

Schools as fearmongering factories: the case of Ahmed Mohamed

A escola como produtora e
disseminadora do medo:
o caso de Ahmed Mohamed

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Abstract: In this essay, it is analyzed the recent case of Ahmed Mohamed, a 14-year-old Muslim high school 9th grader who was questioned by school administrators and the police for bringing a homemade digital clock to school that he had made himself. It is argued that the educational system is broken, reduced largely to a punishing factory defined by a culture of fear and an utter distrust of young people.

Keywords: Schooling. Education. Behavior.

Resumo: Neste ensaio analisa-se o recente caso de Ahmed Mohamed, um estudante muçulmano de 14 anos de idade, que frequenta a nona série da escola norte-americana. O estudante foi interrogado, pela direção da escola e pela polícia, os motivos de ter levado para a escola um relógio digital caseiro, feito por ele. Argumenta-se que o sistema educacional está falido, reduzido essencialmente a uma fábrica de punições, exigida por uma cultura de medo e de total descrença nos jovens.

Palavras-chave: Sistema educacional. Educação. Comportamento.

World renowned author, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, observed that "Children are the future of any society [and that] if you want to know the future of a society look at the eyes of the children. If you want to maim the future of any society, you simply maim the children". If one important measure of a democracy is how a society treats its children, especially young children who are black, brown, or Muslim, there can be little doubt that American society is failing. As the United States increasingly models its schools after prisons, students are no longer viewed as a social investment in the future. Students have become collateral damage in the aftermath of 9/11. They are the most recent victims of a punishing state in a society that "remains in a state of permanent, endless war" (Glenn Greenwald, 2015).

If students in general are now viewed as a potential threat, Muslim students are regarded as potential terrorists. One result is that schools increasingly have come to resemble war zones, spaces marked by distrust, fear, and demonization. There are more police in the schools than ever before. Security has become more important than providing children with a critical education and supportive learning environment. And authority in many of the schools is often handed over to the police and security forces who are now asked to deal with all alleged disciplinary problems, however broadly defined. In most cases, these involve trivial infractions such as violating a dress code, scribbling on a desk, or holding a 2-inch toy gun. It is hard to believe that young people are subjected to such horrendous practices—children being handcuffed and carted off to jail for minor incidents—and that such draconian practices could take place in a society that views itself as a democracy. Stripped of their public mission as institutions that nurture young people to become informed, critically engaged citizens, schools have become punishing factories.

No longer spaces of joy, critical teaching, and support, too many schools in the United States are now modeled after prisons and the lesson that

young people are learning about themselves is that they can't be trusted, cannot rely on the informed judgments of teachers and administrators, and that their behavior is constantly subject to procedures that amount to both an assault on their dignity and a violation of their civil liberties. Schools have become institutions in which creativity is viewed as a threat, discipline a virtue, and punishment the reward for not conforming to what amounts to the dictates of a police state. How many more images of young school children in handcuffs do we have to witness before it becomes clear that the educational system is broken, reduced largely to a punishing factory defined by a culture of fear and an utter distrust of young people?

One highly publicized example can be seen in the case of Ahmed Mohamed, a 14-year-old Muslim high school 9th grader who was questioned by school administrators and the police for bringing a homemade digital clock to school that he had made himself. Ahmed is a gifted young man who makes his own radios, works on his go-kart, tinkers with circuit boards, and has a love for robotics. He is a young man whose immense curiosity for the world has been channeled into the kind of skills that any decent school would recognize not only as a gift but as something to promote and nurture given the potential future he might have as a budding engineer.

Ahmed brought a clock he had made to school to show his teachers. What should have been viewed as a creative act was interpreted as a crime. Instead of being praised for his invention, he got pulled out of class, interrogated, and eventually cuffed with his hands behind his back, and hauled off to a police station. There is more at stake here than a sad example of adults who have defaulted on any sense of responsibility and informed judgment—from the classroom teacher and principal to the police who arrested Ahmed. Ahmed's case is another example of the terrible price young people are paying for being treated with distrust, disdain, and suspicion. This issue could have been resolved in ten minutes. Instead, it becomes another

case of the culture of fear that dominates the United States poisoning a school and turning the people who run it into hysterical adjuncts of the criminal justice system. Ahmed has vowed never to show or take any of his inventions to schools again. Surely, schools should not be places that kill a student's imagination, and position them to live in fear whenever they enter a school building.

Ahmed's case is part of a larger trend that has turned schools across the country into war zones and educators into prison guards. As Glenn Greenwald points out,

The behavior here is nothing short of demented. And it's easy to mock, which in turn has the effect of belittling it and casting it as some sort of bizarre aberration. But it's not that. It's the opposite of aberrational. It's the natural, inevitable byproduct of the culture of fear and demonization that has festered and been continuously inflamed for many years. The circumstances that led to this are systemic and cultural, not aberrational (Glenn Greenwald, 2015).

As young people are viewed as a threat rather than as a social investment, their behaviours are increasingly being criminalized in the streets, malls, schools, and many other places once considered safe spaces. As compassion and social responsibility give way to mass hysteria, punishment, and fear as the most important modalities mediating the relationship of youth to the larger social order, schools resort more and more to zero tolerance policies that are punitive in nature and often result in the handing over of disciplinary problems to the police rather than educational personnel. With the growing presence of police, surveillance technologies, and security guards in schools more and more of what kids do, how they act, how they dress, and what they say is defined as a criminal offence. Suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and jail time have become routine for poor minority youth. The most minor infractions both in schools and on the street are now viewed as criminal acts. Rather than treating such behaviours as part of the professional

responsibilities of teachers and administrators, such infractions are now the purview of the police. What should be viewed a teachable moment becomes a criminal offense. In this instance, youth such as Ahmed become the object of a new mode of governance based on the crudest forms of disciplinary control often leading to the growth of what has been called the school-to-prison pipeline. Ahmed's case reveals why police should not be in public schools and that the targeting of children by criminalizing their behavior represents the antithesis of how a school should treat its children.

How much longer can a nation ignore the transformation of schools into punishing factories and what I view as a war on youth? What does it mean when a nation becomes frozen ethically and imaginatively in providing its youth with a future of hope and opportunity? Under such circumstances, it is time for parents, young people, educators, writers, labor unions, and social movements to take a stand and to remind themselves that not only do young people deserve more, but so does an aspiring democracy that has any sense of justice, vision, and hope for the future. Schools should be places that educate students not punish them. Educators should assume responsibility for their roles as informed administrators and teachers. The classroom should be a place where the critical capacities of students are encouraged. Schools not only teach knowledge and values, they also speak to the kind of future that young people might inhabit. Surely, there is no room for schools that turn what might be dreams for children into nightmares.

Reference

Glenn Greenwald, "**Arrest of 14-Year-Old Student for Making a Clock: the Fruits of Sustained Fearmongering and Anti-Muslim Animus**," The Intercept (September 16, 2015). <https://theintercept.com/2015/09/16/arrest-14-year-old-student-making-clock-fruits-15-years-fear-mongering-anti-muslim-animus/>