

A moral analysis of educational harm and student resistance

Nicholas Parkin 

Peace Experiment, 18 Pilkington Road, Panmure, Auckland 1072, New Zealand

Corresponding author. E-mail: nikparkin@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper elucidates the rights violations caused by mass formal schooling systems and explores what students may do about them. Students have rights not to be harmed and rights to liberty (not to be oppressed), as well as attendant rights to (proportionately) defend their rights if necessary. For some time now, education has been dominated by mass formal schooling systems that harm and oppress many students. Such harm and oppression violate those students' rights not to be harmed or oppressed, which may justify student nonviolent defensive (or rights-protecting) action.

KEYWORDS: education, schooling, rights, self-defence, nonviolent resistance

Education—widely and rightly held to be an incontrovertible good—is now for the most part represented by mass formal schooling systems. The open and inquisitive classrooms of Aristotle and Nāgārjuna have been steadily replaced since the Industrial Revolution by schooling systems designed to exert political and social control. Many students are treated by mass formal schooling systems in ways that adults would not allow themselves to be treated.

My argument runs as follows. All people have a range of rights, including *prima facie* rights not to be harmed or oppressed, as well as attendant rights to defend themselves against unjust harm and oppression (so long as certain necessity and proportionality requirements are met). Students have rights not to be harmed or oppressed. Mass formal schooling systems violate many students' rights not to be harmed or oppressed. People who have rights not to be harmed or oppressed have the right to (proportionately) defend those rights if necessary. Therefore, students whose rights not to be harmed or oppressed are violated by mass formal schooling systems have the right to (proportionately) defend those rights if necessary. Whilst they may not do so violently, they may, I argue, do so nonviolently.

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I have recently suggested that mass formal schooling systems produce harmful violence towards students, of types not commonly recognized or understood by education leaders, bureaucrats, and researchers (Parkin 2023). Here I further elucidate the rights violations caused by mass formal schooling systems and explore what students might do about them. The types of harm (and thus the sources of the rights violations) I have in mind include *direct harm* (which manifests physically and psychologically), *structural indirect harm* (caused by patterned relationships that exist amongst components of social systems), *objective indirect harm* (caused by hierarchical structures and systems, inequality, and the current economic order), and *symbolic indirect harm* (caused by thought, language, and ideology that arise due to power imbalances between groups). These harms are all present in mass formal schooling systems.¹

Mass formal schooling systems date back to the Industrial Revolution and are characterized by top-down hierarchical management, pedagogy, and classroom management, age-based classrooms, results-based curricula, focus on testing, discipline, and control, and so on. In other words, what most schooling in most countries looks like. Mass formal schooling is distinct from compulsory schooling, because in many countries it is not schooling, but rather education that is compulsory. (Compulsory education is seen to secure children's rights to education and protect them against factors that might violate those rights (see United Nations 1989).)

It is not my aim here to argue that 'schooling' is inherently harmful, or that the school system ought to be jettisoned entirely, or that education ought to be non-compulsory. I make no comment on the moral value of 'unschooling' (taking children out of school) or 'deschooling' (changing the laws to make schools noncompulsory). Rather, my argument centres on the rights violations caused by mass formal education systems, which is to say mass formal schooling systems. I do not claim that all mass formal education systems cause significant rights violations all of the time—instead I argue that many mass formal education systems cause significant rights violations some, or perhaps a lot, of the time (enough, I argue, for it to be a moral issue). Which education systems? The ones that cause the rights violations discussed in this paper.

In section one I first discuss rights language and student rights, in particular the rights not to be harmed or oppressed, then explain how mass formal schooling systems violate many students' rights not to be harmed or oppressed. In section two I refute the idea that educational harm and oppression is somehow justifiable as a 'lesser evil', whereby students' rights are lost, overridden, or outweighed by competing moral considerations. I then argue that students have rights to self-defence, so long as certain necessity and proportionality requirements are met, but also that any self-defence may not employ harmful force. In section three I discuss students' defensive rights, and in section four I forward nonviolent resistance as an effective self-defence tool for students. I explain some of the theory and historical successes of nonviolent resistance, and claim that students would be justified in employing

¹ I borrow the term 'mass formal schooling' from Clive Harber (2002).

defensive nonviolent resistance under certain circumstances, and that educators and other adults may themselves have duties to assist harmed and oppressed students by also engaging in that resistance.

1. STUDENT RIGHTS AND THE NATURE OF EDUCATIONAL HARM AND OPPRESSION

Mass formal schooling systems harm and oppress many students, violating their rights not to be harmed or oppressed. Rights language provides a way of describing moral statuses and situations, or what may or may not be done according to some moral system: ‘To have a right is to have a kind of moral status, so working out what a right is comes to the same as working out what people ought or ought not do, may or may not do, given a person has a right’ (Thomson 1990: 373). Many rights are ‘claim-rights’, demanded against others. Claims are akin to boundaries, which are infringed, violated, or trespassed on if crossed. Abe has a claim against Bob that Bob ϕ if (and only if) Bob does wrong by not ϕ -ing (where ϕ can be a positive or negative verb). ‘Privilege-rights’ are equivalent to others lacking claims. Abe has a privilege as regards to Bob to ϕ if (and only if) Bob lacks a claim against Abe that he not ϕ (see Thomson 1990: 37–60).

Valid claim-rights signify correlative behavioural constraints, or duties, on others—if Abe has a valid claim against Bob that Bob ϕ , then Bob has a duty to Abe to ϕ . The correlative duties that derive from legitimate claims are not morally optional; they are obligatory. One acts rightly by upholding one’s duties and acts wrongly by not doing so: ‘A right is something that can be demanded or insisted upon without embarrassment or shame. When that to which one has a right is not forthcoming, the appropriate reaction is indignation; when it is duly given there is no reason for gratitude, since it is simply one’s own or one’s due that one received’ (Feinberg 1973: 59). Many claim-rights are claims against *everyone*—my right not to be harmed, for example, is a claim against others that they not harm me. This right persists whether it is upheld or not (that is, whether others uphold their duty not to harm me). It also persists whether the law recognizes it or not—moral rights are not equivalent to legal rights. Many legal rights do (and should) map onto our moral rights, but this paper refers to moral rights violations that are, for the most part, not illegal.²

Students have rights not to be harmed, including claims against others that they not unjustly impose (some relevantly high level of) risk of harm on them. Following Joel Feinberg (1985), we can say that to ‘harm’ someone is to adversely affect their ‘interests’—the distinguishable components of someone’s good or well-being. Such an ‘interest’ theory of rights holds that the principal function of human rights is to protect and promote certain essential human interests (and thus interests ground rights). Those things that are in someone’s interests are good for them (or beneficial) and those that are against their interests are bad for them (or harmful). Acts that harm

² It may follow that if the state fails to protect valid moral rights by enshrining them as legal rights, then it fails in its duty to properly protect its citizens.

are those that cause someone's interests to be in worse condition than they would have been had those acts been different. Thus, to say that someone has a right not to be harmed is to say that no one ought to harm them by negatively affecting their interests. (As I explain in section two, rights sometimes clash and can outweigh or override others (or be outweighed or overridden by others) in certain situations. So I am not saying, and rights theory does not say, that one may never negatively affect someone's interests; in many cases one may.) We have claims against others that they not cause us harm—we have a right not to be harmed (Thomson 1990: 227–48).

Students also have rights to liberty, including claims against others that they not oppress them. To oppress someone is to act in such a way that causes another of their interests—liberty—to be unjustly restricted. All people have a right to a certain minimum level of freedom, and oppression of people denies them the minimum level of freedom to which they are entitled. The right to freedom includes the right to not have that freedom unjustly restricted. This is what I mean by the right not to be oppressed. (Students have many more rights besides, but these will do for our purposes here.)

Children's rights are curtailed in some instances—for their own good, parents or educators may overrule some of their life choices and, therefore, their right to self-determination (Brennan and Noggle 1997). Thus, the right to liberty, say, may look somewhat different when it comes to children, which would affect whether and to what extent rights violations are present in schools. Whilst it is not my aim here to resolve the issue of liberty rights in children, it seems clear that even if children lack certain (negative) liberty rights, they most likely retain other (positive) rights to protection, including rights against harm (Ezer 2004). And it seems fairly uncontroversial to suggest that older children have a pretty standard set of liberty rights, even if younger children do not. Moreover, as is the case with all rights, children's liberty rights may only be curtailed if there is good reason to do so. All other things being equal, their corresponding duties remain intact, and as I argue in section two, I do not believe there is good enough reason to do so.

Let us now examine the rights violations present in mass formal schooling systems. Educational harm can be 'direct' (overt and recognized) or 'indirect' (covert and mostly unrecognized). Direct harm is noticeable because it disturbs normality, but indirect harm goes relatively unnoticed because it *is* normality. And although it goes mostly unrecognized, indirect educational harm is more common, wide-ranging, and harmful; hence current education systems are more harmful than commonly recognized. Mass formal schooling dominates state-delivered education, meaning that most students do not choose to be in it, and thus *unwillingly* suffer the harms detailed below.

Direct educational harm manifests physically and psychologically, mostly via student-on-student bullying (including physical violence, threats, name-calling, theft, gossip, teasing, humiliation, and exclusion). Educator-on-student physical harm has been mostly eliminated, but plenty of verbal harm remains. Student-on-educator physical and verbal harm is still common (see Hughes 2020).

A certain level of direct violence often seems normal, inevitable, and even tolerable to schools, who are ill-equipped to deal with difficult emotions and relationships. Many schools harm by omission, by explicitly or tacitly condoning direct harm in the form of student hierarchical violence, initiation rituals, normalized bullying, and so on. Adequately equipping educators to deal with interpersonal and intrapersonal direct harm would require significant changes to teacher training and schools' power dynamics and perceived *raison d'être* (Harber 2004). Nevertheless, limiting direct violence has been an objective for most liberal education systems, with encouraging results.

But limiting 'harm' to direct harm is too restrictive, for such a definition would allow for the 'harmless' presence of highly unacceptable social orders. As stated above, to harm someone is to adversely affect their interests, and so indirect harm is present when people's interests are in worse condition than they would have been had that indirect harm not been present. Most educational harm is indirect, and most indirect harm goes unnoticed or ignored by educators, educational bureaucrats, and leaders. Indirect harm manifests in a variety of forms, which can be usefully divided into three main categories, each with its own causes and effects—'structural', 'objective', and 'symbolic'.

Structural indirect harm is caused by patterned relationships that exist amongst components of social systems, such as unorganized subjective attitudes or practices (sexism, racism, ageism, and so on) and organized subjective practices (official restrictions of civil liberties, oppressive regimes, institutional policies or practices that support discrimination, and so on). The history of education is characterized by the struggle between control, conformation, and docility on the one hand, and critical consciousness, liberalism, and participation on the other (Harber 2004). Regrettably, it is the former set that has won out—mass formal schooling systems now help to create and maintain systemic political and social control. Structural educational harm manifests as authoritarianism, coercion, and exclusion, and causes great harm to students.

Note that although indirect or systemic harms are not caused by readily identifiable aggressors (insofar as the 'aggressor' is a structure or system, rather than a defined person or group), those harms and their victims are nevertheless real. Systems are not like rocks or lions, whose harms do not violate rights. Rather, systems are created, maintained, and controlled by people and groups, and even if those systems have their own momentum and force, there are people and groups who have the power to correct that momentum and force, and thus to reduce and prevent the harms caused by those systems or even try to abolish the systems themselves. And so it makes sense to talk of the harm caused by those systems, and the rights violations suffered by the victims of that harm.

In terms of authoritarianism, mass formal schooling systems support and maintain political and social order via control, conformation, and docility. Since the Industrial Revolution, schooling systems have sought to produce students with 'the subordinate values and behaviours necessary for the modern bureaucratic, mass production workplace and the existing social order—regularity, routine,

monotonous work and strict discipline' (Harber 2004: 60). Authoritarianism was used to foster obedience and conformity—schools became institutions of power, with omnipotent adults and impotent students (Freire 1972; Foucault 1979). Thus, whilst schooling is typically seen as a liberating and mobilizing good, it is instead 'one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one' (Bourdieu 2012: 46). Educational authoritarianism negatively affects students' interests and subordinates intellectual, creative, and economic expression.

Coercion is expressed in educational structures, curricula, assessments, inspections, qualifications, school organization, and teaching. Students experience threats of punishment for bad behaviour or work (negative coercion) and rewards and admiration for good behaviour or work (positive coercion). Many students also feel excluded from the educational process, especially those experiencing academic or social failure, behavioural problems, alienation, absence, and home issues. These factors limit and even harm students' educational confidence, motivation, and engagement, and critical and creative thinking.

Objective indirect harm is caused by hierarchical structures and systems, inequality, and the current economic order. It manifests in our social, economic, and political worlds. In response to a range of crises in the 1960s and 1970s, dominant states, corporations, and groups restructured global capitalism to enhance its accumulation and profit-making (Robinson 2016). They did so by reducing or dismantling redistributive or social welfare systems, resubordinating labour through deregulation, deunionization, and flexibilization, and increasing neoliberal policies and trade, including commodification of public goods. If it ever was, global capitalism is no longer predicated on free and fair trade, but rather on elite-controlled institutions and exploitation of the global economic South by the North.

Mass schooling systems (their structures, norms, and values) reproduce and entrench capitalist inequalities by preparing students for working life in the capitalist economy, via disciplinary processes, hierarchies, and hidden curricula. Initially, capitalist economies required trained, intelligent, and self-directing workers. Now, however, they need many basic workers alongside much fewer technical and knowledge workers, all with limited ability or desire to challenge the system (Bowles and Gintis 2002). Mass schooling systems also indoctrinate students to 'the promise of petty (and generally banal) consumption and entertainment, backed by the threat of coercion and repression should dissatisfaction lead to rebellion' (Robinson 2016: 4). Hence mass schooling systems play critical roles in controlling labour and reproducing social inequality, the resultant inequality and oppression of which harms 'just as surely as direct violence' (Christie et al. 2008: 8). Students' rights not to be harmed or oppressed are violated by the systems that support, entrench, and prepare most students for subordinate life in a harmful economic system that requires inequality, subjugation, and suffering to survive.

Symbolic indirect harm resides in thought, language, and ideology. Following Pierre Bourdieu, it is a type of nonphysical harm manifested in the power

differential between social groups. It is normalized subordination, unconsciously agreed to by both subordinator and subordinated; the harmful status quo. Schooling systems produce symbolic harm via content and pedagogy. Modern curricula consciously or unconsciously transmit ideologies of bourgeois control and acquiescence, capitalist work and productivity, preparation for the working life, and particular viewpoints, communication styles, and aesthetic and moral tastes (Bourdieu 1989). Neoliberal ideologies are ‘tacitly embedded messages in educational design, discourse, and syllabus choice’ (Hughes 2020: 28).

Pedagogical choices such as certification, testing, and ranking produce and entrench symbolic harm. Symbolic power imbalances are developed via enclosure, surveillance, rewards and punishments, hierarchy, and judgements on student achievement. Institutional communication—lessons, questions, orders, differentiation of student ‘value’ and knowledge, and obedience—develops mindsets and behaviours that lead to oppressive power imbalances (Foucault 1979). Grading systems divide and rank students into succeeding and failing groups, imposing ‘a dull uniformity on curricula, reducing learning to rote memorization, routine, punctuality, and obedience’ (Robinson 2016: 15), because they cause schools and educators to prioritize grading success over other educational goods. Content transfer and testing are prioritized over critical and creative thinking, intellectual freedom, self-realization, and well-being. Symbolic harm violates many students’ rights not to be harmed or oppressed by surreptitiously and systematically affecting their interests. Mass schooling systems unjustly harm and oppress students by failing to provide a neutral educational environment in which students can freely learn, think, and act, in favour of one that judges, punishes, and abandons.

The indirect rights violations outlined here are mostly wilfully or unwilfully ignored. Educators and educational bureaucrats rejoice over successful attempts to reduce direct educational harm, but overlook the pervasive and significant rights violations caused by the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of the schooling model itself. Moreover, their focus on direct harm has contributed to the obfuscation of those indirect rights violations. Systemic harm is rarely critiqued in part because education is an assumed good, the ends of which justify the means (mass schooling). Mass schooling systems replicate states by causing direct and indirect harm and oppression, and violate students’ rights not to be harmed or oppressed.

2. JUSTIFYING EDUCATIONAL HARM AND OPPRESSION

Space does not allow for a more detailed taxonomy of educational harm and oppression, but many students’ prima facie rights not to be harmed and not to be oppressed are at the very least infringed upon by mass formal schooling systems, because students are in *some important sense* harmed and oppressed. And yet we must consider the possibility that student rights are not violated, but are instead lost, overridden, or outweighed by competing moral considerations, thereby justifying educational harm and oppression. Whilst we often describe rights as ‘inalienable’, all rights are in fact conditional in various ways. Many of my rights are

contingent on me upholding certain duties of my own—my right to use my car, for example, is contingent on my driving sensibly, and may be compromised if I fail to act within the moral limits of that right. Many rights also exist in competition with one another, in certain situations. This, of course, is what the representatives of mass formal schooling systems will say in their defence. It may be that educational harm and oppression does not violate students' rights not to be harmed or oppressed, but is, rather, justifiable in some way. There are two main ways by which students' rights might be compromised. First, they may act in some way to 'lose' their rights. Second, competing moral considerations may 'override' or 'outweigh' their rights. Let us examine each in turn.

A loss of rights can be explained in various ways—one's rights might be forfeited by one's own actions (Thomson 1986), or be conditional upon one's actions (Uniacke 1994), or be deprioritized in favour of the rights of another (Ryan 1983). All of these explanations imply that one's right not to be harmed is contingent on certain facts concerning one's normative relationships with others, and can be lost if one acts in certain ways. Lost or forfeited rights obviously cannot be violated. If students compromise their own rights by failing to uphold their duties not to harm others, then educational harm and oppression might be justifiably employed to prevent harm. But whilst the actions of a small number of students may indeed cause those students to temporarily lose or forfeit certain rights, most students have done nothing to lose their rights not to be harmed or oppressed.³

Alternatively, students' rights might remain intact yet somehow overridden or outweighed by competing moral considerations. The goods of quality education include learning, critical and creative thinking, self-expression and self-realization, empowerment, social meritocracy, and well-being. And perhaps mass formal schooling, even with its attendant costs, can be justified in the name of these goods. It is held that students lack motivation, awareness of what they need, adequate decision-making faculties, and so on, and thus mass formal schooling constrains their behaviour so that they can receive the benefits of education. In other words, it may be *for their own good* that students are harmed and oppressed.

Even if students require this level of 'guidance', however—and we cannot know for sure, given the relative homogeneity of current educational practice—harming and oppressing them to provide it treats them as means to ends. And since a condition for right moral action is that we may not treat people as means to ends, it follows that those practices are unjust, even if the ends are those same people's education. Even if one rejects this Kantian take, it nevertheless remains that harm employed to prevent harm must be proportionate (I discuss this further below), and educational harm and oppression does not prevent any sufficiently harmful thing to be justified in this manner. Moreover, to weigh the positive and negative

³ Note that general moral character does not affect situational moral status—even a morally corrupt person retains most of their rights. Moreover, a loss or forfeiture of rights in a particular normative situation endures only whilst the situation endures.

consequences of the widespread and serious rights violations of children is to employ a consequentialist ethics that has no place here.

More problematically, mass formal schooling systems do not adequately provide many of the goods of education. They have historically focussed on content delivery, and have only recently acknowledged the importance of critical and creative thinking, self-expression, empowerment, and well-being. Schooling often works to curb and restrain the ‘nature’ of youth, and the moral presumption is held to be in its favour. But the burden of proof should instead lie with those who wish to justify rights-violating schooling, for the simple fact that it is *prima facie* morally wrong to violate students’ rights.

At this point one might claim that children are better off in this system than out of it, since many of these harms are relatively minor for most, and are clearly outweighed by the benefits of the schooling system. I disagree. First, there are alternatives; pedagogies and movements that do a much better job of prioritizing the freedom and well-being of young people whilst educating them. Peace educationists, for example, have proposed and developed a range of approaches that elicit desire for peace, nonviolent conflict management, and critical analysis of how to avoid unjust and unequal structural arrangements in education (see [Harris and Synott 2002](#)). Similarly, Montessori education aims to promote freedom and peace without resorting to teacher-centred oppression, and there are other pedagogies with similar aims. Schools such as Summerhill School in the UK and Sudbury Valley School in the USA model educational approaches centred on student rights. Good education that does not include control and harm is at the very least plausible.⁴ Second, the benefits of mass formal schooling do not clearly outweigh the harms that are pervasive and more harmful than we often assume. Third, whilst it is true that a reformed state-delivered mass formal schooling system that relies on control, testing, and so on is unlikely to treat all students equitably, fairly, or even justly (meaning that my arguments would still apply), it remains the case that highlighting the harms caused by that system and working to reduce them (if eliminating them proves impossible) will result in a better situation than if nothing is done. Highlighting rights violations and working to end them is the morally right thing to do, no matter what the results (especially since good education can be delivered without most or all of those violations).

Moreover, we have reason to question whether mass formal schooling systems are designed to provide the goods of education at all (cards on the table—I do not think they are). As I have argued, educational choices are rarely politically neutral; they serve some interests and hinder others ([Freire 1985](#)). There are forces in education that suppress and control, and schooling systems, forged in the fires of industrialism and shaped by capitalist and colonial attitudes and practices, have ends synthetic with that history that endure today. Moreover, schooling systems are subservient to states’ economic aims, which include the shaping of, and limitations upon, class structure and mobility. Students can be educated without being

⁴ It is worth noting that there is a significant amount of literature in philosophy of education on home schooling as an alternative to formal schooling (e.g. [Reich 2002](#)).

harm or oppressed, but not via current mass formal schooling practice—to do so would take substantial and likely unobtainable (given the historical and current apparent goals of that practice) reform. Students' rights not to be harmed or oppressed are not lost, forfeited, overridden, or outweighed, and are thus violated when they are harmed or oppressed; they are wronged.

3. SELF-DEFENCE AND THE LIMITS OF STUDENT RESISTANCE

This section examines students' rights to self-defence, or rights to defend their rights. The right to self-defence derives from more fundamental rights; self-defensive action aims to prevent or reduce harm threatened by another. Imagine that an 'aggressor' unjustly threatens to harm a 'victim', and that the victim's only means of preventing that harm is to harm the aggressor—it is generally accepted that the victim may do so. They have a right to self-defence. This implies a moral asymmetry between the victim and the aggressor, since harming the aggressor in other contexts would violate their own rights. Both the victim's and the aggressor's rights are contingent on certain facts about their normative relationship; by unjustly acting and thus violating their duty not to harm, the aggressor's right not to be harmed is—temporarily and under certain conditions—compromised. Self-defence typically focusses on the right to use force to defend oneself from harm or death, but it can also apply to systemic harm.

Whilst a victim has defensive rights, they may not defend themselves by any means; they may only perform specific actions in specific situations. First, their defence, whether violent, disruptive, restrictive, or offensive, must be *necessary*—less harmful means must not be possible. This means that the threat must be imminent, and the defensive action, especially if violent, must be a last resort (see [Uniacke 1994](#)). Many students are imminently threatened with rights violations, and in many cases the violations are not threatened but happening. (Note that the concept of 'imminence' takes on a particular meaning when we consider systematic oppression, because the threats are often small and are harmful because they accumulate. So proportionate defensive action takes on a particular meaning, too.) But employing defensive *force* to ward off educational harm and oppression would not be a last resort, and thus not necessary, because nonviolent, peaceful alternatives are available to students (as discussed in section four).⁵

Second, the victim's use of defence force must be *proportionate* to the threat. This does not mean simply that defensive force must be equal to or less than the threatened harm, but rather that the amount of defensive harm that may be employed is affected by the severity of the threatened harm ([Coons and Weber 2016](#)). Broadly, it would be disproportionate to employ physical force as a means of preventing students' rights violations, because those rights violations do not cause or threaten sufficiently grave suffering such as physical harm, imprisonment, slavery, malnutrition, and so on. It would be disproportionate primarily because, as with most violent

⁵ Note that 'last resort' need not be temporal—alternatives must be properly considered, not necessarily tried.

political action, it would harm many innocent people. It is widely accepted that innocents—roughly those who are not intentionally or foreseeably unjustly harming or threatening to harm, nor knowingly helping others to unjustly harm or threaten to harm, and who therefore have done nothing to lose their moral right not to be harmed—may not be intentionally harmed in self-defence (see [Thomson 1990](#); [Uniacke 1994](#)). Educators would most likely bear the brunt of any student force, and most educators are innocent in the relevant sense, even if some *do* violate students' rights (the main rights violations in education are caused by systems, not individuals, as discussed above). Educators (mostly) follow professional guidelines and (mostly) believe schooling, like education, to be a clear and obvious good. Harm to educators, then, would mostly be harm to innocents that would be disproportionate and unjustifiable.

Whilst the right to self-defence is broadly established in both morality and law, its grounds and limits are complex and not quickly explained (see [Frowe and Parry 2022](#)). That said, I do not see any good reason as to why students may not defend their own rights. But there are moral limits to what they may do. There are very few times in which intentional harm to others, especially innocents, can be morally justified. Given the nature of students' rights violations, students may not employ harmful force to defend themselves.

4. THE POSSIBILITY OF NONVIOLENT STUDENT RESISTANCE

But this does not preclude students from *nonviolently* defending their rights. This section briefly explains nonviolent resistance in theory and practice, discusses how students might use it, and asks whether such resistance can be justified in the context of student rights violations. Nonviolent resistance can be performed *en masse*, without harming innocents, and has been proven to be highly successful in a range of situations.

Political power (a powerholder's means, influences, and pressures), such as that manifested in schooling hierarchies, is often thought to emanate from above, from dominator to dominated, coercer to coerced. The 'consent' theory of power, conversely, suggests that subordinates grant power to their rulers, and thus that power 'over' someone is an illusion produced by normalized subordination ([Vinthagen 2006](#)). Power cannot be held without the support of those who grant it—as Mahatma Gandhi argued, 'government of the people is possible so long as they consent either consciously or unconsciously to be governed' ([Burrowes 1996](#): 87). Powerholders cannot rule without the support of their subordinates.

Nonviolent resistance is predicated on this idea that power is granted, not held over. It functions by targeting the support structures that powerholders need to maintain power, including systemic hierarchy, structural control, rules, threats, punishments, and various external sources (subordinate acceptance, knowledge and skills supporters, psychological and ideological conditioning, material resources, and available sanctions). Powerholders can coerce and dominate subordinate groups, and groups comprised of atomized subjects are susceptible to tyranny

and uncontrolled political power. But disciplined and organized groups also have coercive power because they can attack powerholders' support structures and remove their support ([Sharp 1980](#)).

Nonviolent resistance has historically been more successful in achieving its ends than violent resistance. Nonviolent resistance can attract much larger numbers of active participants, and produce a higher likelihood of receiving support from the international community and from within the 'enemy', amongst other benefits ([Chenoweth and Stephan 2011](#)). (Note that the effectiveness of nonviolence resistance strengthens the 'last resort' criterion for any violent resistance.) Some notable political examples of nonviolent resistance include the popular movement against Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos (1983–6), the student-led Velvet Revolution against Gustáv Husák's Soviet-backed Czechoslovakian government (1989), the Gandhi-led movement against the British in India (1930–1), and the resistance against the Nazi occupation of Denmark (1940–5). Tactics in these campaigns included non-cooperation, strikes and economic deprivation, protests, deliberate breaking of laws, and general organization. These campaigns were undertaken without extensive planning, research, funding, or training, against violent and oppressive aggressors (see [Chenoweth and Stephan 2011](#)).

Although nonviolent student resistance is probably most closely associated with university students, nonviolent resistance by school students is 'far more pervasive and influential to the world's various social and political evolutions than popularly realized' ([Boren 2019](#): 6). We may draw on many examples to illustrate this point. In 1951, 16-year-old Barbara Johns led a walkout in Virginia to protest the poor conditions at her all-black school, a moment that has been called the turning point of the civil rights movement ([Simon 2019](#)). In 1957 direct action by 'the Little Rock nine' students and their supporters forced the Arkansas government to comply with the Supreme Court ruling against segregated schools, three years after that decision. In 1968 student walkouts from Los Angeles schools aimed to address poor conditions for, and biased practice towards, Latin American students. And in 1976 South African students protested the introduction of Afrikaans as the sole language in schools during the Soweto Uprising. This only scrapes the surface of historical non-violent school student action.

More recently, the online and increasingly globalized world has facilitated a range of significant student-led nonviolent movements. The 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin and his killer's subsequent acquittal caused university, secondary, and even intermediate students to stage protests and school walkouts across the USA. In 2014 many secondary school students joined the Umbrella Movement and subsequent protests against heavy-handed Chinese rule in Hong Kong. In 2016 students managed to prevent a Donald Trump rally in Chicago using online petitions and protests. In 2018 students in the USA organized the National School Walkout to call attention to how gun violence affects communities and to protest Congress' inaction towards gun control, often in the face of opposition from school authorities. The Fridays for Future movement in response to the climate crisis has seen millions of school students strike across the world since 2018. Many school

students have participated in online and in person in the #MeToo movement, and the #MeTooK12 extension, which has included walkouts, protests, and online campaigns, has raised awareness of sexual harassment and assault at schools in the USA. In 2021 thousands of Minneapolis students staged school walkouts and protests to condemn police killings. These movements have all garnered worldwide media attention and put significant pressure on leaders. Student protests shift attention towards the substantive issues underlying student grievances, prompting real and lasting change (Lee 2018).

In terms of defending their own rights, a great range of nonviolent resistance tactics are available to students. Gene Sharp (1973, 2005) has developed an extensive range of methods or techniques for nonviolent resisters that have been used in many successful movements. Michael Beer (2021) usefully categorizes these tactics and more of his own into three categories ('acts of expression', 'acts of omission', and 'acts of commission'), each of which can be employed 'coercively' or 'persuasively'.⁶ Coercive acts of expression ('protest') are communicative actions to criticize or coerce, and persuasive acts of expression ('appeal') are communicative actions to reward or persuade. Tactics suitable for resisting students include protest kneels, marches, pickets, deputations, assemblies, group lobbies, coordinated nation- and worldwide demonstrations, flash mobs and theatre, walkouts, refusals to engage, loud protests, written communications (posters, graffiti, pamphlets, blogs, and online commentary), livestreams, videos, art (physical and digital), social media campaigns, 'sousveillance' of educational harm, petitions, signed public statements, public speeches, and dissenting literature.

Coercive acts of omission ('non-cooperation') are refusals to engage in expected behaviour, and persuasive acts of omission ('refraining') include postponing or cancelling planned or ongoing action to reward or persuade. Tactics suitable for resisting students include social, sports, and study boycotts, student strikes (refusal to attend class or school), boycotts, reluctant or slow obedience, complete nonobedience, and suspending or ceasing planned action (to reward cooperation). Coercive acts of commission ('disruptive intervention') are direct actions that confront another party to stop, disrupt, or change their behaviour, and persuasive acts of commission ('creative intervention') are direct actions that model or construct alternative behaviours and institutions. Tactics suitable for resisting students include fasts, sit-ins, alternative education, self-education, and awards for educators who resist educational harm or who educate without harming.⁷

Descriptively, then, nonviolent resistance can be powerful, adaptable, coercive, and persuasive. School students are capable of employing any of the tactics outlined above. Normatively, nonviolent resistance still requires justification, because it is likely to be disruptive, offensive, and possibly harmful. Any self-defence must be necessary and proportionate. This means that nonviolent resistance should only be

⁶ For an extensive list of 346 nonviolent resistance tactics, including Sharp's original 108, see Beer 2021: 83–103.

⁷ I have left out actions such as property destruction and serious hunger strikes as they might be seen as disproportionate and possibly harmful to (not-yet adult) students.

applied when other options—cooperation, bargaining, and so on—are unavailable. It also means that the ‘harm’ caused by nonviolent resistance—disruption, possible animosity, loss of learning time, and so on—must not be disproportionate to the harms that it aims to prevent.

Recent nonviolent student actions such as the climate strikes have been dismissed by some as unnecessary and disproportionate, and causing more harm than good. Participating students have been admonished for not focussing on their schooling, being disrespectful to authorities, and so on. Even if these arguments were genuine (and often they are not, for a primary goal of authorities is to maintain their authority), a few days off school would not harm students’ learning. On the contrary, active participation in actions promoting student liberation, social justice, and environmental awareness is surely only educational, confidence- and resilience-building, and positive (see [Biswas and Mattheis 2022](#)).

Belligerent nonviolent resistance is, moreover, an important and legitimate feature of modern liberal society. It inhibits and corrects injustices and tests and protects a state’s democratic legitimacy: ‘Every constitutional democracy that is sure of itself considers civil disobedience as a normalized—because necessary—component of its political culture’ ([Habermas 1985](#): 99; see [Rawls 1971](#)). It has been argued, in fact, that the democratic values of civil disobedience apply *especially* to children; that is, children are especially justified in using civil disobedience because they are unjustifiably excluded from democratic participation ([Mattheis 2022](#)). And arguing that students are not responsible enough to participate in the defence of themselves, others, or the environment seems contradictory and hypocritical when those students are showing the very responsibility in question by demanding to participate. History is full of examples of oppressed groups being wrongfully told that they should dutifully accept their ‘place’ in society and the harms that they suffer. Students have the right to demand the cessation of their rights violations, and, if ignored, to act decisively and belligerently on that demand. They should not have to wait for the creaking wheels of educational bureaucracy to finally start turning for them.

The necessity requirement for the less belligerent and potentially harmful nonviolent resistance tactics is satisfied if other options such as appealing to authorities and educators have been properly considered and attempted. If those tactics fail and rights violations continue, then the necessity requirement for the more serious, belligerent, and disruptive tactics is satisfied. If the duty to follow the law (and school rules) is outweighed by other moral considerations such as rights violations, then nonviolent resistance is justifiable in the name of those other considerations. The oppression facing many students as outlined in this paper is more benign than flat-out political oppression and violence, but is nevertheless real. And students may rightly expect that others uphold their duties not to violate their rights. Thus, the proportionality requirement for nonviolent resistance, as it is properly meant and understood, appears satisfied in cases where students’ rights not to be harmed or oppressed can only be prevented by that resistance.

Finally, we might question whether others ought to come to the defence of harmed and oppressed students. It is generally accepted that conditions that justify an agent to defend themselves (to engage in self-defence) also justify others to defend them (to engage in ‘other-defence’). Further, those who can defend them without excessive cost to themselves and other innocents, *ought* to. That is, they have a duty to engage in other-defence (see Thomson 1991). Educators and other adults, therefore, may have a duty to defend students whose rights are violated and who have a justified right to self-defence.

What should we make of the phrase ‘without excessive cost to themselves’ in the educational context? Should, for example, educators risk their employment or career possibilities to defend students’ rights? Certainly, some threshold of cost exists where the duty to other-defence becomes a weaker justification for other-defence; where moral obligation becomes supererogatory. On the one hand, it seems a lot to ask of educators to risk their jobs, say, to help students in an established and broadly accepted system. On the other hand, history is replete with examples where other-defence was the right thing to do—take the push to desegregate schools, for example. Any teacher who did nothing is likely to have violated their duty to other-defence by not helping at least a little, even at some cost to themselves. Acting morally almost always comes at a price. Losing one’s job is not an excessive cost when compared to the brutality of state-sponsored apartheid. Many students suffer serious rights violations in the course of their education, and educators and other adults ought to do *something* to help.

Viewed one way, ‘conscious’ educators and other adults might form a ‘revolutionary vanguard’, to employ that Leninism, to assist in the defence of harmed and oppressed students. For Lenin, the proletariat could not be expected to recognize the harm and oppression forced upon them, so educated and sympathetic members of the *bourgeoisie* needed to drive efforts to procure their liberation. Similarly, many students are unaware of the harm and oppression they suffer, in part because they know no alternative. A revolutionary vanguard could help students to understand their situation, teach nonviolent resistance history and potential, help facilitate student protests, and even act on their behalf.

There are many schools, and a larger number of educators, that critique and are critical of mass schooling systems. Many of them may be prepared to work with students to encourage the protection of their rights. Indeed, if my arguments above are correct, some strong moral obligations to other-defence may fall on adults, including, perhaps, participation in this ‘vanguard’. At the very least, my arguments might compel educators to teach students that leaders need their acquiescence—their *permission*—to lead, that they are the main powerholders in education, and that they can use that power if necessary.

Despite having never received significant political support or funding for research and training, nonviolent resistance has succeeded many times against violent oppressors. Nonviolent resistance training for students would build resilience, develop group discipline, morale, and solidarity, revise and develop strategy and tactics, create understanding of the dynamics of nonviolent struggle, and build skills for

applying nonviolent action (Lakey 1994). It would also equip students with the means to nonviolently resist harm and oppression, and could even provide the foundation for a trained, resourced, and empowered nonviolent resistance force (or civilian defence system) to be employed against political aggressors. States ought to provide nonviolent resistance theory and training to their citizens, and by extension their students, but they are unlikely to do so anytime soon (see Parkin 2016).

Disempowered, alienated, and suppressed students often use verbal and physical violence to demonstrate resistance because they lack alternative means of expressing frustration and failure. Current industrial schooling models *do* seek to educate, but also to suppress and control. And they harm, persistently and significantly. Students, who all have rights not to be harmed or oppressed, have a right to defend those rights. They have the right to resist. Conscious, purposeful, and compassionate nonviolent resistance can effectively defend those rights whilst satisfying the relevant necessity and proportionality requirements.

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