

Book Review

Schooling as Violence: How Schools Harm Pupils and Societies

By Clive Harber

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Reviewed by

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Schooling as Violence: How Schools Harm Pupils and Societies, by Clive Harber (2004) offers a challenging critique of the global education system, arguing that schools remain far from being universally beneficial institutions and are often structured in ways that perpetuate violence, strict control, and authoritarian practices.

Clive Harber is an emeritus professor of International Education at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. Harber's academic authority comes from both his scholarly work and his field experience, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Harber, 2004), with research focusing on democratic education, schooling in conflict zones, and education reform in developing countries.

Harber defines school violence broadly—not just as physical harm, but also as psychological and institutional control—arguing that traditional schools use discipline and obedience to create environments that reinforce inequality. Harber draws on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to show how schools use surveillance and control to shape student obedience (Foucault, 1977). Harber connects routines, order, and fear to how schools reinforce social hierarchies, drawing on Freire's critical pedagogy and post-colonial theory (Freire, 1970). The text views school violence as not only physical harm

but also symbolic and structural issues like harmful discipline, rigid curricula, and teaching that overlooks students' cultural backgrounds. For instance, Harber discusses physical punishment in South African schools, teacher authoritarianism in the UK, and the competitive exam culture in South Asian schools (Harber, 2004). Although these examples are valuable, the analysis often rushes across diverse regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and Europe, without sufficiently contextualizing the specific political and socio-cultural conditions that shape educational practices in each case.

Harber's argument is most potent when he critiques the ideological foundations of mass education systems. He challenges the "one-size-fits-all" approach to schooling, arguing that it marginalizes learners and perpetuates social inequalities. This critique is consistent with Harber's later work (Harber, 2005), in which he expands on the commodification and marketization of education. In his other work, Harber notes that schools follow neoliberal ideas by focusing too much on results and treating students and teachers like workers in an economic system (Harber, 2005). He strongly opposes league tables, standardized testing, and the emphasis on measurable outcomes. According to the author, these practices foster a culture of competition and stress, suggesting that such metrics dehumanize education, transforming it into a system of surveillance and control rather than promoting personal and social development (Harber, 2004).

One of the limitations is this book is the lack of engagement with the North American context, particularly in Canada. In Canada, educational policy in many jurisdictions have increasingly emphasized inclusive education, equity strategies for Indigenous students, and anti-bullying campaigns (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). However, systemic violence persists in subtler forms, including the overrepresentation of racialized students in disciplinary actions, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems, and the persistence of Eurocentric curricula (Dei, 2012; Pidgeon, 2016). Harber's critique of the hidden curriculum—the unofficial and often unintended lessons and values students learn in school, beyond the formal curriculum—remains relevant today, especially in the context of efforts to decolonize education in Canada and challenge authoritarian norms (Kärner & Schneider, 2024).

Another clear gap in Harber's work is that he only focuses on violence against students. While his primary concern is with how school structures harm learners, he largely overlooks the systemic violence experienced by educators. As educators in authoritarian or under-resourced schools are disproportionately impacted by stress, job insecurity,

and surveillance, driven by the demands of performative accountability (Jerrim & Sims, 2022). Including even one chapter on teacher-directed violence, whether structural or interpersonal, would have added valuable depth and detail to his thesis.

By citing examples from around the world, Harber convincingly argues that schools often mirror the power dynamics of their societies, leading to psychological, symbolic, and physical harm. The relevance of this book today is emphasized by its resonance with current discussions about student mental health, school discrimination, and strict teaching methods (Gillborn, 2008; Bowers et al., 2013; Meisel et al., 2022). Given that the book was published 21 years ago, it is crucial to assess its strengths and weaknesses in today's context.

As of 2025, *Schooling as Violence: How Schools Harm Pupils and Societies* should be reconsidered in light of more recent educational research. Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly focused on teaching approaches that are sensitive to the emotional needs of students, promote cultural understanding, address racial inequality, and emphasize the role of schools in supporting overall student well-being (Fatahi & Warner-Griffin, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 2021; and Samuels, 2018). These frameworks recognize schools as both potential sites of healing and harm. Besides, developments in inclusive education, student advocacy, and growing recognition of LGBTQ2S+ rights have transformed how violence is defined and addressed in North American K–12 schools (GLSEN, 2025; NAESP, 2025).

Nevertheless, this text still offers a powerful critique of global education systems, even though its framework necessitates contextualization within current literature. While Harber (2004) highlights systemic violence in schools, more recent scholarship—such as Hammond's (2015) *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* and Burke Harris's (2018) *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*—shifts the focus toward healing, culturally responsive pedagogy, and care within existing systems. This evolution reflects a broader movement in education research that seeks not only to critique but also to transform harmful practices into opportunities for resilience and equity.

Though partially addressed, the book could better link to Canadian and North American educational reforms, including decolonization, inclusive education, and anti-racism initiatives. Despite limited regional focus, Harber's critique of authoritarian schooling and inequality remains relevant but contrasts with today's reform efforts to some extent.

Schooling as Violence: How Schools Harm Pupils and Societies challenge the idea that schools are harmless, revealing deep power dynamics in education. Though it doesn't fully reflect today's complexities, it remains a key text, especially when paired with newer work on decolonial, inclusive, and equitable practices. Its critique of structural violence continues to inform reform efforts.

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