

Deschooling from above

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Abstract

The concept of deschooling has been making a comeback, after having been largely written off by the mainstream education research community in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, it is not just anti-capitalist radicals who are rediscovering the appeal of deschooling, but political and economic elites as well. This article traces some of the central claims and practices of this elite-led movement – that we call ‘deschooling from above’ – in current attacks on universal higher education, projects to deschool professional and technical training, and an abandonment of past commitments to universal compulsory schooling. We argue that all of these trends need to be situated within the broader context of the unravelling of the education fix of the previous era of global (neoliberal) capitalist restructuring.

Keywords: alternative credentials; anti-college movement; deschooling; education fix; Illich; school closure; school exclusion; work-based learning

Deschooling, long associated with the work of Ivan Illich, is back on the educational agenda. After being one of the most discussed education theorists of the 1970s, Illich and deschooling were increasingly ignored by educationalists in the 1980s and early 1990s.¹ Gabbard writes that Illich ‘completely faded from the community of education’ during this period; while Zaldívar notes how ‘Illich and deschooling became catalogued as examples of old theories, obsolete and out of date’.² But, since the late 1990s, there has been growing interest in returning to Illich and the idea of deschooling. A review of Google Scholar shows that English language citations of Illich’s *Deschooling Society* dropped from an annual high of 97 in the 1970s to a low of 45 in the 1980s, but averaged over 300 since 2008. By the early 1990s, *Deschooling Society* had fallen out of print: but a new edition was printed in 1996, and over the last decade, the book was reprinted yearly.³ In 2009, the *International Journal of Illich Studies* launched; and conferences and edited collections dedicated to Illich’s ideas have spread once again.⁴

Much of this resurgence of interest in Illich and deschooling is driven by the appeal that deschooling holds for individuals around the world who are seeking to develop post-development, de-growth, decolonizing, anti-capitalist, autonomous, ecological and indigenous pedagogies and social movements.⁵ As many of these individuals work within socially, economically and politically marginalized communities, we might call this a project of ‘deschooling from below’.⁶ However, it is not just radicals who are rediscovering the appeal of deschooling in the current era. For over the past decade, there has been a parallel phenomenon that we call here ‘deschooling from above,’ in which economic and political elites from more centrist and rightwing positions have also come to embrace the critique of schooling as an institution, and push for a move away from an emphasis on expanding formal education in favour of alternative models of learning and development. This elite-led project rarely refers to either Illich or the term ‘deschooling’ directly, and runs ideologically

counter to both Illich and the radical agendas of deschooling from below; nonetheless, the specific critiques it makes about schooling, as well as the practical alternatives it proposes, often bear a strong family resemblance to Illich and deschooling from below critics.

In this article, we present an analysis of ‘deschooling from above’ in order to make four core arguments about the place of deschooling in the early twenty-first century. First, deschooling should be recognized as a significant and increasingly influential component of contemporary education debates. Second, deschooling exists as both a radical, marginal demand, and as an elite-led, top-down movement as well. As Illich himself observed long ago, ‘deschooling makes strange bedfellows.’⁷ Third, education practitioners, researchers and theorists need to understand why deschooling demands are returning now. Finally, those committed to public, democratic and egalitarian visions of education need to think carefully of how best to respond to the claims of deschooling from above. For this movement’s elitist attack on democracy and equality in education and society is all the more alarming (and seductive) because it contains kernels of valid insight, that are not solely part of the neoliberal, conservative right’s agenda. Our analysis in this article is based on a critical reading of a set of academic, popular, media and government texts drawn primarily from the United States and United Kingdom, where the deschooling from above phenomenon is most evident.

Deschooling and Illich

Any discussion of ‘deschooling’ requires a definition of what is meant by ‘school.’ We use ‘school’ as a synonym for formal education, defined as the ‘hierarchically structured, chronologically graded “education system”, running from primary school through the university’.⁸ Illich’s definition of school as an ‘age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum’ is also useful. For Illich, school is an institution that makes age-based claims of universality, as something that all children and young people should be enrolled in; it is ‘built on the axiom that learning is the result of teaching’; it ‘tends to make a total claim on the time and energies of its participants’; and it directs learning via an institutionally packaged, standardized and segmented curriculum comprised of ‘prefabricated blocks’.⁹ Deschooling, in the broad sense in which we use the term here, critiques all of these core characteristics, as it works to decenter and disestablish formal education, both in the lives of individuals, and in society more generally.

In Illich’s own work, deschooling was embraced for two principal reasons. Illich saw the formal institutionalization of education as alienating, disempowering and dehumanizing, as children and young people are “‘schooled” to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new.’ Formal education is also not a particularly effective site for learning, both because many would-be learners (and would-be teachers) are excluded for not having the correct credentials, but also because much of the most powerful learning we do happens informally, ‘casually and as a by-product of some other activity defined as work or leisure.’ What is needed is not yet more school reform, but the ‘disestablishment’ of school as an institution, along with deliberate fostering of educational ‘quality’ and ‘opportunity’ across all arenas of social interaction. While Illich was vague about how schooling should be

replaced, he called for creating informal, open access, voluntary and non-credentialist 'learning webs' that could link self-directed learners with education resources, educators, and peers with shared interests.¹⁰ As examples of what such webs might look like, Illich invoked real world examples of libraries, museums, centres of non-formal education and apprenticeships.¹¹

Illich's work on deschooling was massively popular and influential during the 1970s. *Deschooling Society* appeared in an era when, as Bowles and Gintis observe in their 1976 book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, doubts were growing about the ability of schools to promote social justice and equality for all.¹² For, despite the rapid post-Second World War expansion of mass secondary and postsecondary education, deep race, class and gender inequality and injustice persisted in society. In this context, there was widespread willingness to experiment with alternatives, both within and beyond the formal school system. Illich, as Marcela Gajardo writes, was 'one of the educational thinkers who helped to give life to the educational debate of the 1970s and laid the groundwork for the conception of a school more attentive to the needs of its environment, to the realities of its pupils' lives and to the efficient acquisition of socially relevant knowledge.'¹³ By the 1980s, though, much of this initial interest in Illich and deschooling dissipated.

The 'education fix' and contradictions of global capitalist restructuring

To make sense of the changing fortunes of deschooling – its disappearance and subsequent resurgence – it is helpful to understand the place of formal education in the period of global neoliberal capitalist restructuring that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. David Harvey proposes the concept of a 'spatial fix' to describe this process: as employers in the global North faced a profit squeeze in the 1970s, caused partly by rising wages, high rates of unionization and welfare state taxation, many sought to move to countries in the global periphery, in search of lower wages, production costs, and a more pliable workforce. Higher education in the global North itself sought this kind of spatial fix, through recruiting more international students, opening overseas branch campuses and expanding transnational partnerships to make up for public funding shortfalls at home. Harvey argues that spatial fixes in capitalism are unstable and short-lived, because while they solve one set of contradictions and crises, they eventually generate new contradictions and crises that themselves need to be addressed.¹⁴

Taking Harvey's framework, we suggest that the spatial fix of neoliberal globalization in the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by what might be called an 'education fix.' For political and economic elites in the core countries of global capitalism to move production (in manufacturing, especially) offshore, they needed a legitimization frame that could justify such a shift without triggering mass domestic opposition and unrest. One way this was done was through the vigorous promotion of human capital theory, knowledge economy rhetoric, and education as the route to social mobility for workers at home¹⁵ (promotion of education, of course, has long been linked to elite agendas of fixing contradictions and crises in capitalist development).¹⁶ For example, in the words of Robert Reich, US Secretary of Labor in the mid-1990s:

Unlike America's old hierarchical and somewhat isolated economy, whose white-collar jobs were necessarily limited in proportion to the number of blue-collar jobs beneath them, the global economy imposes no particular limit upon the number of Americans who can sell symbolic-analytic services worldwide. In principle, all of America's routine production workers could become symbolic analysts [knowledge workers] and let their old jobs drift overseas to developing nations.¹⁷

The vision on offer was a new global division of labour and win-win solution for everybody, as workers in 'head nations' could be educated to gain high wage, high skill jobs in a growing global knowledge economy, while those in 'body nations' could develop their own wealth by taking on an ever greater proportion of the world's production line work.¹⁸ Brown, Lauder and Ashton label this the 'neoliberal opportunity bargain' that promised 'families [in the global North especially] a path to individual and national prosperity through education'.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, the education fix era saw rapidly rising rates of post-secondary education enrolment across the world, as 'universal' higher education became a policy aspiration for wealthy nations, much as universal primary and secondary education had been targeted and largely achieved by these countries previously.²⁰ Tertiary enrolment rates for young people in the UK, for example, tripled between 1980 and 1999.²¹ In this context of global educational expansion, the idea of 'deschooling society' came to be seen as an historical oddity.²²

However, the education fix has since created its own problems and contradictions. Capitalist economies create limited numbers of high skill, high wage knowledge economy jobs; and many of these are as susceptible to offshoring, automation, deskilling and wage degradation (or polarization) as manufacturing jobs before them.²³ As numbers of young people with post-secondary credentials increase, graduate underemployment has also risen – a trend exacerbated by the global financial crisis of 2008.²⁴ In the UK, the Office for National Statistics reported in 2019 that '31% of graduates are overeducated for the job they are doing.'²⁵ National elites have worried about the cost of continually expanding post-secondary education: in the United States, where much of this cost has been shifted to students via tuition fees, concerns have grown over the potentially destabilizing impacts of what is now a \$1.5 trillion student debt bubble.²⁶ Graduate unemployment and underemployment are seen as dangerous sources of social and political unrest, blamed for mass protests and uprisings across the globe.²⁷ In a 2018 article titled 'A degree of overkill,' the British Council's Martin Rose warns of the 'education trap' that arises when there are 'too many graduates for too many jobs,' arguing that:

the unemployed graduate has been very visible in the Arab Spring, in the riots that swept Tunisia in January, in the Hirak protest movement in Morocco's Rif region and in 'graduate recruitment' to the ranks of the Islamic State jihadist group.²⁸

The failure of the education fix to solve social problems, reduce inequality, and meet individual and collective needs is part of what had led to a resurgence of interest in radical, alternative projects of deschooling from below: projects such as Swaraj University in India, Universidad de la Tierra in Mexico, and the global Ecovercities Alliance are all influenced and inspired by Illich and deschooling.²⁹ 'While education has been framed as the cure to [our] crisis, in reality, the factory model of schooling is part of the problem,' declares the mission statement for Swaraj University. 'There is an urgent need to start thinking differently,' the

mission statement continues, as ‘communities must engage in new modes of lifelong societal learning which grow from a larger understanding of and respect for human potential and human dignity.’³⁰ But failure of the neoliberal education fix has also led to a parallel call for what we are calling deschooling from above. Against a past consensus of the desirability and necessity of continued expansion of formal education horizontally across the population and vertically through the life course,³¹ deschooling from above centres on three key areas of education policy and practice: a questioning of universal higher education as a legitimate policy objective; a push to deschool professional, managerial and technical workforce preparation; and a *de facto* abandonment (at least) of universal compulsory level education.

Contesting (universal) higher education

Most clearly, as the education fix has begun to unravel, there has emerged a growing elite critique of the promotion of (universal) higher education as an unquestioned good in itself, and a counter-argument that there should not be an unending expansion of higher education, and not everybody should go to university.³² ‘Our education system’s supreme defect,’ argues Bryan Caplan in his 2018 book, *The Case Against Education*, is that ‘*there’s way too much education*’ (emphasis in original).³³ ‘The college-for-all crusade has outlived its usefulness,’ writes Samuelson: ‘Time to ditch it,’ as ‘it’s now doing more harm than good’ and ‘looms as the largest mistake in educational policy since World War II’.³⁴ Popularly known in the US as the anti-college movement, the principal concerns of this rightwing critique focus both on the increased uncertainty about the economic value of a university degree, as well as the perceived liberal political leanings and rising cost of higher education. A 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center found in the US that a majority of Republican voters (58%) now say universities have a negative effect on the country (compared with 19% of Democrats).³⁵

Anti-college (or university) discourse is popular among both political and business elites. In the UK, a significant portion of the Conservative Party believe that ‘there are too many people going to university.’³⁶ ‘The obsession with academic degrees in this country must end,’ the Chair of the UK House of Commons Education Select Committee, Robert Halfon, argued in 2018; the ‘idea that you just have a mass conveyer belt of people going to university was the wrong one,’ insists Halfon, and ‘what we should have done is said that we need “skills, skills, skills” not “university, university, university”’.³⁷ In the United States, a long line of Secretaries of Education have likewise questioned the ongoing expansion of higher education. William Bennett, Secretary of Education under Reagan, wrote a book challenging the ‘college for all’ agenda. Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education under Obama, is a strong promoter of online certification (‘badges’) of learning as an alternative to college degrees. Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education under Trump, says that ‘we need to stop forcing kids into believing a traditional four-year degree is the only pathway to success’.³⁸ Technology business leaders have been particularly outspoken about questioning traditional higher education, leading Tristan McCowan to write of the emergence of a ‘Silicon Valley deschooling.’³⁹ PayPal billionaire Peter Thiel has become something of a spokesperson for the anti-college movement, setting up his Thiel Fellowships in 2011 to give \$100,000 grants to young people to work on entrepreneurial ideas instead of going to university.⁴⁰

Popular and political critiques of (universal) higher education are supported by an expanding literature that is produced by a densely networked group of authors, many (but not all) with conservative libertarian politics, often linked with think tanks such as the Cato Institute: for example, Bryan Caplan's (2018) *The Case Against Education*, Kevin Carey's (2015) *The End of College*, Ryan Craig's (2015) *College Disrupted*, Michael Ellsberg's (2012) *The Education of Millionaires*, Seth Godin's (2012) *Stop Stealing Dreams*, Charles Murray's (2009) *Real Education*, Jeffrey Selinger's (2013) *College (Un)Bound*, Dale Stephens' (2013) *Hacking Your Education*, and Charles Sykes' (2016) *Fail U: The False Promise of Higher Education*.⁴¹ Few of these authors cite Illich directly, although Stephens' *Hacking Your Education* is an exception. Stephens, who received a Thiel Fellowship to drop out of college, used the money to set up UnCollege, and aspires to build 'a social movement empowering individuals to take their education beyond the classroom,' directly invokes Illich, *Deschooling Society* and the notion of 'learning webs' as a model for the future.⁴² In the 1970s, writes Stephens, 'we didn't have the technology to create some of the ideas Ivan Illich and others had; today we do.'⁴³

Despite the general lack of direct references, the core critiques made by this literature of higher education bear a strong resemblance to those made by Illich, and deschooling from below critics. These are that:

1. Students in general are not learning effectively in university.
2. Higher education often teaches a dull conformity, marked by bureaucracy and institutionalization.
3. Instead of real learning, higher education promotes credentialism (or 'signalling').
4. Higher education makes unreasonable, excessive and unnecessary demands on the time of its students, particularly in the form of the standard US four year BA degree.
5. Higher education's model of teacher led and controlled curriculum is unhelpful and unwelcome.
6. Claims of universalism in higher education – that all young people should be able to go to university – are also unhelpful and unwelcome.

Instead of universal higher education, these critics propose a range of alternatives that, once again, are often very similar to those proposed by Illich: online education, self education, and networked education; work experience, on the job training, apprenticeships, paid employment, and entrepreneurship; play, travel, sports, arts and volunteering.⁴⁴ Central to all of these alternatives is that they are personalized or learner driven modes of learning, and are directly relevant to and valuable within a capitalist labour market. It is in this latter respect, of course, that deschooling from above runs directly counter to models promoted both by Illich and Illich-inspired movements of deschooling from below. As Illich warned back in the 1970s, 'the rash and uncritical disestablishment of school could lead to a free-for-all in the production and consumption of more vulgar learning, acquired for immediate utility or eventual prestige.'⁴⁵

Thus far, concrete impact of the critique of (universal) higher education on practice is seen less in changes in higher education enrolment levels, but principally in the dramatic decline in state funding for higher education. In the US, public funding for higher education dropped by \$9 billion from 2008 to 2017; in the UK, direct public funding for higher

education in England was cut by £3 billion between 2011 and 2018.⁴⁶ Such cuts are usually framed as a phenomenon of higher education marketization; but this misses a core argument that is being made about deschooling. Some cuts are driven directly by anti-university sentiment, particularly among Republican lawmakers in the US.⁴⁷ More often, cuts are driven by a framework in which the public value of university is questioned, and degrees are seen as private goods that principally benefit degree holders in terms of better jobs and higher incomes (justifying the shift from public tax payer support to high tuition fees, as well as the attack on humanities and other disciplines that do not serve market interests): universities are expected to serve the labour market, above and beyond any other goals. Subsequently, the private labour market benefit of university degrees is also questioned, and it is proposed that at least some students are better off spending their (own or loan) money elsewhere, or going directly into the workforce, where they can earn while learning on the job.⁴⁸ The higher education sector “must be challenged to balance its worth against its negative economic impact on students and their families,” states the 2016 Republican Party platform in the US, which goes on to call for models both of alternative schooling and deschooling: “We need new systems of learning to compete with traditional four-year schools: Technical institutions, online universities, life-long learning, and work-based learning in the private sector.”⁴⁹

Deschooling technical and professional workforce preparation

Closely linked with the critique of (universal) higher education is a parallel move to deschool professional, managerial and technical workforce preparation. One of the central contradictions of the education fix during the era of global capitalist restructuring is not just the production of more highly educated graduates than capitalist economies could easily incorporate;⁵⁰ it is also that, to support the spatial fix agenda of lowering costs, evading state regulation and pursuing capital interests, the promotion of the education fix contributed the massive expansion of a (higher) education sector that was highly state regulated, had rapidly rising costs, and was driven by a range of competing interests other than those of directly serving market and business needs. Deschooling professional and technical workforce preparation seeks to resolve this contradiction by both promoting non-college pathways into the skilled workforce that already exist,⁵¹ and removing the need to obtain a university degree to enter professional, managerial and technical jobs through creating new, alternative routes into these occupations.

This is happening in at least three ways. First, some corporations (such as Apple, IBM, Google, Ernst and Young, PwC, Bank of America, etc.), are dropping university degree requirements for entry level job applicants.⁵² Universities often ‘don’t deliver on what they promise,’ claims Google’s head of hiring: ‘You generate a ton of debt, you don’t learn the most useful things for your life;’ by contrast, ‘when you look at people who don’t go to school and make their way in the world, those are exceptional human beings, and we should do everything we can to find those people’.⁵³ A survey of US human resource executives in 2018 ‘found that almost half ... are blaming colleges for not preparing students for jobs’ and ‘90 percent are dropping the four-year college degree requirement and are now more open to hiring candidates’ with alternative certification.⁵⁴

Second, there is a sustained project, driven by an array of private sector actors, to create new forms of skill development and certification as alternatives to traditional undergraduate and (post)graduate degrees. Pearson, one of the companies most invested in this project, defines alternative credentials as ‘competencies, skills, and learning outcomes derived from assessment-based, non-degree activities’ that ‘align to specific, timely needs in the workforce’.⁵⁵ Alternative credentials include certificates issued by online and face to face skills based courses, programs and ‘boot camps;’ competency-based tests and exams; ‘digital badges’ that provide recognition of successful completion of online skills development; and micro-credentials that document mastery of specific skills and areas of knowledge.⁵⁶ Thus far, alternative credentials have had limited success in displacing traditional university degrees.⁵⁷ Indeed, many individuals now gain alternative credentials *in addition to* rather than *instead of* university degrees; and some universities are adding alternative credentials to supplement their core degree programs.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, there is currently a sustained private sector effort to deschool learning – in particular, learning related to technical, professional and managerial workforce development. The rallying cry of this movement is to ‘challenge the monopoly that colleges and universities have on credentialing’. In the words of the American Enterprise Institute, ‘Corporate America’ must break ‘its addiction to degree inflation’ and strike ‘a blow against the college cartel’.⁵⁹

Third, the state has acted to shift professional education partly or wholly out of the university sector, a trend especially visible in the UK. In fields such as social work, teaching and nursing, the UK government has over the last decade sought to replace university-based professional degree courses with fast-track, work-based, practice-driven training and apprenticeship programs, using shifts in finance policy (e.g., cutting bursaries for university courses, while offering subsidized tuition-free fast-track programs) to steer students into non-university professional training routes.⁶⁰ McIntyre, Youens and Stevenson describe this as the deliberate ‘marginalization’ and ‘silencing’ of the university in state professional education policy.⁶¹ By 2016, over half of all teacher trainee places in England were provided by school (i.e., workplace) led teacher training routes: trainees on the School Direct route typically spend only 30 days of study in a university over the course of their program; while School-Centred Initial Teacher Training has no input from universities at all. Also in 2016, Frontline, a fast track social work training program in the UK, likewise removed university involvement from its program curriculum entirely.⁶²

The motivation for these shifts is that university professional education is allegedly too costly, low quality and ineffective – being too divorced from direct, practical employer and workplace needs, and overly focused on big picture, abstract academic questions – and is often shaped by leftist ideology.⁶³ UK Secretary of Education Michael Gove was scathing of university social work and teacher educators: accusing the former of propagating ‘pernicious’ leftwing ‘dogma’ and vowing to ‘strip this sort of thinking out of the profession’; while labelling the latter as ‘Enemies of Promise ... in thrall to Sixties ideologies,’ interested in ‘valuing Marxism, revering jargon and fighting excellence’.⁶⁴ In reaction to this state-driven move to deschool professional education, university social work, teaching and nursing educators are now speaking out ‘in defence’ of the ‘distinctive contribution of the university,’ to insist that ‘education does matter’. ‘There is something special about learning as a university student rather than as an employee, trainee or apprentice,’ insists Thoburn: ‘The student is more able to be adventurous, take risks ... critique the practice or the service

model they are experiencing, ... experiment [and] “think outside the box.” “Being part of the academy,’ argue McIntyre, Youens and Stevenson, ‘means university teacher educators are “part of a culture that expects to challenge, to debate, to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions and values by exposing them to critical scrutiny.”’⁶⁵

In general, apprenticeships are back in vogue as work-based learning alternatives to the school-based model of learning offered in traditional university degrees. In the UK, the government introduced an apprenticeship levy on large employers in 2017, and is vigorously promoting the development of new higher and degree apprenticeships.⁶⁶ ‘The sad truth is that outdated and snobby attitudes are still putting people off apprenticeships,’ argues UK Secretary of Education Damian Hinds, ‘which means they’re missing out on great jobs and higher salaries – many of them in the sorts of firms graduates look to land jobs with after university’.⁶⁷ In the US, President Donald Trump, who became famous as star of the TV show *The Apprentice*, launched a Taskforce on Apprenticeship Expansion to promote apprenticeships and workplace learning, with the goal of ‘reforming ineffective education’ and addressing the failure of universities to prepare youth for the workforce while keeping costs down. US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos argues for extending apprenticeships beyond blue collar jobs to potentially cover all occupations, including ‘health care, finance and law’.⁶⁸

Abandoning universal compulsory education

If the elite challenge to universal higher education is direct and explicit, some educational researchers and campaigners in the US, UK and elsewhere warn that there is at least a *de facto* abandonment of universal compulsory level education occurring as well.⁶⁹ Indeed, if we are to speak about deschooling in the current era, a central concern must be the wave of mass school closures sweeping through the US and other countries since the start of the millennium – a phenomenon described by critics as an ‘epidemic,’ ‘clear-cutting’ and ‘mania’ of ‘slow violence’.⁷⁰ Since the late 1990s, about 2000 schools closed every year in the US, double the rate in previous decades: this represents 2% of all schools closing annually, impacting about 200,000 students at a time. In 2013, Chicago closed 49 primary schools, in what was the single largest mass school closing in US history.⁷¹ School closures have also swept through other countries, from Chile to Canada to China.⁷² Driven partly by demographic changes (i.e., fewer children in certain neighbourhoods), the twenty-first century school closure movement is also the dark underside of the heavy promotion by government, wealthy philanthropists and private sector entrepreneurs of education system marketization and privatization, by opening new charter schools (or free schools or academies) in place of neighbourhood public schools.⁷³

In some senses, the school closure movement is a phenomenon of ‘reschooling’ as opposed to ‘deschooling.’ Unlike the reforms described earlier – where the agenda is to remove people and practices from the higher education sector altogether, while fostering new learning opportunities in non-school settings – school closure is currently embraced as a central plank of education reform policy, in which schools said to be failing (inefficient, under-utilized or underperforming) are shut down and students are moved to other schools

elsewhere, many of which (in the US) are charter schools, all in the name of improving market efficiency and educational excellence.⁷⁴

However, critics of the school closure movement argue that, in practice, school closure also functions as a phenomenon of deschooling, in at least two ways. First, mass school closures tend to lead to higher dropout rates, as some students end up disappearing from the school system altogether.⁷⁵ Second, campaigners note that mass school closure policy fails to recognize the broader community ties and (public good) benefits that schools provide for local neighbourhoods, as it is driven by a narrow, privatized and individualized view of education focused on student test scores.⁷⁶ As Eve Ewing writes:

The decision to shuffle students from one building to another in the name of numbers ... is based on the premise that children, teachers, and schools are indistinguishable widgets, to be distributed as efficiently as possible across the landscape. But the fact is that schools are ecosystems, each with its own history, culture, and intricately woven set of social relationships. Schools are community anchors. They are not interchangeable, nor are they disposable. Schools are home.⁷⁷

One consequence of mass school closures is that 'education deserts' are being created in neighbourhoods throughout the US, where there are few or no local schools remaining; and these education deserts tend to be located in poor, black and Latino neighbourhoods. Matthew Shaw notes, for example, that in Chicago '*all of the forty-nine schools ... closed in 2013 served mostly low-income students of color*' and though '*African-Americans were forty percent of [district] students, they were *eighty-eight percent* of students affected by school closures*' (emphasis in original). Likewise, in Philadelphia, '*black students made up 58 percent of the district, but 81 percent of those affected by closures.*' Community groups in ten cities in the US have '*filed civil rights complaints with the US Department of Education about the disparate racial impact of school closures.*' At least in a spatial sense, universal primary and secondary education are at risk of existing no more, as local, predominantly low income, black and Latino communities across the country are effectively being deschooled.⁷⁸

Just like the attacks on higher education described above, mass school closures and the rise of education deserts need to be linked to the unravelling of the education fix of the global capitalist restructuring era: these are not simply the unfortunate side effect of education marketization and privatization. Pauline Lipman argues that school closures constitute part of a new mode of 'neoliberal urban governance by exclusion, a "form of economic, spatial and symbolic violence against the poor where hegemonic actors do not see the potential, need or possibility of organizing a more inclusionary [educational] enrolment strategy."' ⁷⁹ In the current context of extreme wealth polarization, limited numbers of high wage, high skill jobs and significant graduate underemployment, growing (racialized) segments of the population may be deemed to be 'surplus' to production (and consumption) needs of any kind in the global capitalist economy.⁸⁰ In such a historical conjuncture, universal investment in education across human populations and geographical space may no longer be seen as necessary or perhaps even desirable; as a consequence, we may witness the 'selective abandonment of education as a mechanism of social reproduction and legitimation in [low income and ethnic minority] communities that have become zones of disposability'.⁸¹

Alongside the phenomenon of school closure runs the parallel deschooling process of school exclusion. Schools in a marketized education system, that compete with each other for rankings and league table positions, often have an incentive to restrict admissions and remove or exclude students who are disruptive, difficult or costly, or who may have a negative impact on overall marks and exam scores. In the UK, this practice is commonly known as 'off-rolling,' defined as 'the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than the best interests of the pupil'.⁸² In England, Gill, Quilter-Pinner and Swift estimate that 35 pupils are permanently excluded from schools each day and 'tens of thousands' of pupils are excluded each year, including official and unofficial, legal and illegal forms of school exclusion.⁸³

Evidence is even emerging that some school leaders, paradoxically, are themselves acting as deschooling advocates – at least for children they would rather not have in their own schools. In 2013, a report from the Children's Commissioner for England found schools that 'encouraged parents to take their children out of school and educate them at home'. A follow up report in 2019 reported that there are schools 'where pro forma letters declaring a decision to home educate are kept at reception, ready for parents to sign when things at school get tough'.⁸⁴ Such encouragement is said to be a factor in the increase in homeschooling in England, where numbers of home educated children more than doubled from 2012 to 2017.⁸⁵ In such a context, the turn to homeschooling appears less as a form of liberation from state schooling that Illichian-inspired deschoolers hope it to be,⁸⁶ and more an alarming act of targeted state exclusion.

In general, students from marginalized socioeconomic, racial and ethnic groups, as well as students with special educational needs are particularly at risk of being excluded by or prevented from enrolling in schools in the first place. Black Caribbean children are permanently excluded from schools in England at a rate more than three times the national average, Gypsy/Roma children are permanently excluded at a rate six times the average, and low income children on free school meals are four times as likely to be permanently excluded as children not on free school meals.⁸⁷ Weale reports, too, that 'refugee and asylum-seeking children face long delays accessing education after arriving in the UK, in many cases because schools are reluctant to offer them a place over fears they will lower GCSE results and affect school leagues tables.'⁸⁸ Once again, all of this needs to be recognized not just as an unfortunate side-effect of school system marketization, but also as being driven by an ideological shift in which – as the education fix agenda of the previous agenda continues to unravel – the commitment to educate, school and include all children and young people is being eroded, and, at the local institutional level, often effectively abandoned. 'An essential principle of [universal] comprehensive education is a rejection of exclusion,' insists Searle: as significant numbers of schools are increasingly turning to off-rolling and other practices of school exclusion, it is precisely this universalist commitment to educating (or schooling) all students equally that effectively starts to disappear.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The rise of deschooling from above (and below) needs to be situated within the broader context of changes in the global capitalist economy. On the one hand, much of the deschooling from above agenda is driven by a neoliberal, privatized and marketized model of education policy reform, in which the core purpose of education is narrowed to serving the needs of the marketplace, and the marketplace provides the key tools and structures for reorganizing formal systems of education. The damages and exclusions caused by this neoliberal model of education can and should be critiqued forcefully. On the other hand, the deschooling from above agenda is also driven by crises and contradictions emerging from the unravelling of the education fix and 'neoliberal opportunity bargain' that drove the rapid expansion of formal education worldwide over the past several decades. These crises and contradictions are real, and as great a concern to anti-capitalist movements as they are to capitalist elites. Educational expansion – and the growth of higher education, in particular – has been driven primarily by promises of individual social and economic mobility that are not realizable for all in capitalist economies (and that are highly problematic as an ideal for social justice and basis for educational meaning and purpose in the first place). A blanket, reactive rejection of deschooling from above rhetoric that seeks to hang onto the schooling status quo fails to recognize the changing context of education in the current historical conjuncture. A new and alternative vision of education in relation to global society and economy is needed.

Deschooling from above thus raises both old and new questions about the relation of formal education to an ever-evolving global capitalist economy. It also returns us to a set of questions presented by Illich many decades ago about schooling as a social institution, and deschooling as a site of possible educational alternatives. Once again, there are two sides to this discussion. The fact that strong critiques of the limitations of schooling are currently being made across the political spectrum suggests that these are concerns that need to be taken seriously: problems of ineffectual learning, student alienation, empty credentialism, extensive wastage of time and resources, and failures to address social justice and equality imperatives. Many of the practical alternatives proposed by deschooling advocates, from both above and below, of personalised learning trajectories, experiential learning, practice based learning, home education, informal, de-institutionalized and open access networks of learning, and so forth, are, in and of themselves, often exciting and appealing options worth exploring further. At the same time, however, the very existence of deschooling from above, and the fact that similar kinds of critiques and alternatives to schooling are being promoted by elites with a deep investment in the contemporary global capitalist system, should give those engaged in projects of deschooling from below pause for thought. This may serve as a reminder that what is essential is not just the particular forms, processes and locations of educational practice, but the broader political agendas and ideological visions to which this practice is being harnessed.

More specifically, the claims, practices and visions of deschooling from above help to highlight what the social institution of schooling may be important for, and what is at risk of being lost if commitment to this institution is given up. Campaigns against school closure highlight a vital geographical and community character of schooling that is often overlooked by deschooling critics, who tend to focus on classroom matters of curriculum, pedagogy and

assessment: in many low income, racial and ethnic minority communities, especially, it is not clear that there are better, alternative types of social institution ready to fully replace this community role that many local schools now play. Protests against the deschooling of professional education point out the importance of having separate institutional spaces for education that can (potentially, at least) support forms of critical, theoretical, collective and public learning, which are often difficult or impossible to do when education is entirely practice, work, experience or context based (particularly when these are located in the broader framework of a global capitalist economy).⁹⁰ Public demands for universal higher education are at the heart of battles for social and education justice: it is likely that it will be lower income students and students from marginalized ethnic and racial backgrounds whose participation in higher education will be most negatively impacted, to the degree that the policy ideal of university (or college) for all is abandoned. Even if we concede that universal higher education may not be necessary nor sufficient nor even desirable as a social justice ideal, there nevertheless needs to be some alternative ideal offered of how education and (de)schooling, whatever form these take, can be harnessed to the goal of providing a universal public good that benefits all, not just an individualized and privatized benefit for an elite few.⁹¹

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