Bourdieu 1990) for trends and patterns in schooling arrangements and practices. It also seeks to differentiate between personal problems and social issues (Wright-Mills, 1959). Education sociology is interested in the routines and mechanisms by which social groups transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, and what productive and regulative functions such transmissions serve. Knowledge transmission invariably occurs informally within the unit of the family, or more formally within the larger social group by those designated as knowledge stewards. In the twentieth century with the almost total adoption of schooling as it became institutionalized in industrial Europe, the dominant form of socially sanctioned knowledge transmission beyond the family is primarily that of the brick-and-mortar school (with learners grouped by age into cohorts, spaces arranged into classrooms, and time divided by subject specification) and beyond this, the university<sup>2</sup>.

In 1974, Bourdieu published his essay "The School as a Conservative Force", one of the first texts to question the established dominant trope that attending school was always a liberatory experience and a means of upward social mobility. His piece followed the Coleman Report (1966), a large-scale empirical study in the US that controversially found schools in fact perpetuated, rather than narrowed social inequality. But unlike the Coleman Report, Bourdieu used his sociological framework that he began developing in French-occupied Algeria to understand *how* and *why* schooling might function in this manner.

Bourdieu reasons that each agent in society, in the period of their early socialization, develops a *habitus*, a precognitive disposition towards the world based on their early experiences, an embodied internalization of habits, rituals, instincts, norms and unspoken codes about how to be in the world and how to be with others. The *habitus* is not a fixed entity, but is relatively resistant to change once established.

Simultaneously, groups of agents establish what he refers to as *fields* of practice, socially delineated spaces where norms, routines, goals and expectations around activities operate within relational power structures. Education is a field. Literature, or art, constitute a field: a discursive space with unspoken rules and routines that do

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is encouraged to engage with some of the readings listed in the bibliography for a deeper description of a large and complex body of work. Bourdieu's framework developed over 40 years of broad and detailed empirical engagement across multiple facets and contexts of twentieth century society.

<sup>2</sup> The university lacks the tightness of age cohorts of basic schooling, but nonetheless exhibits most of its other features.

not transmit easily beyond those practices. An example: to sit forty people based by age facing the same wall in instalments of an hour, punctuated by a bell, to listen in silence to one other person... makes no sense beyond school. It is not a practice used in mining, in office work, in retail. When found elsewhere, it often to engage in practices that mimic schooling: training workshops or lectures. Thus, fields contain their own internal logic that is both fashioned and sustained by the compliance of the agents that operate within them.

Habitus and field make no sense in the absence of the other: the habitus of agents shapes the fields in which they operate, and concomitantly, fields encourage some aspects of the habitus of the agents that occupy it, and discourages or negates others. Agents constantly work within the structuring structures of the fields they inhabit, deploying whatever resources or *capitals* they have at their disposal to master the goals that the field decrees as valid or valorous. These capitals might be economic, social, symbolic or cultural, and forms, modes and codes differ from field to field. E.g. in education, speaking the dominant language used in class is a cultural capital, whereas not speaking or having mastery of that language makes an agent (a student) less 'fit' to play the game of schooling. Those with more appropriate habitus and capitals at their disposal use their advantage to sustain their dominance, primarily by establishing symbols and signs of distinction that signal their difference from others. In schooling, the term 'distinction' is even explicitly used to delineate those who have achieved 'success' at schooling from those who have not. But distinction in the field is premised on difference: just as in academics, where a 'distinction' is valueless if it is obtained by every student in the class, the dominant groups of any field continue to deploy their capitals in order to set themselves apart.

Bourdieu often used the metaphor of a game to illustrate how habitus, field and capitals interacted. He posited that the primary purpose of schooling was the socially sanctioned transmission of *cultural capital as valued by dominant social groups* to their children, in a manner that made mastery of such capital extremely difficult, if not impossible, for other groups who lacked the habitus or capitals to be equally fit to play the game. Schooling, and what constitutes 'success' at schooling, is aligned with the habits and preferences of the dominant group: the knowledge selected and assessed, and the modes of transmission and assessment.

But for such practices to perpetuate, they need to be seen as legitimate by those who participate in them. For Bourdieu, the primary mechanism of this sanctioning was *misrecognition*: convincing all engaged in the game, whether dominant or marginalized, that a cultural *arbitrary* is *essential* and 'without alternative', whether it

be speaking English, adding and subtracting well, knowing Shakespeare or preferring scientific to occult explanations for natural phenomena<sup>3</sup>.

Institutionalized (and mandatory) schooling is also a singularly unique field. All fields are broadly embedded within a field of political and economic power, and schooling as a sub-field uniquely positions students from a young age as more or less dominant within that broader field of power. Schooling acts as the reproductive field of capitals: a means of disguising economic inheritance between parents and children in the form of knowledge. It is this singular position that has often led to the shared belief that attendance and success at school is both necessary and sufficient for upward social mobility and increased personal emancipation.

But this shared belief sits on shaky ground. As Bourdieu notes, the capitals brought to schooling amongst different social strata of students, whether this be based on gender, race, class or geography, differs vastly, and is premised on their family of origin (Bourdieu 1986). He clearly states:

“in fact, to penalized the underprivileged and favour the most privileged, the school has only to neglect, in its teaching methods and its techniques and its criteria when making academic judgements, to take into account the cultural inequalities between children of different social classes. In other words, by treating all pupils, however unequal they may be in reality, as equal in rights and duties, the educational system is led to give its de facto sanction to initial cultural inequalities.” (Bourdieu, 1974, p 113.)

This *de facto* sanction is extremely powerful, especially in a neoliberal social meritocracy when failure is often attributed to personal flaw. Despite Wright-Mill’s caution to distinguish between personal problems and social issues, and the clear trends in education between those who ‘succeed’ and those who ‘fail’, the notion of schooling as liberatory is still held as ‘common’ sense. Schooling is still *misrecognized* as culturally neutral, when it never can be (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

### Bourdieu and 21st century South African education

The idea that schools establish and legitimise arbitrary, normative distinctions that stratify society was contentious in the US or France in the 1960s and 1970s. This is not the case in South Africa. Institutionalized schooling<sup>4</sup> has been a means of social

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that there are no distinctions between different forms of knowledge as more or less powerful. Vygotsky, and Bernstein, both recognized that one of the primary features of modern schooling was the focus on teaching and learning the ability to extrapolate from everyday, quotidian forms of knowledge to abstract and codified forms. Such forms have certainly been at the heart of the modernization engine since the industrial revolution.

<sup>4</sup> Of course indigenous societies had their own means of intergenerational knowledge transmission (e.g. the initiation rites of young amaXhosa males into manhood through circumcision): ‘schooling’ here refers to

domination and stratification since missionaries first began establishing schools in the Cape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hlatshwayo 2000).

More recently, the project of Apartheid sought to engineer South African society by race explicitly. One of the major, and most effective, apparatus of this project were schools, leveraged to sustain inequality through the deployment of Bantu Education for black learners. This deliberate entrenchment of inequality in schools fomented some of the most dramatic events of anti-apartheid struggle, the most notable of which is the Soweto Student Uprisings of 1976.

Perhaps it is because the symbolic violence of schooling was so explicit for the last three hundred years that the South African gaze has not been as critical of schools' *inherent* ability to entrench inequality post-apartheid. All critiques (numerous as they are) of schooling post-1994 have focused, with good reason, on the quality of teaching and learning provision as gauged against the norm of 'schools that work'. Yet such a narrow ambition for struggling schools fails to recognise that even if all 'dysfunctional' schools began doing all the things that 'functional' schools do tomorrow, the current arrangements of the system would still fundamentally disadvantage poor, black, non-Anglophone and rural learners.

Access to the quality of schooling formerly reserved only for white learners represented one of the great liberation goals for the new democratic government: the "doors of learning" were to be opened to all (Christie 2008). And yet, bar the exceptions that prove the rule, schooling has failed to address deep social inequalities since the demise of apartheid. Bourdieu's insights into how schools (in their current form) tacitly *sanction* and *legitimize* social inequalities provides cold comfort to South Africans looking to schooling to solve social ills and narrow inequality gaps.

Furthermore, in the euphoric and contradictory days of the mid 1990s, the political rush to 'treat all as equal', instead of laying strong foundations for positive redress and redistribution<sup>5</sup>, inadvertently led the post-apartheid government to lay down policies that would in fact do just as Bourdieu warned: the current South African schooling system by and large treats all pupils (and schools), however unequal they may be in reality, as equal in rights and duties (Motala 2009).

While the time and place differ vastly, the fundamental structure of schooling between 1970s France and 2017 South Africa are almost identical, and the social inequalities of South Africa by far outstrip those of France. This essay does not claim Bourdieu's analysis as a grand theory of schooling failure in South Africa. Rather, as

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Westernized schooling as established in industrial Victorian times and now well established as the common meaning of the word 'schooling'.

<sup>5</sup> The non-adoption of the Hunter Report is a good example of how discourses of 'equality' trumped those of redress in the late 1990s.

theory should, his insights into the reproductive and conservative functions of schooling provide points for understanding the generative structures underlying current South African education crises. The next section refocuses back on the disruptions and tensions of the last two years on campuses across the country and asks what Bourdieu, and others, offer us in terms of tools to begin imagining a different, more just, schooling system.

### Making sense of the rupture: moving forward

The recognition that schools impose cultural arbitrariness that privilege some groups and disadvantage others provides a theoretical rationale for current uprisings in South African schools and on university campuses.

Calls for the decolonization of curricula, the removal of arbitrary school rules about hair-styles or the language learners may use on the playground, are evidence of students beginning to puncture the misrecognition of the culturally arbitrary as essential.

The symbolic violence imposed by a school requires the co-option and cooperation of the marginalized groups into sustaining the (common yet unfounded) belief that certain practices, knowledges and norms are 'superior'. But as more and more students with a habitus at odds with that expected and valued by the education institution gain admission, the pressure for alternatives increases. Field and habitus are dialogically mutually constructive: the habitus of agents is both shaping of and shaped by the field. It then follows that as more agents with an alternative habitus gain access to privileged schooling spaces and bring different types of resources, the nature of the game of schooling, and the cultural arbitrariness it demands, can no longer be business as usual.

Homi Bhabha (1994) provides two concepts for describing the response of the colonised/marginalized towards the cultural imposition of the coloniser/dominant: *mimicry* and *hybridity*. For many years, students of disadvantaged backgrounds have 'divorced themselves from themselves' (Bourdieu 1999) in order to obtain the habits and dispositions of dominant groups that is required of them to succeed at prestigious schools and at universities. Their *mimicry* of dominant groups' language, accents, bearing and habits set them at odds with their cultural practices of the home and family<sup>6</sup>. As Bhabha notes, the mimesis can never be complete – the mimicry decomposes to mockery, a reflection of that which is considered 'cultured' or 'educated' so as to expose its arbitrariness (Bourdieu 1990). Ironically, the jettisoning of all epistemes, practices and preferences considered 'non-African' and hence tainted, is also a form of mimicry: Afrocentrism adopts all the vices and limitations

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<sup>6</sup> A wonderful account of this splitting of the self to obtain access to the cultural capital of education, what Bourdieu calls *habitus clivé*, or cleft habitus, is narrated in Tsitsi Dangbarembga's novel "Nervous Conditions".

of Eurocentrism by adopting narrow, essentialized definitions of identity (Bhabha, 1994; Andreotti, 2011).

But Bhabha also offers an alternative: **hybridity**, and cultural *difference* rather than diversity. Where the latter is premised on identities being fixed entities cast as essential and immutable, the former embraces pluralism, complexity and the agency of the individual to manifest and orchestrate their own identity and cultural resources. That is not to say we all descend into a “melting pot of love where everyone is brown”<sup>7</sup>: cultural distinctions *do* exist and are backed up by power asymmetries both historical, political and economic. Rather, the concept of hybridity foregrounds schools’ current inability to leverage identity complexity and multiple forms of resources as cultural capital<sup>8</sup> in the learning project: students are expected to **be** and **behave** a certain way, and deviations are rarely tolerated<sup>9</sup>.

Embracing hybridity as a strategy enables both dissenting students and educators to leverage what they bring that is undervalued by the education system, as well as harness the powerful forms of knowledge that formal education bestows. Students can learn African philosophy *and* Greek philosophy, Victorian literature canon as well as post-colonial critiques thereof, and wrestle with contradicting accounts of history from multiple perspectives. Rather than jettisoning scientific syllabi, students can both learn organic chemistry *and* the philosophy of science, understanding the differences between models and reality, as well as the limitations and strengths of positivist/realist approaches to empirical investigation.

While time limitations always imply that a curriculum is a sub-set of all that could be taught (and hence is always symbolically violent to *someone*), a pluralistic, hybrid curriculum offers a promising approach: not only to avoiding ethnocentrically limited thinking and learning, but to education that embraces critical approaches, appreciates complexity and has a healthy cynicism for “single stories”<sup>10</sup>. The tools and literacies required to teach and learn such curricula are advanced and powerful, requiring abstractions of patterns and concepts – and attention to detail – in ways that current, universalistic curricula do not.

In addition to a pluriversalist (Mignolo 2013) approach to curriculum *content*, educational spaces need to be mindful that pedagogic acts are always culturally discursive (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and hence symbolically violent: but they need not be *as* symbolically violent as they currently are. Educators should rather

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<sup>7</sup> Skunk Anansie: “And here I stand”, *Paranoid and Sunburnt* 1995.

<sup>8</sup> (for a good example of schools serving disadvantaged learners in Australia who resist centralized curricula policies to elevate their learners’ and communities’ indigent cultural resources, see Lingard et. al. 2003).

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say there are no limitations on what constitutes tolerable behaviour. But that these norms should not just be assumed, but negotiated democratically.

<sup>10</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story) (2009)

attempt to work in the difficult boundaries of hybridity rather than expecting mimesis, and in doing so heed Bourdieu's (1974) suggestion to 'take nothing for granted' in order to construct a genuinely liberating pedagogy. That is: no tacit expectations about what is 'proper' or 'right' should be assumed from learners, but rather all forms of different cultural arbitrariness be explicitly taught as objects of study in and of themselves, negotiated between educator and student in order to find common understanding about the education contract they must forge.

### **Conclusion**

These approaches to schooling are far easier to write about than to implement. Questions arise over what to include and what to exclude, when so much is available to be learnt. But a closer analysis of our current curricula, predominately at the schooling level, reveal inert (and sometimes arcane) content, the regurgitation of which is used more to distinguish those who 'can' from those who 'can't' than to empower and enliven interesting thinking. There is more room to manoeuvre than might initially be apparent.

Then there is the question of who might be willing and able to teach such a curriculum, as well as the question of what changes would be necessary at the broader social scale to allow such changes: the current neoliberal moment that emphasises human capital outcomes of schooling is not fertile ground for such a bold reimagining.

But our current narrow, discursive and arbitrary schooling, both in form and content, continues to favour the privileged and penalize the under-privileged, and commands the compliance of the under-privileged to do so. The current moment of rupture on schooling campuses may provide the crack through which to shine the light<sup>11</sup> required for reimagining an advanced and hybrid form of schooling that genuinely does open the doors of learning to all.

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<sup>11</sup> with thanks to Leonard Cohen

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## Recommended Reading: *Reimagining Education*

[“Decolonised Curriculum: a matter of mindfulness”](#) by Muhammed Nakhooda

*“The manner in which many countries were colonised, physically, economically and emotionally enslaving the earlier population ... will always remain an unsightly scar in the fabric of human history. It is one that should definitely be rectified through education, restoration of justice, and mitigation of inequality to uplift the oppressed by those who benefited from the unjust and unequal system.”*

[“Fees are an issue at school too, not just university”](#) by Nurina Ally and Daniel McLaren

*“If inequalities in funding and access to quality education are not reduced at school, university enrolment and experience will continue to be unequal too.”*

[“School funding: South Africa can learn from the world”](#) by Birgit Weyss, Nurina Ally and Daniel McLaren

*“An international assessment of reading skills in South Africa conducted in 2011 showed that 58% of Grade 4 learners were not able to understand what they read and that 29% were completely illiterate. Letting those learners continue to lag behind or drop out is a violation of their constitutional right to basic education.”*

