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Acknowledging the Struggle of the Other School as a Milieu for Mutual Inclusion

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In this paper I intend to discuss possibilities for children to mutually acknowledge each other's struggles at school and, with this, promote opportunities for inclusion. I argue that the school can be acknowledged as a milieu where various encounters take place, and these encounters can turn into educative practices if children are encouraged to acknowledge each other's struggles. I will discuss some aspects of the struggle which students in the West may face through what Nietzsche called "nihilism," that has a more existential bearing. I will explain some aspects of this argument through some scenes from the film This is England. Additionally, I will discuss other aspects of acknowledging students' mutual struggles by shared experiences, such as personal narratives, similar historical facts, or similar life events. These aspects will be explored using scenes from the film Shoplifters. I aim to conclude that struggle and suffering are part of the human condition and experienced in some way by everyone. Hence it could be a kind of common ground which schools could turn into educative practices for mutual acknowledgement and inclusion of students.

Key words: struggle; difference; nihilism; education; milieu

INTRODUCTION

One challenge for schools is how to facilitate ways in which students can acknowledge struggles faced by their peers who come from diverse backgrounds, or struggles faced by those with cultural, financial and health differences that can be completely alien to most of them. Children experiencing poverty, unemployment, cultural differences, survivors of domestic violence, those who have a physical or learning disability, among other situations, may face struggles that are unknown or not experienced by many students. Whereas many children may not experience any such issues, they may experience other struggles that may not be acknowledged as such. On the one hand, some children may experience struggles that are more visible, palpable, hence less challenging to identify; on the other hand, some may experience struggles that are more complex to identify, such as existential questions coming from the dissolution of values and foundation in the West, which Nietzsche called nihilism. According to Nietzsche, since the values of Western society entered into devaluation in which he called the "death of God" since modernity, the West has experienced a sense of meaninglessness and currently this feeling is being "substituted" by consumerism, where the education provided by schools focuses on preparing students to enter the labour market and, as a result, become consumers. Nietzsche points to the idea of an eternal "truth" having been lost; in other words, the foundations we once relied on have gone. Hence, questions of meaning, value of life and suffering have been concealed, and still not addressed, and so the idea of truth still exists in the Western culture, but

in a devalued form. These questions of the meaning and value of existence may generate some feelings and emotions that are difficult to grasp, particularly considering that the lenses by which we make sense of reality are still embedded on this idea of truth. We cannot forget to mention how technology and the use of electronic devices has had a significant impact on the lives of human beings and has played an important part in the unfolding of nihilism as argued by Ashley Woodward (2009). According to Woodward, the crisis of meaning is commonly associated with the acceleration of cultural and technological changes which can make people unsure about their place in the world and the meaning of their lives.

Additionally, a space where not only knowledge but also such complexities of the human condition could be problematised, which is the school, has focused its aims in the last decades mainly on raising standards and to channel students' efforts to pass exams and to achieve the grades that the labour market expects from them. The idea here is not just to critique how these ways in which the devalued forms of "truth" still remain and influence children since their childhood, but also to highlight how such ways continue to divert human beings from addressing the meaning and values that were lost when the fixed idea of truth lost its meaning to these devalued forms. These forms still evade questions about the complexity of human experiences in the immanent world and about the suffering and struggle felt by Westerns born in a world immersed in nihilism, and their experiences growing up and living with the devaluation of core values and foundation. Hence, despite many Western countries being able to promote the general welfare of a great part of their citizens, tackling extreme poverty and providing a minimum standard of life, core questions remain about a society in which values feel external to people. So, the struggle and suffering of living in a society without foundations persists. If many Western countries were able to shift their citizens from the struggle for survival to a minimum state of welfare in which they now do not have to compete to have their basic needs met, they still failed to address questions about suffering and existence. The struggles faced by children growing in a situation of exclusion in a society immersed in nihilism sometimes can be overlooked if these struggles are acknowledged only by certain lenses that do not address existential and foundational domains. It is important to question how this complexity, which arises from different ways of experiencing nihilism, can bring forth emotions that are more difficult to identify as it is not related to a more palpable or visible cause.

SCHOOL AS A MILIEU TO ACKNOWLEDGE STRUGGLES

The school is a place where most children spend a great part of their childhood, regardless of their background. As a result, school might uniquely be a place in which children from different ways of life and backgrounds meet in a way that may not be possible outside school's walls. In that sense, the school receives children who could be facing the most complex and diverse struggles. For example, the student who is facing a constant struggle as a result of the dissolution of foundations brought about by the nihilism examined by Nietzsche; students who are struggling to perform in their exams to get the grades that would allow them to progress to other levels and support schools to retain their places in the ranking; or students struggling to find their voices within an instrumentalised education environment. In that sense, Naoko Saito (2018) illustrates the existential, nihilistic feeling in higher education when analysing the book of William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* (2014). Saito argues that the book shows how the

crisis of young students in elite universities is not only a matter of higher education, but also involves a psychological and existential impasse peculiar to our times. Saito continues her analysis by stating that “What is distinctive here is the phenomenon of hidden, suppressed negative emotions—lack of passion about ideas, cynicism about education and toxic levels of fear, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation, the students have lost a sense of inner purpose” (Saito, 2018, p. 199).

Additionally, there are other kind of struggle faced by students, for example students from migrant families who are trying to adapt to fit in to another society, exiled from the values that were once familiar; students who are survivors of domestic violence or neglect; students coming from deprived backgrounds; students who have a learning disability who struggle to navigate the structures of a society not designed to accommodate fully their neurodiversity; and those who have physical disabilities, among others.

Education, then, could recognise this multiplicity of struggles, by acknowledging them and opening up the possibility for a dialogue. This dialogue would account for the multiple struggles faced by children, and the effects on their lives. It would acknowledge their suffering, and this could be a way to shift misconceptions of the other. It would also support the acknowledgement of the other in their complexity.

ACKNOWLEDGING STRUGGLES: THE CASES PRESENTED ON THE FILMS *THIS IS BRITAIN* AND *SHOPLIFTERS*

I would like to discuss how emotions and feelings can emerge from different kinds of suffering and struggles, and how the acknowledgement of these different forms of struggles can be a means to support the inclusion of difference.

I argue that, as defended by Nietzsche, suffering is part of our human condition, regardless of class, gender, age and etc. Hence, if students have opportunities to acknowledge their own struggles and the struggles of others, this could be a way to support the acknowledgement, and the inclusion of, difference.

I will bring forth scenarios from both films *This is England* and *Shoplifters* and discuss how the struggle and suffering expressed by characters in both films can support my claim that the recognition of struggle can be a valid and important way to acknowledge the other and lead to opportunities for inclusion at schools. First, I will provide a synopsis of both films and then I will describe the scenes which illustrate my arguments. Moreover, I will discuss how the recognition of struggle can be made by acknowledging visible aspects of the self and of the other, which is the example of the film *Shoplifters*, and non-visible aspects, which is the example of *This is England*.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PRESENCE OF STRUGGLES FROM (EXSISTENTIAL) ASPECTS

Synopsis

The film *This is England* (2006) is a British production written and directed by Shane Meadows. The film is based on events happening in 1983 and tells the story of Shaun, a

12-year-old, only child, adolescent boy who lives on a working-class estate with his widowed mother. Shaun's father had died a few months ago in the Falklands war. Shaun has the picture of his deceased father, wearing his army uniform, by the side of his bed, on top of a clock whose alarm goes off every morning. Hence the first thing he sees every morning is the picture of his recently deceased father. Shaun had some fights at school with other boys but seems not to receive support from the school with respect to this, or his recent bereavement. Shaun ended up being admitted as a member of a gang of skinheads, where he feels welcomed. After some tensions with another member, Gadget, Shaun finally bonded well with all members and they become like a family. One previous member of the gang, Combo, returns to the group after serving time in prison. Combo expresses extremist and racist views, and this causes a split in the group, as a result of which Shaun decides to follow Combo, and desert the part of the gang that did not have extremist views. Shaun, allied with Combo and his gang, starts stealing and also threatening the owner of the local off licence, who is from an Asian background. However, the items stolen from the off-licence are not items to fulfil basic needs, such as food and toiletries, but alcoholic drinks, cigarettes, and sweets. Combo and Shaun appear to form a strong bond, and Combo seems to somehow fulfil the male presence that Shaun's father had been before his death.

Shaun's struggles

Throughout the film, it is possible to observe potential sources of struggle experienced by Shaun. Emotionally, he is going through the beginning of his adolescence which brings lots of changes. He is at the same time experiencing bereavement, as he had recently lost his father, who seemed to represent a role model for him (minute 2). Shaun lives in a working-class environment, with his widowed mother who works to earn a living for both. Shaun has his basic needs fulfilled, which means a stable place to live, access to school and the community resources as well as a responsible adult, his mother, who is a protective factor. However, Shaun's mother has low financial resources. This brings another struggle experienced by Shaun, related to bullying. Shaun could not afford more fashionable clothes and for that reason experiences some bullying from other adolescents. One of these events happens when he is walking to school wearing old fashioned trousers and a small group of male adolescents say: "Nice flares, matey" and Shaun responds "p...off," showing his discontentment with the group's remarks (4 minute). Still in the sequence of this scene, Shaun reads a comic book in the off licence but cannot afford to buy it. He challenges the off-licence's owner when the latter asks Shaun to put the comic book back. Shaun only leaves the place after the owner threatens to call the police.

Shaun is bullied at school because of his clothes but seems to handle it. However, there seems to be a triggering element that brings Shaun to an uncontrollable level of anger, which leads him to physically attack others, regardless of their height or strength. This uncontrollable struggle comes up when negative remarks are made in relation to his recently deceased father. This is shown in minute 6 of the film, when Shaun starts a fight with a student at school when the male student makes derogatory and disrespectful comments about Shaun's father. The second time this uncontrollable struggle appears is at minute 44 when Combo mentions the Falklands war and Shaun physically attacks Combo as the latter's remarks trigger his feelings and anger at having lost his father in the Falklands. Despite being the youngest and apparently less physically

strong in the group, Shaun, moved by his anger, was able to physically challenge Combo where no other member of the group had dared. This wins the respect of Combo who then, addressing the other members, proclaims that “That little f... whipper snapper is setting the standard. What a gem” (minute 45). Whereas Shaun seems not to be listened to or having his struggles addressed by the school, it is in the group of skinheads where he feels listened to, where he can express his feelings and express himself without being judged. In this gang, he finds shelter, where disagreements happen but are resolved, and where he feels that he can be understood, which he does not at school or with his mother. It is also noted that Combo has many struggles and anger. He struggles with being rejected by a female member of the gang (minute 61 and minute 73), and to acknowledge that Milky, a mixed-race member of the gang, had a loving and caring family (minute 82). Despite living on a poor estate, Combo has his basic needs fulfilled of food and shelter. His struggles, in some way evidenced by his self-perceived lack of life opportunities, for which he blames immigrants, may have some relation to the nihilism, or absence of a foundation in the Western society, which entered into devaluation; as argued by Nietzsche. “What does nihilism mean? The highest values devalued themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why’ finds no answer” (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 2).

However, this anger felt by Combo is not addressed. Combo directs his anger and frustration to others, when they do not agree with his ideas/requests or when he judges that these others are the cause of his self-perceived lack of opportunities. This can be evidenced by scenes in minute 42 when Combo blames allegedly “foreigners” for the struggles of the working class, lack of housing and jobs. Later, when a politician gives a speech asking for the members of a nationalist party to fight for their country, this politician preys on the feelings of anger of the members. The politician induces his audience of frustrated, marginalised men to direct their anger towards what, in their view, is a threat to them and their country: foreigners. The anger is used as a fuel to achieve political means by inflaming separation and hate. The anger is directed to the other, the one that is not considered a member of the same group, in this sense, the foreigners. The origin of this anger, this struggle, is not addressed but its presence is acknowledged and channelled by the manipulation of these males’ feelings. Nietzsche (1986) has discussed how this way of understanding the world, dividing it in supposed opposites, could harm the quality of interaction with the world and with the other:

The general imprecise way of observing sees everywhere in nature opposites (as, e.g., “warm and cold”) where there are, not opposites, but differences of degree. This bad habit has led us into wanting to comprehend and analyse the inner world, too, the spiritual-moral world, in terms of such opposites. An unspeakable amount of painfulness, arrogance, harshness, estrangement, frigidity has entered into human feelings because we think we see opposites instead of transitions. (Nietzsche, 1986, p. 67)

Nietzsche has also discussed how the idea of separating us/not us as being proper of the spirit of resentment, which would lead to life-denying interactions:

while every aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says “no” from the very outset to what is “outside itself,” “different from itself” and “not itself”: and this “no” is its creative deed. This

volte-face of the valuing standpoint—this inevitable gravitation to the objective instead of back to the subjective—is typical of “resentment” ... its action is fundamentally a reaction. (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 10)

The kind of language based on a binary, oppositional way of observing difference reinforces perceptions that perpetuate the us/not-us opposition, and prevents a broader quality of interaction from taking place. Shane Meadows has acknowledged how popular movements and struggles could be misappropriated, distorted, and used to fuel separation for political gains. When writing the film, he said:

It is my own story, basically. Nineteen-eighty-three was the year I became a skinhead myself. I shaved my head, put on a pair of Doc Martens, and visited a tattoo parlour. It is a tragedy that 95% of people associate skinheads with racism. The whole cult was born out of a love for black music, and it was originally a very left-wing, socialist movement. It was only later that the National Front took the anger and frustration of its members and directed it towards minorities. I came from a white, working-class background, and I was constantly told that the Asians were nicking all our jobs. For a three-to-four-week period I believed it. But then I witnessed some appalling violence, and realised it was not true¹.

Hence, it is important to reflect on the importance that the nihilism discussed by Nietzsche could have in terms of acknowledging the emotions that it may bring. It is common that struggles as those identified in Meadows’ film are analysed in terms of lack of resources, unemployment, difference of classes or problems in the family only. I am not refuting this analysis as these issues constitute a great part of the struggle faced by students and as a society it is crucial to acknowledge those and address issues of social injustice. However, what I am trying to do is to offer another angle to widen the analysis in addressing the origin and growing of struggles faced by students. In fact, nihilism can affect all people living in the same society, regardless of their background as it affects the basis of a culture. Recognising that some of the struggles that young people experience might arise from this lack of foundations is important to address these issues and better support students.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PRESENCE OF STRUGGLES BY VISIBLE MEANS

Synopsis

The film *万引き家族* translated to English as *Shoplifters* (2018), is a Japanese production written, directed, and edited by Hirokazu Kore-Eda. The scenario happens in the outskirts of Tokyo and the film tells the story of a non blood-related family. The family is constituted by a grandmother (Hatsue), a mother (Noboyu) and father (Osamu) in their middle years, and three children (an adolescent girl (Aki) who is the only blood-related member to Hatsue), a pre-adolescent boy (Shota) and a young girl (Juri)). The family is involved in some non-traditional means to earn a living, such as committing petty crimes (shoplifting). The family lives in dire conditions, in an unkempt and poorly maintained privately rented flat and they struggle to make ends meet. The family experiences a high level of poverty despite being in employment; they shoplift

mainly food and toiletries, which are basic items for a human being to survive, and the father “teaches” shoplifting techniques to the young children. However, he keeps them outside the view of the government by not registering them at school, and by telling Shota that only kids who cannot study at home go to school. The young girl started to be “assimilated” into the family when one day Osamu and Shota saw Juri crying while sitting outside her family home. They took Juri back to their home and noted that she had marks on her body which were indicative of domestic violence. Juri also wetted the bed, which is also a signal of psychological/emotional struggle. Juri is then taught how to shoplift, and started to be cared for by this family which she is now part of.

The film provides thought-provoking scenes, particularly in posing the question: What constitutes a family? However, for the purpose of this paper I will keep my focus on the theme of struggle. My argument is that the acknowledgement of the struggle of the other may be a way of sensitising and to pave the way for educative practices of inclusion to emerge. I am paying special attention to the relationship that develops between the characters and am liaising that with the struggles they were facing but that were not acknowledged by other people.

Juri's struggle

Osamu and Shota had previously noticed that Juri was left in neglectful conditions at home, as Osamu mentioned to Shota “she is there again” (minute 4). It might be that several people had passed everyday through the same place where Juri was left, and they did not notice the little girl in her struggle, left with bruises on her own. However, Shota and Osamu seem to acknowledge the girl and offer support by giving her food and shelter, and by taking her to their unkempt, but somehow safer place. Hatsue then noticed that Juri was underweight, which means that she might not have been fed as often as she needed, and that she had marks and scars on her arms and body, suggesting physical abuse and neglect. That is when Hatsue mentioned “she is covered in scars” (minute 6). The scars are also noticed by Shota, who asks Juri how she got them (minute 17). Although Juri is only 5 years old and perhaps could not express her struggles and suffering as clearly as an older child or adults might do, her suffering is clear and visible. This is demonstrated by her low weight, marks of abuse on her body, and the visible signs of abuse, neglect, and deprivation. These struggles were acknowledged by people who were themselves at the margins of society, facing their own daily struggles to have even their basic needs met.

Emotional and physical abuse at home are noticed when Noboyu and Osamu try to take Juri back to the outside of her own family home. They hear Juri’s parents arguing and being violent towards each other. In one dialogue Juri’s mother says to her partner “I didn’t want to have her either” (minute 8).

Although being of young age, Juri is sensitive to the other’s suffering. Juri could express some of her pain when comparing her scars of burns in her arms with Aki’s when they were having a bath together (minute 48). Juri was touching Aki’s scar’s as recognising the pain that caused it, as she herself had also same scars. At that moment, of mutual acknowledgement of body scars Aki comments that they are the same. By recognising each other’s struggles, even coming from different life experiences, Juri and Aki could share similar things, acknowledging each other’s pain and find mutual comfort. Juri also does the same by touching her mother’s facial scars

(minute 101) but her mother does not allow the mutual bond to happen by asking Juri not to touch her.

Aki's struggle

Like Juri, Aki could recognise in others their suffering and struggles by acknowledging their body scars. Aki saw the scars of self-harming in one of the clients at her work and she could relate this with her own struggles as she had also marks of self-harming (minute 60).

Shota's struggle

Shota seems to have a strong bond with Osamu, however he never refers to him as “father” (this only happens at the end of the film when Osamu could not witness it). Osamu originally found Shota abandoned in a car, and this image recurs later when Shota looks for shelter in a car after running away from Osamu due to disagreements about Juri being with them (minute 37). Shota shoplifts with Osamu or with Juri and, with this, he gets daily food and toiletries for the family. Shota's physical presentation is poor. His clothes are not size appropriated. Shota does not go to school and he seems not to have ambitions in life apart from having his daily needs meet.

Osamu and Nobuyu's struggle

Osamu works part-time on a construction site but does not have worker's rights. When he has an accident and hurts his feet, he does not get worker's compensation (minute 22). Nobuyu is on a job share, so she works less hours (minute 25). Although both work, they have no welfare support or stable income, making them struggle endlessly just to make ends meet. They seem to have no goals in life apart from living and surviving each day. They seem to live each day as it comes. When Nobuyu is accused by the police of throwing Hatsue away as Nobuyu admitted burying Hatsue's body in the house's garden, Nobuyu says that that she did not throw Hatsue away. She, in fact, he had found Hatsue after she had been thrown away by her family. Nobuyo had then effectively “adopted” Hatsue until her death (minute 98). This may demonstrate that the situation of marginalisation and struggle that both Nobuyu and Hatsue found themselves in, were mutually acknowledged as they found a kind of shelter in each other's company.

CONCLUSION

Naoko Saito explains that “In many respects, this is an age of uncertainty when many people are searching for security and safety, yet without any absolute ground” (Saito, 2019, p. 479).

Hence, instead of looking for foundations, for a fixed worldview, we have the challenge of finding what is similar and what is different by embodying the diversity and the plurality of the world. This would account for the acknowledgement of different struggles that would allow diversity to be embodied by the other. The school, as a milieu of possibilities, seems to be one of the places in which such educative practices could rise and flourish.

It might be that in struggle, in suffering, and by recognising each other's suffering through different translations of emotions raised by opening up to the other, and recognising each

other's struggles and vulnerabilities, that children could learn from each other and develop a sense of mutual responsibility. Perhaps this could shed light on educative practices that emerge at schools as struggle and suffering are part of the human condition, and they are experienced in some way by everyone. Hence the mutual acknowledgement of struggles could be a kind of common ground which schools could turn into educative practices for the inclusion of students.

NOTE

1. See more information about this at <http://shanemeadows.co.uk/thisisengland.html>

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