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Are We Ready for 'School' Abolition? Thoughts and Practices of Radical Imaginary in Education

David Stovall

The following document seeks to engage a set of questions traditionally associated with the organized, grassroots activist and scholarly resistance to abolish the prison industrial complex (PIC). While new directions of this inquiry have challenged us to think about a school and prison nexus (Davis, 2003; Meiners & Winn, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008; Schnyder, 2010,; Sojourner, 2016; Wun, 2015), like prison abolitionists, we should also entertain a process that is willing to “demand the impossible” (Ayers, 2016). Claims to this end include a reframing and revisiting of ideas that clearly delineate the difference between ‘school’ and education. Utilizing the ideas offered by proponents of prison abolition, I consider traditional ‘school’ in its material and ideological form. It should be considered part of a radical imaginary in that it seeks to understand the world in its current state while vehemently working with others to change the current condition. In this instance, ‘school’ as an US institution primarily rewards students for order and compliance, which should also be considered part and parcel of the larger projects of settler colonialism and white supremacy/racism. Similar to the rationales provided to us by prison abolitionists, the call in this document is for radical educators to challenge themselves to think of ‘school’ beyond the building that houses young people for 8-10 hours a day. Imperative to the separation of ‘school’ and education, ‘school’ abolition in this sense seeks to eliminate the order, compliance and dehumanization that happens in said buildings while allowing for the capacity to imagine and enact a radical imaginary. In the spirit of scholars willing to engage in an abolitionist future (DuBois, 2014; Meiners, 2011; Rodriguez & Davis 2000; Richie, 2015), I am intentional in my attempt to challenge conventional thinking around what we currently know as ‘school.’

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'School' v. Education

Similar to the take of prison abolitionists, it should be understood in the practical sense that we are not talking about the destruction of buildings currently used as schools in the immediate future. Instead, what I am suggesting is a systemic account of 'schooling' in historically disinvested and isolated communities. 'School' is placed in parentheses because I am thinking beyond the school's physical space. As an ideological and material formation, 'school' in its most familiar form is not connected to any project of liberation. 'Schooling' in this sense is "is a process *intended* to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements" (Shujaa, 1994, 15). For some groups, and parallel to prisons, this idea is steeped in containment, control and isolation. Directly contrasting the idea of 'school,' Shujaa considers education to be "the process of transmitting from one generation to the next knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs and all things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness" (ibid). Because 'school' in its current form seeks to impose the assumed beliefs and cultural values of White, Western European, protestant, heterosexual, able-bodied cis-gendered males as the normative standard, education also includes the rejection of the aforementioned. Education in this form also becomes the political exercise that seeks to end repression while simultaneously supporting the capacity of historically oppressed and marginalized peoples to think and create.

In the most practical sense, I often place a question to my high school and college students about what makes a good teacher. Once they start to identify what they did for them as students (listening to them, challenging notions of deficits, caring for them, positioning families as equitable partners in the education process, etc.), I ask them a second question: *are they good teachers because of the school system or is it something else*. After more conversation, I ask them do they think those teachers are skilled because they reject common notions of school. In short, *are they skilled at what they do in spite of the system?* Going deeper into the analysis, I ask *them how much of what they do as good teachers do you think was learned in 'school'?* Because these teachers committed themselves to a process of education over the traditional expectations of schooling, I am placing their work in line with prison abolitionists in that they embrace a radical imaginary. In looking at the 'school' for what it is, these teachers dared to imagine another space for their students and engaged a process to build it. Where these efforts sometimes are thought of as singular, one-off individual efforts, the more I engage people in different locales throughout the U.S., I have come to find that there are people who have made both individual and collective attempts to reimagine 'school' through a commitment to education. In recognition of this dynamic, a 'school' abolition, similar to prison abolition, would seek to end the conditions that sustain and support white supremacy through a endemic system of training rooted in dehumanization (Spring, 2010). At a practical level, a question that should be considered for the

remainder of this document is as follows: *given the constraints and foundations of state-sanctioned violence as 'schooling,' can education happen in the institution commonly known as 'school'?*

For the purposes of this account, my questions are less ideological than they are practical, given the current conditions of many schools in urban centers. Understanding the systemic positionality of Black and Latinx youth as disposable, a radical imaginary challenges us to think about the world as it is while committing to a process that systemically changes it. Dumas captures the conundrum succinctly in his account of school as a site of Black suffering.

Schooling is not merely a sight of suffering, but I believe it is the suffering that we have been least willing or able to acknowledge or give voice to in educational scholarship, and more specifically in educational policy analysis. (Dumas, 2014, 2)

Embracing this dynamic has the greatest opportunity to shift our thinking to one that allows for a re-tooling of the practices used to oppose state-sanctioned violence in the form of school. For these reasons, the suggestion here is to approach the dynamic of 'school' abolition as one that challenges the idea that what happens in 'school' is intended to support those who have historically had the least.

We should also understand that in many ways, this document does not necessarily purport anything "new". Instead, my attempt here is to call on the age-old practices invoked by oppressed peoples across the planet to claim liberation from the tyranny of white supremacy, colonialism, imperialism and other forms of state sanctioned violence. Rodriguez is correct that the assumption of the 'school' for marginalized people under imperialist colonial rule is that its function in the project of nation building is "reformable, redeemable and forgivable" despite the carnage of Black and Brown bodies left in its aftermath. Through a rhetoric that peace "requires a normalize, culturally legitimated proliferation of state violence", 'school' becomes the conduit by which to justify the genocidal practices of the nation-state (Rodriguez, 2008, 11).

Given the perceived totalizing power of the state, education represents the resistance to state-sanctioned violence. From slave rebellions in the Western Hemisphere to maroon movements in the Caribbean in the 18th and 19th centuries to the Zapatista Movement of Chiapas, Mexico to Quilombo movement of Brazil to the most recent iterations of the Movement for Black Lives (Black Lives Matter), there is always a demand to build and create in the face of extreme repression. These fugitive spaces are imperfect, but are necessary in reminding us of our capacity to do things differently. In the process of creating different spaces, a process of 'school' abolition should be considered part of Harney and Moten's concept of an undercommons. Operating as the space that is created for the purpose of reimagining and building outside of the current system for survival and self-determination, their discussion of justice and debt is extremely timely, as 'school' is now considered to be a product to be exchanged on the free market.

Justice is only possible where debt never obliges, never demands, never equals credit, payment, payback. Justice is only possible only where it is never asked in the refuge of bad debt, in the fugitive public of strangers not communities, of undercommons not neighbourhoods, among those who have been there all along from somewhere. (Harney & Moten, 2013, 63).

A 'school' abolitionist interpretation of this quote would replace "justice" with "education" and "debt with "school."

Education is only possible where school never obliges, never demands, never equals credit, payment, payback. *Education* is possible only where it is never asked in the refuge of bad *schools*, in the fugitive public of strangers not communities, of undercommons not neighbourhoods, among those who have been there all along from somewhere.

In the spirit of Harney and Moten's recognition of the ability of marginalized and isolated peoples to resist, 'school' abolition is a challenge with an uncertain, but necessary future. The remaining pages, in an attempt to push my own thinking, is one that seeks an abolitionist future, attempting to reconstruct "the structures and traditions that safeguard power and privilege, just as much as taking down those that visibly punish and oppress" (DuBois in Meiners & Winn, 2010, 273).

Lessons from Prison Abolitionists

Scholarship over the last 40-plus years on prison abolition provides context for the thinking around 'school' abolition. As some of the earlier work centers on the reform of prisons, seeking to end the "degrading, humiliating, alienation-producing character of prison" (Mathiesen, 1986, 91). Where this is viewed as a constructive start in rethinking the prison, my work aligns itself with the radical emergent trend, seeking to understand abolition from a societal level. This strand of scholarship reaches back to W.E.B. DuBois' analysis of how Reconstruction represented an abolitionist democracy, in that it called for a rethinking of social landscape. Given the instances of wrongful imprisonment for petty and arbitrary crimes (i.e., mischief, insulting gestures, cruel treatment to animals, collaborating with Whites, etc.) in the years directly after the Civil War, Southern slave states sought to control the bodies of newly manumitted Black people (DuBois in McLeod, 2015, 1188). As Black people were wrongly imprisoned and often could not pay the fines associated with their imprisonment, many were leased to corporations to build railroads and other forms of infrastructure. Commonly known as the convict leasing system, many people who were imprisoned served inordinate sentences, disallowing their re-entry into society and the right to engage in employment that would support self-sufficiency. Given the prison's deeply entrenched relationship with chattel slavery and the convenience clause of the 13th amendment that ends slavery "except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted" (U.S. Constitution), abolition stands to interrupt the commonly accepted trend of overrepresentation of people of color in prison.

Borrowing from a conversation between prison abolitionist scholars Angela Davis and Dylan Rodriguez, prison abolition should be considered a long-term project. In their exchange, Davis reminds us that

Prison abolition, like the abolition of slavery, is a long-range goal... an abolitionist approach requires an analysis of “crime” that links it with social structures, as opposed to individual pathology, as well as “anticrime” strategies that focus on the provision of social resources... prison needs to be abolished as the dominant mode of addressing social problems that are better solved by other institutions and other means. The call for prison abolition urges us to imagine and strive for a very different social landscape. (Davis in Davis & Rodriguez, 2000, 215)

For these reasons, abolition is also centered in the explicit interruption of the belief of the Black body as permanently criminal and deserving of gratuitous punishment in perpetuity (Sexton, 2016; Wun, 2015). In the same vein, ‘school’ abolition should also be a long-term goal, centered in the activity of students, parents, teachers, and activists to revisit and build an abolitionist future in education. Abolition, in this sense is “not a utopian dream, but a necessity” (Meiners, 2011, 5).

From the School-to-Prison Nexus to ‘School’ Abolition

Over the last decade I have taken to the work of education scholars engaged in the work of prison abolition and the ending of what is commonly known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (STPP). Similar to scholars in the mid 1990’s who took the contributions of legal scholars in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and applied them to education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997; etc.), a set of educational scholars are engaging in a similar task in using prison abolition scholarship, advocating for an end to STPP. As STPP is thought of as a “consequence of schools which criminalize minor disciplinary infractions via zero-tolerance policies, have a police presence and the school and rely on suspensions and expulsions for minor infractions”, we have reached a moment that needs to intensify the dynamic (Heitzeg, 2009, 2). Where the language of STPP has been championed in many organizing spaces and grassroots organizations, I take the work of Krueger and Rodriguez to reframe the dynamic as a school-prison nexus (Krueger, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008).

Within the schooling regime/prison regime nexus, many are taught into freedom in order to administer, enforce, and passively reproduce the unfreedom of others, while some are trained into a tentative and always-temporary avoidance of unfreedom, meagerly rewarded with the accouterments of civic inclusion (a job, a vote, a home address. (Rodriguez, 2008, 12)

Instead of viewing the ‘school’ as a place that potentially leads to prison, I agree with Krueger and Rodriguez that depending on the particular instance, the school operates as a jail, hence a nexus between school and prison. If you think about a place where students are punished if they do not walk on demarcated lines in the

floor, are required to remain silent during lunch, required to wear uniforms (including clear backpacks), subject to random searches, and are fined for being out of uniform, this place is not “leading” you to prison. Instead, we should understand that space as an operative prison, with the main difference being that you are allowed to go home every afternoon. As prison abolitionists understand prison as a corrosive, deadening place intended to dislodge people of color from social fabrics that affirm and protect their existence, ‘school’ in the traditional sense should be considered in a similar vein.

In my home state of Illinois, one of the wealthiest school districts in the state, Winnetka School District 36, spends \$19,774 per student (<http://www.ilraiseyourhand.org/statefunding>). Conversely, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice spends \$111,000 per incarcerated youth (<http://northernpublicradio.org/post/illinois-spends-111000-jail-each-young-offender>). Despite the alarming data points, there’s another point that is just as poignant. The Winnetka School District is over 85% white. The Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice is 77.9% Black and Latinx (64.6 and 13.3% respectively) (Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, 2015). If it costs five times less to educate young people in a district with one of the highest expenditures than it does to incarcerate a population that is currently primarily Black and Latinx, how can we not understand the school and prison nexus as a continuation of genocidal state-sanctioned violence in the name of safety and security? As Illinois provides one example of exorbitant expenditures for youth incarceration, it should be noted that there are similar situations in Pennsylvania, California, Texas, Florida and Louisiana. As Black and Latinx youth in urban centers are pushed towards the educational track of low-wage service sector disposable employment, this process is one deserving of abolition.

In light of the oppressive conditions, ‘school’ abolition should also include a pedagogy that dares to teach “against the carceral common sense” while also asks “the unaskable, posits the necessity of the impossible, and embraces the creative danger inherent in liberationist futures (Rodriguez, 2008, 12). By ridding ourselves of the constraints of “age appropriate material” and high stakes testing, an embrace of the politics of abolition is no longer safe by definition. Instead, it is imbued in perpetual risk. Nevertheless, historical and contemporary iterations of ‘school’ abolition reveal themselves in the work of the Raza Studies Program of Tucson, Arizona, Students at the Center in New Orleans Louisiana, the Pin@y Education Partnerships of the Bay Area and the Peoples Education Movement (Los Angeles and Bay Area). Where some of these formations may not consider themselves to embrace an abolitionist politic, all share the idea that the current ‘school’ system continues to justify slavery, genocide, and wrongful land appropriation.

Abolition and the Future of Education

In learning from our comrades who are engaged in the project of prison aboli-

tion, it should be understood that in the practical sense we are not solely talking about the destruction of school buildings. Instead, the demand is for a systemic account of ‘schooling’ in historically disinvested and isolated communities. Because these spaces are primarily populated by low-income/working class people of color, we must also contend with the idea that this population has historically been declared disposable by the state. In recognition of this dynamic, a ‘school’ abolition, similar to prison abolition, would seek to end the conditions that sustain and support white supremacy through an endemic system of training rooted in dehumanization and white supremacy. Where the terminology leaves more questions than answers (i.e., what do we call the places where education happens if we are abolishing ‘school’?), we must also be careful that ‘school’ abolition does not go the co-optation route of the language of ‘social justice.’ Once thought to be a radical term, the term now encompasses a loose description of actions that may or may not be connected to the development of conditions that allow people to self-determine the justice condition. As Meiners reminds us to be deftly cognizant of the prevailing opportunity for state actors to appropriate our justice work, it will be critical to remain steadfast in making sure that ‘school’ abolition is reduced to mere reform strategies (Meiners, 2011, 9).

Because this is a call to both build and resist, we should understand that the response to detract and upend the movement for ‘school’ abolition from the state to be imminent and in perpetuity. Earlier iterations of abolitions have received drastic responses from government. State legislation was developed to end Raza Studies in Tucson *despite* demonstrated educational gains. Teachers are fired for engaging in acts of resistance to support the education of their students. In many instances, these teachers are often women of color. Ethnic studies departments in universities across the country are perpetually under threat of closure. Because this work suggests risk, a process to this end echoes the sentiment of Michael Dumas’ comments on the challenge to educational researchers that operate from a critical perspective.

We need to pursue a similar project in educational research—scholarship that vividly reveals the nature of racial suffering in schools and incisively analyzes the infliction of power on racialized bodies, yet insists that this is hardly a surprise ending to generations of racial assault. (Dumas, 2014, 26)

Because ‘school’ abolition at this point is primarily conceptual and incomplete, below is a set of considerations to engage in the attempt to build spaces where education is supported over ‘school’. I am reminded by a colleague that an abolitionist politics makes the point clear: after all that has been done to us, what else can the oppressor do? For these reasons, we cannot live in fear of the state. Instead, we should expect them at every instantiation of our work. At the same time, I agree with Rodriguez in that “no teaching formula or pedagogical system finally fulfills the abolitionist social vision.” He is correct that “there is only a political desire that understands the immediacy of struggling for human liberation from precisely those forms of systemic violence and institutionalized dehumanization that are

most culturally and politically sanctioned... within one's own pedagogical moment (Rodriguez, 2008, 14). For these reasons and the myriad of others, the following suggestions should be considered a humble continuation of the work put forward by my colleagues in earlier iterations of educational justice work.

1. ***Challenge and resist the proliferation of corporate charter school networks in historically disenfranchised communities.*** As New Orleans Louisiana has served as ground zero for corporate charter school proliferation, Philadelphia, New York City, Chicago and Newark, New Jersey are witnessing an exponential growth in corporate charter networks. A number of community organizations have collectivized their efforts to resist the growth of charters.

2. ***Build resistance in communities and amongst educators against vouchers.*** The recent appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education under the Trump administration is of particular importance as she prepares to provide incentives to states in support of vouchers for private education. Mired under the problematic rhetoric of 'choice', vouchers siphon public dollars from state general education funds, leaving fewer resources for public schools.

3. ***Build resistance in communities and amongst educators against teacher merit-based pay.*** Where the push for merit-based pay has died down somewhat, we need to remain on watch for the debate to reveal itself once more. The new DeVos administration has championed the idea of providing salary incentives to teachers based on student test scores.

4. ***Support efforts to challenge the proliferation of high-stakes standardized testing in historically, disinvested, marginalized and isolated schools.*** The organization Fair Test has served as the vanguard against high stakes testing in schools. Their support of performance-based assessment eliminates high-stakes testing based on a singular performance. Over the years high-stakes testing has not proven to be beneficial for students of color in urban areas who have been isolated and marginalized in their 'school' experience.

5. ***Support the movement for quality education in the form of accessible neighborhood, community-centered sites of education.*** We have no conclusive evidence that new educational "innovations" (charter schools, STEM academies, virtual academies, etc.) are more effective sites of education. Instead, the preparation and support of teachers, along with viable resources for historically disenfranchised schools are what communities have called for historically in the battle for quality education.

6. ***Support efforts to preserve and grow the work of radical educators inside and outside of traditional school spaces.*** Collectives of critical

educators are organizing themselves to fight collectively for quality education. A key example of this is the shift in the Chicago Teachers Union from a traditional employment union to a social justice union. There are also grassroots efforts from teachers to support themselves around developing relevant curriculum and pedagogy. We should also support and pay close attention to the attempts to abolish prisons and ‘schools’ (e.g. The Movement for Black Lives, Critical Resistance, Prison Neighborhood Arts Project, Black Youth Project 100, etc.).

7. *Build spaces where teachers and community members can support each other in the fight for quality education.* The struggle for education rooted in self-determination is a collective process. The aforementioned groups are doing amazing work, but there is always room to support their efforts. Through this collective work, there is the greater opportunity to resist and create viable means to educate ourselves.

Below is a listing of some of the organizations that engage in this work. Much like the work of prison abolition, ‘school’ abolition is representative of an aspirational politic, but one that should be considered given the lessons from those who staunchly advocate for a prison abolition. The following incomplete list of organizations have information on the previously considerations on ‘school’ abolition:

Journey for Justice Alliance (www.j4jalliance.com)
Teachers for Social Justice Bay Area (www.t4sj.org)
Teachers for Social Justice Chicago (www.teachersforjustice.org)
Chicago Teachers Union (www.ctunet.org)
Substance News (www.substancenews.net)
New York Collective of Radical Educators (www.nycore.org)
Citizens for Public Schools—Boston (www.citizensforpublicschools.org)
Students at the Center (New Orleans)
Peoples Education Movement (Bay Area)
Peoples Education Movement (Los Angeles)
The Movement for Black Lives (<https://m4bl.net>)
Black Youth Project 100 (www.byp100.org)
Critical Resistance (www.criticalresistance.org)
Prison Neighborhood Arts Project (www.p-nap.org)
Fair Test (www.fairtest.org)
Grassroots Education Movement (New York)
Grassroots Education Movement (Chicago)
Educator’s Network for Social Justice (Milwaukee)
Teacher Activist Groups (www.teacheractivistgroups.org)
Free Minds Free People (www.fimfp.org)
Education for Liberation Network (www.edliberation.org)

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