The banality of education policy: Discipline as extensive evil in the neoliberal era

Introduction

> So much pressure has been brought to bear on schools at all levels to 'deliver content,' to 'hold people accountable' for achieving pre-set 'outcomes' – in short, for the production of predictable products measurable by the sort of standardized evaluation methods that are precisely not suited for the free act of thinking (Minnich, 2017, p. 9).

> The capacity to reflect becomes a source of pathology and suffering rather than moral and spiritual transformation when it is cut off from the network of worldly, intercorporeal relations that would otherwise support meaning by allowing subjects to become absorbed in something or someone other than themselves (Guenther, 2013, p. 199).

Education, at least in dominant media and political discourse[1], is often assumed to be a force for good, inextricably associated with hope and intimately linked to optimism about the prospects for better individual and social futures (Halpin, 2003; Tiainen et al., 2019). This assumption lies behind current anxieties about children's 'lost time' as a result of school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic. By contrast, in this paper, our contention is that a strong case can be made that education and education policy in the neoliberal era, far from being a pure force for good, is implicated in nefarious effects at multiple levels (Ball, 2020). These effects can be seen in the growing alienation of significant numbers of teachers and students from education at various levels (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018; Oleksiyenko, 2018; Tsang, 2018); they can be seen in the accusations that schools, in a range of global contexts, have been reduced to exam 'factories' (Coffield & Williamson, 2011; Hutchings, 2016; Kulz, 2017); and they can be seen in the growth of authoritarian models of schooling, involving 'zero-tolerance', 'no-excuses' disciplinary approaches. All these developments have undermined the presumption that education is an unquestionable force for good.

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[1] We are mindful that many minorities, such as Black and Traveller communities, do not necessarily see education, at least as far as it equates with formal schooling, as a source of hope so much as a source of oppression.

Neoliberal education policy is understood here as a policy regime aligned with the wider tenets of neoliberal politics and governed by its key logics of competition, instrumentalism and atomisation (Author, 2012; Davies, 2017). In line with these logics, individuals, institutions, sectors and nations are pitted against each other in the belief that this best serves the rightful aim of education, understood as the production of individuals, organisations and nations that can successfully compete in local, national and international arenas (Ball, 2012; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

The pressures associated with the neoliberalisation of education to ensure that schools and students achieve a predetermined set of standards have led to increasingly punitive behavior policies in many English schools. These policies are often defended in the name of social justice and announced with catch-cry labels such as 'no excuses' and 'zero tolerance'. They include practices such as the issuing of demerits, detentions or placement in isolation as punishment for even minor infractions of highly prescriptive behavioural and dress codes – for instance, for forgetting a pen or wearing socks of the wrong length. The argument is that discipline must be robust to ensure maximum productivity and minimal disruption (Dishon & Goodman, 2017). It is almost as if schools implementing these policies have been seeking to instantiate Foucault's notion of 'infra-' or 'micro-' penalty:

> The workshop, the school, the army were subject to a whole micro-penality of time (latenesses, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behaviour (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body ('incorrect' attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency). At the same time, by way of punishment, a whole series of subtle procedures was used, from light physical punishment to minor deprivations and petty humiliations. It was a question both of making the slightest departures from correct behaviour subject to punishment, and of giving a punitive function to the apparently indifferent elements of the disciplinary apparatus: so that, if necessary, everything might serve to punish the slightest thing; each subject find himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality (Foucault, 1977, p.?).

Our contention in this paper is that it is worth reflecting on the hidden costs of such infra-penal approaches in education. In particular, we are mindful of how, as Harcourt noted in the context of zero tolerance policing in New York, fuelled by so-called 'broken windows' theory, "the categories of the disorderly and law abiders, of order and disorder, limit our

horizon… we should refocus our attention on the numerous forces that contribute to declining neighborhoods, poverty, and crime, and that are masked by the aesthetic and rhetoric of orderliness" (1998, p. 389). These reflections are particularly relevant given the trajectory of zero tolerance policies in the USA, from prisons and policing into school systems such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP - https://www.kipp.org/), which have in turn served as exemplars for similar school models in the UK[2].

Zero tolerance policies have been prevalent in the USA since the late 1980s (Curran, 2019), where the Department of Education and Department of Justice overlap through a 'safe school-based enforcement through collaboration, understanding and respect' (US Department of Education and Department of Justice ED, 2016), thus entwining law enforcement and school discipline. There are similarly strict policies in China, where the intentions of disciplinary measures are to 'safeguard the dignity of children and promote the all-round development and healthy growth of students' (Ministry of Education, 2019). Education policy rules that punishment is an integral part of discipline, which itself is considered as a necessary means for teachers to fulfil their duties of education and teaching (Ministry of Education, 2019). Zero tolerance and no excuses polices are relatively new in the United Kingdom (notably England). To date, there has been no formal mandating of such policies in English schools but their growth has coincided with a rise in the importance placed on safety and risk management (Curran, 2019). More recently the English Secretary for Education, Gavin Williamson instituted Behaviour Hubs, comprising 32 lead schools who will work with schools to improve and develop behaviour management (Roberts, 2021). Williamson has since demanded that all schools ban mobile phones, ignoring the fact that many schools already manage mobile phone use, but again pushing the idea that there is an endemic behaviour problem in schools that needs managing, which feeds into the government's promised behaviour guidance due later this year (Weale, 2021).

In this paper we focus on the use of isolation in schools as emblematic of the new authoritarianism in English education – a phenomenon mirroring wider international trends (Giroux, 2015, 2017; Lendvai-Bainton, & Szelewa, 2020). Whilst punishment has always

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[2] Significantly, in June 2020 in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, KIPP dropped a number of its signature behavioural policies, such as the SLANT (Sit up, Listen, Ask and Answer questions, Nod, Track the speaker) approach to classroom discipline, acknowledging that as an organisation, it "came up short in fully acknowledging the ways in which the school and organizational culture we built and how some of our practices perpetuated white supremacy and anti-Blackness".
(https://www.kipp.org/news/a-letter-from-dave-levin-to-kipp-alumni/ accessed July 20, 2021)

been part of any education system, we take issue with the language used around isolation, which reflects attempts to redeem and 'respectablise' a practice usually deemed to be 'cruel and unusual' (Gallagher, 2014). Indeed, our argument is that these developments are manifestations of the spread of a form of evil —which, following Arendt and Minnich, we refer to as 'banal' or extensive evil — through significant parts of the body of education in contexts such as England and the USA.

In philosophical discourse, two perspectives have dominated discussions of evil in recent decades. On one hand, some have invoked notions of 'radical evil' to account for the excesses of power that marked the tragedies of the twentieth and twenty first centuries (see Bernstein, 2002). On the other hand, some insist that the question of evil is nothing but a redundant theological and metaphysical hangover from a bygone era; for instance, Frederic Jameson refers to 'the archaic categories of good and evil' (1979, p. 56). By contrast, and following thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Elizabeth Minnich, and Simona Forti, we adopt the view that one cannot adequately account for the damage and destruction wreaked on vulnerable lives in modern times without considering questions of evil; but in order to do so, evil needs rethinking in order to take account of developments in thinking about power, particularly Foucault's contributions to its conceptualisation.

In popular discourse, evil is typically conceived as something *extra*-ordinary. The genocidal horrors of the twentieth century are perhaps examples par excellence of this notion of evil. More recently, terrorist attacks in European cities have prompted politicians and media commentators (Bruton & Perrette, 2017; Lemieux, 2016) to use this word to describe – but also to distance themselves and other ordinary, 'good' people from – those individuals who planned and carried out these attacks. Our focus in this paper, however, is on a different register of evil—the *banal* as opposed to the *horrific*. In making our argument – that education systems are perpetrators of a form of evil that goes unnoted and under problematised beneath a layer of bureaucratic respectability – we draw, as clearly signaled in our title, on the ideas of Hannah Arendt (2006), as well as the work of contemporary philosophers, Elizabeth Minnich (2017) and Simona Forti (2014). We should note here that our paper is fundamentally a conceptual study, drawing on work in philosophy and political theory to make its argument. Whilst we do make some reference to government and school policies, these references are provided for illustrative purposes, rather than providing the

basis for the paper. Our intention is to publish subsequent papers providing detailed analyses of government and school policies that build on the current paper's conceptual foundation.

Arendt, banality and evil

While Arendt's thinking on the human condition and the nature of the political has had extensive take-up in education in recent years, offering invaluable critical conceptual resources for challenging the dismantling of the public in education (see Gunter, 2018), her notion of the banality of evil has garnered less attention. Gunter and Hall (2014, p. 83) used the concept to demonstrate problematic leadership discourses in schools, and how the justification of such nefarious practice is made by pointing to 'making the system work in an efficient and effective way is a reasonable defence.' We should note, however, that while we are indebted to Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, our overall perspective, unlike that of Gunter, is not one we would characterise as Arendtian. In particular we are wary of Arendt's scepticism with regard to 'the social', which she associates with 'the encroachment of bodies and needs' that serves to undermine an idealized view of 'deliberate action in the public sphere' (Brown, 2019, p. 49). For us, the social is a critical element in our view of a meaningful life as one that is lived relationally.

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

For us, the banality of education policy is reflected in the normalisation and, indeed, valorisation, under seemingly ordinary and everyday rubrics, of the exertion of extraordinary degrees of pressure on individuals and institutions. This extraordinary pressure is evident in particular performative requirements, such as those associated with the standards and accountability agenda (Ball, 2017), and prescription of minutely detailed pedagogic scripts and templates for teachers. It is evident in demands to comply with what is deemed acceptable behaviour for pupils, including adopting specific bodily positions when seated at desks or specific gaits when walking in the corridors (Dishon & Goodman, 2017).

Indeed, the banality of education policy is manifested in the extraordinary pressure that is routinely brought to bear on schools, leaders, teachers, parents and students, *at all levels*, in order to hold people accountable for achieving pre-set outcomes and to enforce the precisely detailed requirements of what are deemed acceptable practices, appearances, behaviour and comportment. In short, the banality of education policy involves cajoling and coercing individuals and institutions to comply with detailed, yet arbitrary and contingent, behavioural codes and performative requirements that are monitored and enforced through observation, measurement and evaluation methods, all of which comprises a system that is inimical to thinking as a free or non-coerced act of discernment and indeterminate judgement (Minnich, 2014, 2017). In order to develop our argument regarding the banal nature of education policy, the following section unpacks the relationship between the more familiar notion of intensive evil and what, following Minnich, we refer to as extensive evil in further detail.

Evil: intensive and extensive

The term evil makes routine appearances in media and political discourse. Typically, this occurs within the context of some atrocity, such as a terrorist attack (Lemieux, 2016) or the actions of a child killer (Archibald, 2020). The strategic intent of such discourse is to distance the warped, evil perpetrator from normal, decent people such as 'us'. By insisting that 'we' could never conceive or commit such heinous deeds, we allow ourselves the luxury of continued belief in the fundamental 'goodness' of normal humanity, thereby maintaining faith with the liberal view of the inherent goodness of humanity and the inevitability of progress (Gray, 2014). This version of evil we describe, using Minnich's (2014, 2017) term, as 'intensive' evil.

When compared to intensive evil, extensive evil is a less dramatic affair. Indeed, the crucial aspect of extensive evil is, as Minnich (2017, p. 88) explains, that it 'requires that it be conventional to do its work as one's job, daily, day after day, with supper at home and picnics on the weekend'. The critical point is that whereas intensive evil requires individuals who may be warped, sadistic, delusional and dangerous, extensive evil relies upon thoughtlessness and routinized behaviours:

> It just takes a practiced conventionality, a clichéd conscience, emotional conformity, susceptibility to small-scale bribery by salary, goods, and/or status, a sense of isolation,

and distrust of the reliability of others that works against taking a differing public stand. It just takes, that is, much of what in better times keeps a society provided with reliable and ambitious workers, status-anxious consumers, polite neighbors, agreeable team players, and citizens who make no waves: an ability to go along thoughtlessly, to play the game (Minnich, 2017, p. 2).

Such a dynamic involves the normalisation of new truths, new ways of governing and new subjectivities in accordance with the new normative parameters that, over time, become conventional. In neoliberal schooling, these parameters are typically produced by a drive for enhanced efficiency. This might be the most efficient posture for learning (Dishon & Goodman, 2017) *or* it might be augmented profitability, whether measured in relation to performance data *or* in more crude financial terms (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Alexander, 2009; Pring 2012). Crucially, this dynamic of normalisation requires viewing evil, not as some form of demonic drive towards death and destruction, 'but instead viewing the scenes of evil as powerfully inhabited by the will to life, as the result of an attempt to maximise life itself' (Forti, 2014, p. 9). This, in turn, requires removal of the complications, frictions and inefficiencies that hinder the steady and sustained unfolding of established practices and routines. Yet this maximisation of efficiency also involves forms of objectification that are inimical to freedom:

the desire to be free once and for all of all conflict in order to continue to live in tranquility actually makes us slaves of a utilitarian logic, which leads us to accept the identity that someone else imposes on us. It leads us to 'choose' to become what those who save want us to become. This is how we consent to making ourselves into a stable, fixed identity: making ourselves into something objectivizable, employable, useable, and replaceable (Forti, 2014, p. 233).

Following the work of Arendt, Minnich and Forti, then, an emphasis on the banal nature of evil focuses our attention on its bureaucratic and systemic, rather than personal and individual, dimensions. Relatedly, our intention here is not to blame or pathologise individuals but rather to highlight the role of systemic discourses and practices that have to a large extent become naturalised and normalised in schooling in England. We do of course recognise the interplay between the systemic (structure) and the individual (agency) levels in the ongoing (re)production of social reality. Our point is more that, while individuals may see themselves as enacting practices that are deemed to have moral value within the

understandings of the neoliberal education policy discourses that they are part of, the wider system that encourages and condones practices that, in phenomenological terms, represent 'an attack on the structure of being' (Butler, 2020, p. 138; Guenther, 2013). As Butler goes on to note, 'violence is what is perpetually subjected to an oscillation of frameworks that pivot on questions of justification and legitimacy' (2020, p. 138). This leads to situations where individual actions, motivated and justified by particular moral norms and values, may serve to entrench an order inimical to these stated concerns. This in turn reflects the wider character of 'neoliberalism as a form that contains practices and forces that appear as oppositional and yet get folded into a single order' (Muehlebach, 2012, p. 8). The links between banality and evil are explored further below.

The banality of evil and the evil of banality

There are certain works that render particular events emblematic of their times, thereby shifting the dominant discourse in relation to a particular topic (Forti, 2014). Hannah Arendt's 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*, is one such work. At first glance, linking evil and banality may seem odd and it is not surprising that Arendt's phrase caused a degree of confusion and outrage among her readers in *The New Yorker* when she coined it in her reports on the trial of Nazi functionary, Adolf Eichmann. On the face of it these reactions appear reasonable and justified; there would seem to be little that is banal about evil, while it seems ludicrous to attribute evil to banality (Minnich, 2017, p. 45). In recent years, Arendt's notion of the banality of evil has been dismissed as a cliché (Burleigh, 2012), challenged as being overdetermined by Arendt's views on totalitarianism (Lipstadt, 2011) or critiqued as grossly inadequate in relation to the scope and scale of Eichmann's crimes (Cesarani, 2007). Yet despite these criticisms, the linking of evil and banality remains illuminating, highlighting how, rather than necessarily being the outcome of individual malice, great harm may result from thoughtlessness in relation to ordinary routines, practices and behaviours, leading to systemic failures to recognise that, ethically speaking, things have gone seriously awry. As Eagleton (2010, p. 123) notes, for Arendt, understanding the nature of Eichmann's crimes requires that we recognise him as 'having neither depth nor any demonic dimension'; there was no 'diabolic of demonic profundity' but rather a certain 'remoteness from reality' (Arendt, 2006, p. 288). In its banality, such evil is perfunctory rather than pathological. Relating these ideas to education, we can see that when the context in which we operate emphasizes maintaining behavioural codes, maximizing

outcomes and prioritizing results above all other considerations, it becomes possible to use formal rules and administrative reason as justifications for particular actions (Gunter & Hall, 2014). When this occurs, we are subjected to 'a technology of will that requires a *willing submission… an act of submission that is explicitly narrated (and justified) as an act of volition*' (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 92–93); we are unwittingly encouraged to act as willing bureaucratic functionaries acting in the interests of the goals and purposes of our organizations and institutions. Yet, in so doing, we thereby deny our ever-present ethical agency and betray our attendant moral responsibility (Butler, 2005, 2006). In other words, 'what is most dangerous is not an insignificant bureaucrat who thinks he is God but, rather, the God who pretends to be an insignificant bureaucrat' (Zupančič et al., 2011, p. 97).

Of course, the lines in ethics are frequently blurred rather than clear cut. Just as neoliberal governments, in the name of notions like 'the big society', have encouraged compassionate, ethical citizens to engage in practices, such as volunteerism and charity, that contribute to the dismantling of the securities of the welfare state (Muehlebach, 2012), it is indeed possible that some people see certain models and practices of securing efficiency or outcomes as in-themselves ethical to the extent they satisfy wider notions of 'public accountability' or 'public interest'. Here we would argue that 'becoming ethical subjects... means being able to perceive a difference, the difference between life as it presents itself to us and life in its co-belonging with death' (Forti, 2014, p. 283). For the ethical subject, this co-belonging can be understood as a form of estrangement (Foucault, 1997; Roach, 2012), as 'the movement that distances it from the force of things, from the authority of politics, from the pressure of the desire for life. In a word it is the power to resist another power' (Forti, 2014, p. 284). Seen from this perspective, rather than being linked to individual depravity,

> evil is a system, in the sense of a tangle of subjectivities, a network of relations, whose threads knit together thanks to the perfect complementarity between (a few) wicked actors and originators, (a few) zealous and committed agents and (many) acquiescent, not simply indifferent, spectators (Forti, 2014, pp. 8–9).

In other words, banal evil is simultaneously mundane and everyday yet also detached and disinterested. At the same time, it is important not to confuse banality with harmlessness or innocence. Rather, banality is the depersonalised form that radical evil adopts in a mass age of anonymity and alienation. Significantly, banality has etymological links to abandonment and banishment and, as such, suggests a sense of having been forsaken, conjuring up images

of desolation and abjection (Rogozinski, 2011). These threads are picked up by Minnich in her notion of the evil of banality. Minnich (2017, p. 12) foregrounds how evil is frequently a mundane phenomenon that thrives under conditions of banality, 'when places, peoples, meanings have become enclosed, by walls, logics, bureaucracies, authoritative knowledge'. These conditions are all too frequently found in contemporary everyday life, not least in the policies and practices of institutions and organizations such as hospitals, prisons and schools, that are typically governed by thought-stopping master signifiers such as 'quality', 'standards', and 'excellence'. Such institutions typically insist on adherence to official policy and practice; they rarely recognise the possibility that they may be mistaken. As such they become breeding grounds of evil as banality. This is a form of evil involving, perversely, an 'excessive and depthless normality' (Hirvonen, 2011, p. 132), akin to the condition of unthinking identification with one's environment that Christopher Bollas (2018) characterizes as 'normopathic'. It is a form of evil that is characterized, as we have argued, less by demonic depravity than by uncritical acceptance, mundane thoughtlessness and habitual compliance.

Against this background, the following section of this paper considers the growing use of 'isolation' as a disciplinary practice in schools in England as an instance of evil as banality. As we write this, during the Covid-19 crisis, we recognize that 'isolation' has taken on a new popular meaning, in terms of quarantine, however, this amplifies the idea that isolation in schools is often used to separate the perceived danger from the rest of the school population. Our disquiet in relation to the growing use of isolation as punishment in English schools is based on several specific concerns. First, isolation involves a coercive attempt to discipline, constrain and ultimately reform the individual subject. In other words, isolation embodies a discourse that is opposed to notions of singularity, spontaneity, and unpredictability – elements which we see as essential to individual and social flourishing in a society not dominated by notions of compliance and conformity. Second, it frequently reflects a 'poisonous pedagogy' that disguises contempt beneath claims to act, with caring and concern, 'for your own good', as the title of Alice Miller's (1987) book puts it. Third, it each affects certain already-disadvantaged social groups and minorities more than others. Common to each of these concerns is a demand that teachers, students and their families unthinkingly comply with, and conform to, particular disciplinary practices, enacted in the name of a limited and limiting notion of education.

Banal discipline through isolation in English schools

It is easy to forget that mass schooling is a relatively recent phenomenon and hence to overlook what we now view as the typical school's historical contingency as a product of industrialisation and modernity (Donald, 1992). As institutions, schools are required to manage significant numbers of students within particular spatial and temporal constraints and specific ideological and behavioural expectations. Effective management of risk is essential. Put differently, as a consequence of their responsibilities in relation to the imparting of knowledge and the development of young people, coupled with the compulsory nature of formal education, schools necessarily embody and enact certain power relations. These relations are enacted via a series of aggressive-defensive strategies, involving an insistence on compliance, the systemisation of knowledge and the fragmentation of time and space (Bibby, 2010, pp. 26–29). Acknowledging these systems reminds us that the disciplining of minds and bodies is central to the work of schools and teachers, even as their imposition and maintenance inevitably engenders a degree of subversion and resistance from some students (and teachers) in response (Foucault, 2010).

Discipline and punishment, in some shape or form, may be an inextricable part of formal education; to imagine otherwise would be to indulge in the fantasy of the possibility of institutionalised education – as opposed to the wider forms of education highlighted by Bojesen (2020) – existing without power relations. However, recent years have seen the rise of zero tolerance, 'no excuses' approaches in many schools (Golann, 2015; Lopez Kershen et al., 2018; Sondel, 2016), as part of an approach to schooling that takes pride in traditional forms of hierarchy and that demands total obedience. Within this approach, independent thought and action are read as defiance and punished in a drive to create willing and compliant learners. Whilst zero tolerance has a longer history in the United States, it is an increasingly common, but less researched, approach in England. Its rise can be traced to the New Labour government which, as part of a drive to reduce inequality in education, introduced Academies to replace schools in deprived areas of England deemed to be underperforming. Aspiration became the panacea for inequality (Kulz, 2017) and efficient and strict discipline codes have come to be seen as vital to enabling disadvantaged students to acquire, and in time realise, particular aspirations (Khan, 2011; Stahl, 2018).

Strict behaviour policies are advocated by numerous high profile public figures, such as Tom Bennett, the so called 'Behaviour Tsar' for the UK government, who is now leading the aforementioned English Behaviour Hub Project. In his report to the government on behaviour, Bennett argues:

> Directing students to behave in a specific way is often mischaracterised as an act of oppression. This is both unhelpful and untrue. It is the duty of every adult to help create in students the habit of self-restraint or self-regulation. This must be mastered before students can consider themselves to be truly free (Bennett, 2017, p. 33).

For Bennett discipline appears to be a religious mission in which children must sacrifice their wilfulness and submit to the higher authority to become completely free. Compliance, Bennett (2017, p. 23) argues, is a rung 'on a behavioural ladder we hope all our students will climb, but it is a necessary one to achieve first'.

A key strategy deployed by many schools as part of such behavioural policies is the use of 'isolation'. Isolation, sometimes called 'inclusion', 'reflection' or 'consequences', comprises units or rooms to which pupils are sent when infringing the rules. Whilst some isolation rooms contain rows of desks, some contain isolation booths, separated from each other by solid wooden panels, at which pupils sit in silence on their own, often for many hours. A recent report (Mills & Thomson, 2018) found that forty percent of secondary schools employ isolation units, rooms or booths as part of their disciplinary policy. However, the emphasis of the report is on these schools using isolation or 'inclusion units' as a step or attempt to prevent formal exclusion procedures[3]. The use of isolation, in reality, is far more frequent than this would suggest, as belied by the range of 'offences' that lead to isolation, including 'inappropriate' haircuts (Mitchell & Kitching, 2018) wearing makeup or school uniform infractions.

While, as noted above, this is primarily a conceptual paper, as part of a related ongoing research project, involving discourse analysis of school behaviour policies, we drew on the

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[3] Formal exclusion in England includes fixed term exclusion where the student is removed from the school for 1 or more days and also permanent exclusion from a school.

2018/19 English Government data tables[4] to identify all the local authority secondary schools in North Yorkshire (eighteen in total), and all Multi Academy Trusts with five or more schools that provided a behaviour policy or guidance on their website (fifteen in total). We then collected behaviour policies, guidance and values statements from the school's websites. We also included policies from two free schools, Michaela Community School and XP School, who have written books on their culture (Birbalsingh, 2020; ap Harri & Sprakes, 2019).We conducted an initial discourse analysis of these behaviour policies and guidance documents to further understand the use of isolation in schools. Whilst only two Multi Academy Trusts have whole trust behaviour policies, other trusts offer guidance for their schools for developing their own policies, or they provide a general policy that allows the schools to detail their own system of sanctions. Within these documents it is clear that isolation is used widely, although often other terms are used, such as 'reflection', 'referral', 'inclusion', 'seclusion', 'exclusion', 'supervision' or 'consequence'. Some form of isolation is very common, featuring in the policies and guidance of nineteen out of twenty local authority schools and eight out of fifteen Multi Academy Trusts, but its purpose differs, as outlined below.

Sometimes isolation is used as Alternative Provision as a last resort before finally excluding a pupil from that school. In such situations, it appears common to involve some form of pastoral provision with this form of isolation. However, our preliminary analysis of behaviour policies shows that isolation is in reality more frequent and is used for a variety of disciplinary offences. It is this other use of isolation that we are interested in for the purposes of this paper: our analysis raises questions relating to the widespread use of isolation as stage management, which means that pupils can be put in isolation for repeated indiscipline, even where offences are relatively minor. Eighteen out of twenty-two full policies explicitly mentioned the use of an isolation room (or other such named room) used as part of staged management. It is seemingly common practice to have complex discipline policies that describe staged sanctions. Isolation is often stage four or five of sanctions that include a reprimand, temporary removal from the classroom and detention. Whilst isolation is seen as a

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[4] https://www.compare-school-

performance.service.gov.uk/?_ga=2.134376565.528764910.1619718271-961520985.1601041716

[accessed 15 April 2021]

serious sanction, it can be for a relatively minor offence such as uniform infraction that has been repeated two or more times. For instance, 'arriving to school in incorrect uniform or with an inappropriate hair style' results in a full day's isolation at one school.

Moreover, a key concern is that isolation affects some students and groups more than others. Mills and Thomson (2018, p.90) expose how isolation practices affect students with disabilities and mental health issues:

> For the parents interviewed in the case studies, the lack of understanding by mainstream teachers of mental health conditions was particularly distressing. Examples included a boy with a diagnosed mental health condition, for which he was attending a CAMHS unit once a week, being regularly excluded from school on behavioural grounds until he was permanently excluded and started at an AP. The mother felt her son was impacted negatively by the punishments given by the school, and that by the time he arrived in the AP 'it was in some ways too late for him'.

A report for the Inclusion Trust (Menzies & Baars, 2015) found a strong systematic structural bias in the use of isolation, with children from certain ethnic minorities three times, those on free school meals four times, those with special educational needs six times, and those with mental health issues seventeen times more likely to be excluded, either temporarily or permanently, from mainstream classrooms. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that children who have experienced trauma in their lives are more likely to display challenging behaviour, and unsurprisingly are more likely to experience isolation (Centre for Mental Health., 2020). As a result, the Centre for Mental Health expresses concern that these children may experience 'retraumatisation' when they are put in isolation (Centre for Mental Health., 2020, p. 7). The UK government has promised a review (that has still not taken place) regarding its guidance for the use of isolation booths after solicitors Simpson Millar (2019) took legal action after repeated calls from parents of children with SEND and mental health issues, who they believed had been harmed by being placed in isolation booths.

Proponents of no-excuses disciplinary regimes argue that they benefit minority ethnic and working class students by providing the necessary capital for such children to succeed, thus enabling disadvantaged children to close the gap in attainment between themselves and their peers (Birbalsingh, 2016; Watkins & Noble, 2013; Whitman, 2008). However, this is problematic, as it is not a simple case of bringing students up to standard and eliminating

defiance, students are expected to be willing, compliant subjects. Zero-tolerance policies are not necessarily a case of developing capital but converting students to becoming white, middle-class and able-bodied. In other words, isolation policies embody a 'white logic' which 'reinforces structures of white racial domination and deploys a narrative that obscures the mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality' (Lopez Kershen et al., 2018, p. 9) – as was publicly acknowledged in 2020 by the founders of the KIPP charter school network in the USA (see footnote 2).

Whilst some may see isolation as part of a capital building project, a place for rehabilitation, once placed in isolation, students are often effectively out of sight and out of mind as far as the schools are concerned. As the policy of one Multi Academy Trust puts it (Outwood cited in Perraudin, 2018 np), 'the rule when in detention and in the consequences room is occupy and ignore'. The policy goes on, in an unconscious homage to *Discipline and Punish*, to specify in precise detail the bodily comportment expected of those subjected to this form of punishment: 'Students cannot sleep or put their heads on the desk. They must sit up and face forward'. Moreover, 'when in the booths, children are not allowed to 'tap, chew, swing on their chairs, shout out, sigh, or any other unacceptable or disruptive behaviour'. Tellingly, the guidelines on lavatory visits reveals the expectation that children will spend whole days placed in isolation: 'You will be allowed to go to the toilet up to a maximum of three times during the day (maximum five minutes per visit)' and 'you must use the closest toilet and go directly there and back'. The banal, detailed physicality of such prescriptions is what Watkins and Noble (2013) argue is necessary to develop the hexis of pupils who are deemed as lacking the correct physical dispositions that would enable them to learn. Hexis, the embodiment of habitus, is inculcated in institutions tasked with socialisation, such as schools (Bourdieu, 2010); such bodily comportment, down to the angle of the head or the width of the smile, is instilled to ensure students understand their precise place in society. Whilst Watkins and Noble (2013) and Khan (2011) argue that such bodily imprinting is necessary for students to become akin to their more privileged peers – an argument that glosses over issues as to whose hexis is deemed worthy of reproduction and whose must be overwritten – the disciplining of the body within isolation makes it clear that the student belongs to a different class. Whilst some may argue that this is the point of isolation – a student needs to understand s/he has done wrong – when children are repeatedly put in isolation such bodily messaging is deeply problematic, reflecting a longstanding 'politics of humiliation' as a

means of social control (Frevert, 2020). As highlighted earlier, isolation often affects the already marginalised, and the continued separation of these students, rather than a more therapeutic approach of meeting their needs (Dix, 2017), is emblematic of deeper societal problems.

For us, such banal prescriptions, and the model of schooling these policies embody, reveal a concern with training rather than education, a privileging of unthinking compliance over creativity or critical thinking, and an obsession with the minutiae of conduct that ignores bigger questions regarding the purposes of education. As Golann (2015, p. 103) found in her research, whilst the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers was closed, it was at the cost of education, as schools focussed on producing 'worker-learners – children who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority – rather than lifelong learners'. Such a model of education is reproductive, rather than transformative, 'not intended to promote thinking at all, but simply to 'train' people, 'equip them with skillsets,' and so on – to prepare them to fit right into things as they are' (Minnich, 2017, p. 114).

The growing use of isolation booths in schools has not gone unchallenged. Parents have complained of the damaging effects on young people's psychological wellbeing as a consequence of spending hours separated from peers, highlighting the lengthy periods of time that children are sometimes required to spend in isolation for fairly minor infractions and characterising their use as 'barbaric'(Perraudin, 2018). In the face of such criticism, the language deployed by schools to manage debate and discussion of this issue is instructive and revealing. Many schools have sought to utilise alternative language and, instead of using the term 'isolation', with its echoes of solitary confinement – something recognised as a particularly cruel and harsh punishment in prisons (Guenther, 2013) – talk instead of 'internal exclusion' as a counterpart to external exclusion in the form of suspension or expulsion. Some have gone further and, in the best Orwellian traditions, restyled isolation booths as 'inclusion' booths, presumably because students placed in the booths, even though they are removed from the social and educational space or the classroom, are not technically 'expelled' but remain instead within the school.

This twisted, topsy-turvy logic, whereby exclusion is reframed as inclusion, has echoes of the timeless lines used to justify sadistic infliction of punishment and pain on children, embodied

in expressions such as 'this is for your own good,' or 'this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.' But more broadly, such policies also represent an assault on thought and language by subordinating them to ideological agendas that cannot allow any space for thinking, lest the logic holding them in place begins to unravel. As Britzman (2003) argues, in group settings – of which institutions like schools are a classic instance – it is all too easy for language to be stripped of its symbolic qualities – the very qualities which enable it to serve as a medium of critical reflection – and it becomes reduced instead to a mode of action. This is particularly evident in school settings where commitment to a strong ideological position, such as zero tolerance, is required of all individuals. As Britzman (2003, p. 114) puts it,

> zero-tolerance policies foreclose the capacity for symbolisation and metaphorical knowledge… when symbolisation cannot be thought, the symbol no longer represents the object, instead it becomes the object. When this occurs, perceptions of the world become more and more literal and aggressive, and the capacity for thinkers to think is attacked.

Significantly for our argument in this paper, this assault on thought and language is an instance of the way seemingly banal policies promote practices that stifle dissent and enable the perpetration of symbolic and psychological violence on young people. As we have argued, such violence is not a consequence of radical evil or of some demonic conspiracy. Instead, it is banal, a consequence of the way

> our minds – and all too often education designed only to inform and train those minds – want to substitute banal clichés, insider and technical language, regulated logics (numeric, for example) for thinking to keep sharable, intellectual emotional lives on track, without friction (Minnich, 2017, p. 115).

This is surely a misguided agenda and a doomed enterprise; yet tragically, evidence suggesting as much is likely to be rejected, refused and reinterpreted as grounds for an ever-more emphatic insistence on adherence to education policy as banality.

Isolation and the wider zero-tolerance behavioural policies it embodies are a good example of what Minnich (2017, p. 103) calls 'of course politics'. In Foucauldian terms, when a truth is produced within an episteme, that is within a matrix of historically shaped a priori knowledge that grounds truth and represents the conditions of possibility for meaningfulness within a particular epoch. Not only does truth become taken for granted but it also becomes the grid of

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intelligibility through which people see the world, the government and themselves (Foucault, 1980). Authoritarian behavioural policies in education have become, in just a few years, a new 'evil episteme', a new norm(ality). This has all occurred with little fanfare or resistance; as Minnich (2017, p. 103) notes, 'it is all part of normality and it is not done by devils incarnate. It is done by respectable citizens and job holders right out in the open, with legal and political support'.

In some ways, many of these policies in education are 'hidden' behind seemingly neutral concepts, like efficacy, efficient management, order, discipline, rationality, and so on. And as part of this development, isolation as an educational policy and its effect on the educational processes and practices, have become banal, ordinary and part of everyday life. Further, most importantly, with this banalization they have become, on the one hand, more and more invisible and, on the other hand, more and more difficult to contradict and question. As Minnich (2017, p. 107) reminds us, 'The ordinary and widespread is essential to extensive evils […] it is hard to see, to name and harder to stand against'. As such, battling against banality presents a formidable challenge for those who wish to resist the new norms.

Conclusion: The importance of thinking in education

> What I propose, therefore, is simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing (Arendt, 2006, p. 5).

It is nearly sixty years since Eichmann's trial prompted Arendt to coin the phrase, 'the banality of evil', thereby drawing our attention to the mundane dimensions of nefarious practices. Since that time – aided and abetted by the powers of computer technology, the pressures of performativity and the attendant cult of managerialism – the bureaucratic machinery governing areas of social practice such as education has developed to levels of sophistication that would have been unimaginable to previous generations of educators. This paper has argued that in order to come to terms with the moral dimensions of the 'brave new world' in which, as educators, we find ourselves, we require a perspective on education policy which recognises how evil is frequently a mundane phenomenon that thrives under conditions of banality.

As repeatedly emphasised, we are not arguing that any individual, involved in these banal practices, is evil. On the contrary, we recognise that many educators and politicians are acting

out of a sense of benevolence, a desire to improve the situation for their students. However, acting from a place of benevolence does not necessarily escape evil, for, as Butler (2016, p. 177) argues, 'moral sadism is a mode of persecution that passes itself off as a virtue'. Critically, we are concerned that contemporary education policy's orientation to disciplining 'unruly' subjects through isolation, typically targeting individuals from disadvantaged communities, punishes a particular sector of society, whilst passing over, and hence strengthening the standing of, the offspring of the most powerful and rich. Those who are unable to maintain appropriate self-discipline are to be pitied and reformed by their superior saviours. Such paternalism is necessary, according to Whitman (2008), for whom those in poverty need more rules and accountability than their more affluent counterparts. Yes these discourses of discipline encourage further acceptance of the abjection of the marginalised. People are divided into those who are willing to comply with the neoliberal discourse and those who refuse or who are unable to adhere to the regime, who often, as Ahmed (2014) points out, are those who are not part of the dominant class. The consequent justification for banal policies and practices is based on the apparent truth that the marginalised must be disciplined as they are morally and physically unable to fully function as human beings in a neoliberal world.

The problem arises from a policy environment in which individuals are discouraged by powerful and pervasive systems of sanctions and rewards from stopping to think what they are doing and questioning the categories, practices and processes embodied in institutionalized language and discourse. The individual is subsumed by and subordinated to the institutional. 'Evil becomes the understanding of a person through the frame and the effect of general speech, whereas the experience of oneself as unique can protect us from such evil' (Bertolino, 2018, p. 33). This unique self, experienced corporeally, singularly and in relation to others, is distinct from the subject of legal representation and political discourses and offers a starting point for resistant discourses and practices. But such resistance also requires a critical sensitivity to the instrumental co-option of individuals as the means to others' ends. We hope that this paper has contributed to the development of such sensitivity while also embodying the Arendtian charge to think what we are doing and to continually interrogate seemingly banal policies and practices.

Zuboff (2019, pp. 53–54) argues that 'meanings we take to be positive or at least banal – she points specifically to 'the open internet', 'interoperability' and 'connectivity' – have been quietly harnessed to a market process in which individuals are definitively cast as the means to others' market ends'. Similarly, we can see such banality intimately entwined with slippages in language, such that, for instance, 'isolation' becomes 'internal exclusion', which then becomes 'inclusion'. In this way, practices that might provoke moral condemnation are recast as being, not only for the benefit of the individuals subjected to them, but as necessary for the instrumentally-conceived flourishing of the overall social and educational system. As such, the banality of education policy, and in particular the disciplinary codes we have analysed in this paper, leads us to overlook the evil inhering within it and the violence and subjugation meted out to individuals that it legitimates.

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