Notes toward a pedagogy of comfort: Inclusion and engagement in uncomfortable sites of teaching and learning
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Notes toward a *pedagogy of comfort*: Inclusion and engagement in uncomfortable sites of teaching and learning

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Abstract

Accounts detailing 'pedagogies of discomfort' argue that unsettling the positionalities of comfortable students affords a basis for interrogating injustice. By asking comfortable students to question their privilege, pedagogies of discomfort seek to move students toward critically informed action by problematising the normative assumptions that sustain social injustice. Yet, questions remain regarding *who* constitutes the focus for these discomforting incursions. This paper argues that moving beyond presumptive attributions of privilege represents an important element in the enactment of inclusive modes of education that remain relevant to all students' lives and experiences. The paper outlines an argument for a *pedagogy of comfort* that seeks to suspend the ascription of culpability and guilt by engaging students in critically conscious and inclusive enactments of teaching and learning that recognise schools as sites of increasing alienation and despair for all students.

There is no place for the "otherness of the other" (Levinas, 1969).

Introduction

Extending a longer tradition of scholarship in critical education (Dewey 1916; Freire 1970; Rancière 1987; Greene 1988; hooks 1994; Biesta 2006), a literature dedicated to 'pedagogies of discomfort' (Boler 1999, 2017; Boler & Zembylas 2003; Nadan & Stark 2017; Nolan & Molla 2018; Zembylas 2020) has emerged over recent decades to problematise the workings of privilege and the positionalities maintained by *comfortable* subjects. By asking students and teachers to interrogate the contours of their privilege, pedagogies of discomfort broach inquiries into disadvantage and the marginalisation of uncomfortable Others as focal points for socially just enactments of education.[1] The biunal arrangement of comfort and discomfort within these incursions provides a heuristic for considering the relative experience of un/comfortable positionalities (Hickey 2023; Sloterdijk 2011) and the workings of privilege within students' and teachers' lifeworlds.

At the core of pedagogies of discomfort is this 'recognition' (Honneth 1995) of the Others' experiences. Mediating an ethical stance focussed on the exposure of the contours of privilege and marginalisation, the interrogation of comfortable positionalities provides a foundation for questioning the complicity that privileged students (and their teachers) maintain in the presence of unjust social formations. This exposure of the workings of privilege are designed to prompt ethical rejoinders to marginalisation and injustice, where the pedagogical incursion mediates a critical vantage point for questioning and responding to disadvantage and the connivance of privilege. As emblematic of privilege, comfort provides a useful indicator for considering how the comfortable subject is implicated in the manifestation of disadvantage,[2] with the purpose of this exposure geared to the initiation of action and the remediation of injustice (Hickey 2023: 9).

Two forms of discomfort: Existing discomfort – Emergent discomfort

This conceptual manoeuvre is pertinent in terms of its configuration of comfort as commensurate with privilege, and alterity as the site of marginalisation. Comfort is manifest as an expression of the privileged subject's positionality, with the logic of this formulation implying that the interrogation *into* the Self will reveal the coordinates for an ethical viewpoint and subsequent action. This conceptualisation however establishes a totalising sense of privilege and marginalisation that conflates the positionality of the privileged subject with comfort, and the alterity of the Other as the site of uncomfortable marginalisation. In other words, the discomfort *of* the marginalised Other provides the material – the curricula 'object' – for the pedagogical interrogation. The apparent expression of discomfort represents a stimulus for generating exposure to the experience of marginalisation, with this invocation of dis/comfort directing the inquiry toward the experiences endured by marginalised Others, and where the marginalised subjects' positionality provides a focus for analysis. In this variation, discomfort is 'found' within the *existing* injustices endured by marginalised Others, with the injustice evident in the Others' discomfort mobilising a purpose for the pedagogical incursion.

But from this, a second variation of discomfort is also evident. Through the process of uncovering the discomfort endured by the marginalised Other, a further 'invoked' discomfort becomes evident *in* the disavowal confronted by the comfortable subject. This *emergent* discomfort, now experienced by the ethically minded, but altogether privileged subject, functions as a commensurate pedagogical objective. *Becoming* uncomfortable and less certain in the sanctity of one's own positionality – one's own privilege – represents a driving purpose

for pedagogies of discomfort, with the critical exposure of comfort's complicity in marginalisation appropriated toward the enactment of ethically intended remediative action. These two points in discomfort's materialisation – the first inherent within the *existing* marginalisation experienced by the Other, and the second *emergent* from the critical interrogation into positionalities of privilege – define the coordinates for the pedagogical enactment.

Pedagogies of discomfort in this sense seek to "wrest us anew from the threat of conformism" to face "the treacherous ghosts of other's fears and terrors" (Boler 1999: 175). By questioning the "cherished beliefs and assumptions" (Boler 1999: 176) held by comfortable students and teachers, the inquiry into the experience of the marginalised Other positions the privileged subject "to see things differently, no matter how perilous the course for all involved" (Boler 1999: 176). Under this guise, pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the assumption that "unsettling students' perceptions of knowledge, power, agency, identity, and their own emotional investments therein" (Head 2020: 80) will result in the "challenging [of] dominant beliefs, social habits, and practices that sustain social inequities" (Zembylas 2015: 163).

What emerges from this formulation, however, is a *static* sense of dis/comfort, where the arrangement of 'comfortable' students inquiring into the 'uncomfortable' lives endured by marginalised Others gains conceptualisation in 'fixed' form. What this conceptualisation fails to fully recognise is the dynamic nature of dis/comfort and how different inflections of positionality render multiple associations with dis/comfort in complex ways, across different settings and situations. The invocations required in this fixing in place of the supposed lives and positionalities of marginalised Others risks abstraction, just as the nature of marginalisation itself is cast in decontextualised form when appropriated as an object for pedagogical inquiry. Albeit enacted on the grounds of ethical purpose (and *the best of intentions*), geared as this is toward the generation of empathetic insight into the workings of alienation and alterity, the appropriation of Other peoples' lives and disavowal of the privileged Self risks fixing marginalised positionalities as always at distance and as the fodder for privileged inquiries into injustice. This formulation also denies the possibility that comfortable students, too, may experience marginality in particular ways and in forms that may not be immediately apparent. It is the totalising intent of dis/comfort in this formulation that is problematic, rendering mute the possibility for comfort and discomfort to circulate simultaneously and in complex interactivity.

This paper considers the underlying assumptions that are inherent to this dynamic. Querying the function of pedagogically mediated discomfort and the extent to which discomfort as a pedagogical motif might be useful for provoking the sorts of empathetic understandings that the literature suggests are crucial for discomforting forms of education, the argument outlined in this paper extends existing deliberations surrounding the ethical limits of using confronting content and other peoples' lives as the basis of socially just action (Boler 1999; Zembylas 2015, 2023). It also asks how far uncomfortable interrogations might remain useful as prompts toward curricula provocations, and what it means for student cohorts and their teachers to encounter discomfort *in practical terms*. Indeed, the paper asks 'who' is invoked within these pedagogical incursions, and what limits apply to these positional invocations?

Following this theme, the arguments outlined in this paper draw particular attention to what it means to broach discomfort with students and teachers who may already be well-aware of injustice and marginalisation through the contours of their own lived experience. A notable oversight in the extant literature is apparent on this front, with implicit assumptions writ-through existing descriptions of pedagogies of discomfort regarding the locus of privilege, and the assumptions invoked in determining these assertions. The paper asks: *Is it appropriate to ask students and teachers who may well be understand and experience alienation and marginalisation, but in ways that are not immediately apparent, to undertake interrogations into, and assume responsibility for, the workings of privilege?* The paper then moves to consider instead the enactment of a pedagogy of comfort that seeks to progress beyond questions of culpability and disavowal by working with (and from) the positionalities that students currently maintain and exist within. This paper asserts that seeking to engage students in terms of 'where they are' presents as a more useful means for enacting a critically realist, and socially inclusive, pedagogical incursion.

Presumptive positionalities: Who is comfortable? Who is *un*comfortable?

The implications that come from deliberating on injustice and marginality exert different effects across different positionalities, with this aspect of prevailing conceptualisations of pedagogies of discomfort not fully expanded (Boler 1999; Zembylas 2015). Although the self-reflexive interrogation of the positionalities maintained by comfortable students and teachers, in principle, presents as a generative undertaking – something that is noble and well-intentioned, drawing as this does on a longer tradition of self-reflexive critical practice (Freire

1970; Greene 1988; Giroux 2004; McLaren 2015) – it remains that pedagogical incursions of this type assume something of the students and the teachers toward whom these interrogations are focussed. Pedagogies of discomfort assume existing positionalities of privilege and marginalisation and mediate critical incursions on the basis of this normative opposition.

It occurs that in this usage, comfort corresponds with *privilege*; a by-word writ through the dominant beliefs, social habits and quotidian practices that comfortable subjects are supposed to maintain and enact. As the basis of interrogations into privileged positionalities, pedagogies of discomfort thus function as an instrument for provoking the exposure of and critical inquiry into socially mediated enactments of comfort geared to teasing out the wider social politics that implicate the comfortable subject in these enactments. Comfort in this sense represents a 'way of being' that mediates the shape and form of privileged expressions of living, with the pedagogy of discomfort providing the means to interrogate the injustices inherent within these lifeways. Generally speaking, the assumptions writ-through this formulation of privilege see the comfortable lifeway as marked by access to resources, the enactment of participation and social inclusion, the capacity to participate in the public sphere and the ability to assert agency in the determination of the life course (Hickey 2023). Privilege-*as*-comfort corresponds in forms of living that are marked by self-determination and the prerogative that comfortable subjects maintain to order their lives on their own terms.

By contrast, discomfort proceeds as consonant with marginalisation, drawing its dimensions from that which it is not: *comfort*. As Hickey (2023) identifies:

> Comfort and discomfort work in tandem, always in-relation, one informing the other… discomfort is always part of the equation. To be comfortable is to be not uncomfortable. But to be comfortable is to recognise discomfort and to know how to avoid this adverse state of being. (3)

Pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the basis of this biunal arrangement. Comfort mediates the expression of privilege; discomfort the expression of marginalisation. Assuming the complicity of comfortable students in everyday demonstrations of privilege, pedagogies of discomfort impose an "affective-political contingency" that requires an "ethical and emotional transformation that breaks complicity with social injustice" (Porto & Zembylas 2020: 359). By asking student to peer across to the other end of the spectrum, pedagogies of discomfort seek

this exposure through the relative accounting of the Self in contrast to a constituted Other. Pedagogies of discomfort mobilise this alterity as the basis of the pedagogical incursion and the material against which a normative ethics of social justice proceeds.

But in taking this focus, pedagogies of discomfort assert the very presence of "privileged and comfortable daily existence" (Lahiri-Roy & Belford 2021: 11) as an *a priori* condition. To expose discomfort is to assert the presence of comfort as an existential starting point. Comfort functions as a default condition that motivates the interrogation into privilege (and privileged positionalities) that in turn require the remediative enactment of ethically intentioned rejoinders. Via the acceptance of complicity and culpability, the ethically motivated (but *always-already* privileged) Self is made prone to action by seeking to repair the injustices uncovered during the pedagogical inquiry.

Assumptions regarding the presence and workings of privilege and marginalisation mediate this formulation. Asserting the very presence and form of privilege, pedagogies of discomfort render the experience of marginalisation into abstracted (but pedagogically *useful*) categories of comparison. By initially situating the focus of inquiry on the discovery of the latent privilege of the Self, the pedagogy of discomfort moves to mobilise action in the form of a remediation that responds to the injustice of the invoked marginalisation. But at risk in this move is the abstracted constitution of privilege and marginalisation, and the imposition of the relative contours and coordinates that each are assumed to maintain. As the necessary foil for the interrogation of privilege and the subsequent turn to action, marginalisation finds conceptualisation on the basis of the privilege of *which it is not*. This is to say that it is via what comes to be regarded as privilege (and *a* 'privileged' subjectivity), that a recognisable estimation of discomfort and commensurate marginalisation register. As the point of reference for this binual arrangement, the positionality of the comfortable subject establishes the coordinates for this formulation; the 'analogue' for determining what constitutes marginalisation and the point of reference in framing the pedagogical incursion.

One of the hesitations evident in existing conceptualisations of pedagogies of discomfort relates to this invocation of 'required' positionalities. Assumptions that motivate and configure comfortable and uncomfortable positionalities affirm the purpose of the discomforting pedagogical incursion on the basis of a necessary abstraction. Pedagogies of discomfort might be well-intentioned and provide a means for provoking "a more ambiguous and flexible sense

of self" (Boler 1999: 176), but it is with how the coordinates for these inquiries emerge and translate into action that the problems appear. Beyond the issues that come with naming and fixing in place relative accounts of privilege and marginalisation, the assertion of assumptions surrounding the lived experience of *actual* human beings constitutes a further, deeper, ethical quandary.[3] At stake here is the denial of a far more dynamic formulation of identity and positionality that affords individual subjects the capacity to move between states of comfort and discomfort, and that acknowledges that privilege and marginality are intersectional and differentially encountered across the aspects of one's life.

This is perhaps most apparent in context of the affective conditions that invoke experiences of comfort and discomfort. The manifestations of dis/comfort take shape in the "flows of affect, material elements and discourses [that] coalesce to form social phenomena that are beyond the individual subjective responses, feelings, and sensibilities" that each individual encounters and negotiates (Zembylas 2018: 89). In any given moment the possibilities for dis/comfort emerge or wane according to the affective climate invoked in this moment, and on the terms of which, different aspects of one's positionality will be drawn upon. Within classroom environments, the complex of relations – with teachers, with students, with knowledge, with space, with personal histories and social context – mediate different sets of association that privilege and marginalise accordingly. It is at this affective level that the prompt toward ethical accountability and action is navigated. As Zembylas (2018) reminds, pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the basis that the affective resonances that are invoked upon the encounter with an Other's marginalisation must translate into material change. But at stake in this formulation is the risk of sentimentalisation that merely "recenters discourse and pedagogical practice" (Zembylas 2018: 96) to decontextualised and disembodied accounts of privilege and marginalisation that are emptied of empirical foundation.

While I remain sympathetic to the general critical tenor of existing articulations of pedagogies of discomfort, it occurs that a far more nuanced sense of *who* occupies each end of this heuristic is required. Prevailing divisions inferring a 'privileged-marginalised' dialectic (and that extend toward a concomitant 'comfortable-uncomfortable' opposition) may not be all that useful for determining how a critically motivated socially-just and inclusive pedagogy should proceed. Beyond drawing assumptions on what constitutes an un/comfortable positionality, the relative experience of schooling as itself un/comfortable necessitates the careful consideration of what a pedagogy of discomfort should seek to achieve. This complication is especially pertinent in

this present moment where the nature and constitution of mass-schooling exerts pressures that inflect the experience of schooling for *all* students and teachers in complex ways. Predominant expressions of privilege and marginalisation that draw from socio-economic categories of distinction may not fully account for the full expression of dis/comfort evident in contemporary expressions of formal-institutional education.

The temerity of discomfort: The prevailing condition of schooling in this present moment
Across advanced societies where mass-education is organised and administrated at the level of the state, the capacity that teachers and students have to mediate meaningful participation in schooling is increasingly restricted (Hickey et al. 2022; Sandvik 2020; Sahlberg 2016; Ball 2003). As Ball (2003) notes, formal education is now constituted by the "calculated deployment of techniques and artefacts to organize human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power" (216). These 'calculated deployments' have resulted in the restriction of what is possible at the level of the classroom and where "a new 'regulative ensemble'…of physical, textual and moral elements" (218) defines the operation of schools and the performative enactments available to teachers and students.[4]

At the same time, classrooms have become sites of increased psycho-social and physical violence (Cohen 2021; Cohen & Espelage 2020; Jones 2020). For many students across the developed world, schooling has become intolerable: a discomforting site of despair and routinised control. As Giroux (2005) indicates, "public education is in crisis. It is not an isolated crisis affecting a specific aspect of … society; it is a crisis that is implicated in and produced by a transformation in the very nature of democracy itself" (137). McGregor and Mills (2012) observe that for many young people, and especially those at the edges of the socio-economic spectrum, mainstream schooling is complicated by "rigidity that does not recognise the complex lives led by many young people…and often, to these students, [is constituted by] irrelevant and meaningless curricula and uncongenial pedagogical practices" (844). This extends through the everyday encounters that young people experience, with Cohen (2021) noting that:

> …a spectrum of conscious and unrecognized experiences undermine K-12 children feeling and being safe in schools – from normative moments of misunderstanding and/or conflict to micro-aggressions or brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional – that communicate

(and/or are [mis] understood as) hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group; to the (mis)understandings and stigma associated with mental illness that affects one in five adolescents; to intentional verbal/cyber acts of disrespect and meanness; to punitive methods of discipline and classroom management; to sexual harassment, date rape and rape as well as additional forms of physical violence or weapons in school, murder and suicide. (254)

For teachers, the situation is equally problematic. Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) identify that:

…life in education is becoming highly constrained, controlled and restricted by the meta-practices of educational policy and administration that commodify and regulate education at every level and to an unprecedented extent. What is being challenged… is the scope of action which enables educators to act and interact with freedom, agency and integrity in their professional relationships. (46)

Prone to the same hostility and incivility that students encounter (Oberg & Bryce 2022; Burns et al. 2020; Espelage et al. 2013), teachers confront "accountability pressures and the performativity culture in education" (Perryman & Calvert 2020: 6) that has generated a situation in which stress, burnout and career stagnation are commonplace (Agyapong et al. 2022; Carroll et al. 2022; Farmer 2020). This is further complicated for early career educators "because beginning teachers face a number of teaching-related stressors such as high workload, lack of support from school staff and difficulties with student behaviour management" (Arnup & Bowles 2016: 230).

It is in this context that the careful (re)consideration of pedagogical comfort must occur. This is relevant not only at the level of practice, geared to questions of what might be 'done' by teachers and students in the day-to-day encounters they share, but also for the enactment of an ethical imperative that asks questions around the purpose and constitution of schooling in this current moment. In sites of schooling where the tenor of everyday experience is defined by stress and anxiety (Berg & Cornell 2016; Tremlow et al. 2006), and where wider socio-economic pathologies exert effect in shaping how students come to and experience education (Maynard et al. 2019; Thomas et al. 2019), it is crucial that schools function as sites of engagement and inclusion.[5] Seeking to mediate enactments of education that are, in other words, *comfortable* for all students and their teachers represents an important prerogative in a

situation of global uncertainty where increased incivility and alienation mark the general experience of schooling. Looking again at how comfort might be activated and how school settings might be mediated as inclusive and supportive sites of engagement in this sense represents an important responsibility (Hickey et al. 2020; Hickey 2020; Biesta 2015; Phillips & Hickey 2013; Connell 2009).

The imperatives of *recognition* and *inclusion*

It is on this basis that approaches to schooling that centre comfort as a unifying orientation represent a hopeful means for ameliorating the conditions of the present moment. A pedagogy of comfort seeks to provoke inclusion in participatory and democratic enactments of schooling, with Nolan and Molla's (2018) observations on pedagogical respect and teacher-student engagement indicating the importance that comfort holds in creating such a climate:

> In social relations and interactions, a sense of comfort is both a condition for and an outcome of openness. Collegial and respectful relationships build trust, and create a sense of comfort and safety, which in turn make it possible for participants not only to freely share experiences and ideas but also to ask questions and seek clarification on issues that matter. It is important to note that, in a transformative learning process, the condition of comfort is only a means to an end. It is a means of creating a 'safe' learning environment so that participants can freely and reflectively express and confront their dilemmas. (Nolan & Molla 2018: 724)

A *comfortable* learning environment provokes an 'openness' to a range of experiences and accounts, with the ethical imperative inherent to this participatory sentiment manifest in the cultivation of inclusive forms of encounter. For students, this means creating spaces of recognition, where each student is valued on the terms of their positionality as a learner *and* as a subject. For teachers, this translates through expressions of collegial engagement where the capacity for teachers to teach and enact practice as professionals is nurtured. As Nolan and Molla (2018) note "collegial and respectful relationships need to be built in order to create a sense of comfort within which questioning…can occur in a safe environment" (733).

Enabling teachers to determine the course of their practice and in ways that encourage deliberation and collegial negotiation is good for teaching *and* for learning. Learning within an environment that recognises student positionality and that refuses to invoke assumptions

around who the learner *is*, reduces the risk of prescription and supposition around student identities. In the current context, where schooling systems work from the opposite end of this spectrum, recognising and valuing teachers' capacity to teach and students' capacities to contribute *as individuals* represents both a radical – but necessary – function for ameliorating the prescriptive nature of contemporary schooling. Opening out the space for teachers and students to negotiate the space of teaching and learning *on their own terms* is an important responsibility.

The ethical coordinates of a Pedagogy of Comfort

Two ethical imperatives are apparent for a pedagogy of comfort. First, by establishing educational climates that are *comforting*, teachers work toward an ethic of 'recognition' (Honneth 1995) that values individual student positionality and that utilises this understanding as a basis for enacting the pedagogical encounter. Second, by positioning the lived-experience of students as a starting point for pedagogical incursions, the groundwork is set for the negotiation of a contextually 'realist' form of education that draws on the experiences of teachers and students to inform and shape the pedagogical encounter (Darling-Hammond & Paoli 2020). A pedagogy that emphasises the significance of the encounter and the relationships that are made possible in the moment of interaction (Hickey & Riddle 2022; Riddle & Hickey 2022; Hickey et al. 2020) opens these opportunities for an inclusive education that values participatory and dialogic engagement. Generating a climate where students and teachers enter the pedagogical encounter as mutual constituents and where value is placed on the divergent positionalities each member holds motivates teaching and learning in ways that are relevant and meaningful to students and teachers and that resist the imposition of assumptions around who students *are*. It is at the 'interface' of students and teachers coming together *in-the-moment* that a dynamic and responsive mode of education occurs (Hickey & Riddle 2023).

Rather than working from the assumption that students require exposure to unsettling, but altogether universalised accounts of marginalisation, a pedagogy of comfort commences with students and teachers *where they are*. Resisting an impulse to establish an oppositional logic – a Manichean dualism – that pits students *against* an imposed but abstracted object of inquiry designed to elicit culpability and guilt, a pedagogy of comfort instead seeks to understand what matters in the students' world as it stands, and to progress from this basis. By avoiding the imposition of *a priori* categories of comfort/privilege and discomfort/marginalisation, a pedagogy of comfort seeks to invoke critical interrogations into the world without castigating

the student or teacher for the position/s they hold. A pedagogy of comfort thus avoids the imposition of abstracted categorisations of privilege and universalist accounts of marginality that risk decoupling meaningful renderings of alterity and injustice, and the further alienation of students and teachers on the implied basis of guilt and disavowal.

Constitutive characteristics of a Pedagogy of Comfort

It is on this basis that a pedagogy of comfort proceeds. The following characteristics orient a set of coordinates for enacting a pedagogy of comfort:

   i. *A pedagogy of comfort nurtures supportive relationships as the foundation of the pedagogical endeavour.*

Education, as a necessarily relational undertaking, proceeds upon 'the interaction of three agencies – the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they produce together' (Lusted 1986, 3). A pedagogy of comfort mediates this imbrication of teacher and student *with* knowledge to position enactments of teaching and learning as mutually constitutive. The relationship establishes the form of the pedagogical encounter, with inclusivity and participatory engagement providing the ethical tenor for such enactments. This is an approach to pedagogy that moves beyond "teaching innocently" (Brookfield 1995: 1) to draw attention to the nature of the exchange and the conditions that frame how students and teachers encounter each other.

To be comfortable, students and teachers must feel engaged and able to contribute openly and freely to the conduct and direction of the learning encounter. Making space for this to occur, especially within the current climate of schooling, represents an imperative for teachers and school leaders. When teachers and students are provided with space to position the encounters they share at the core of teaching and learning, a way of 'doing' education that proceeds on the basis of openness and the valuing of student positionalities occurs. This is foundational to a pedagogy of comfort, where recognition is given to "the complex web of relations that students and teachers exist 'within' and as part of" and that value the "positionality that students and teachers hold" (Hickey et al. 2021: 206).

   ii. *A pedagogy of comfort creates spaces for recognition.*

After setting the tenor for the establishment of rich and meaningful interconnections between teachers and students, it is vital that each individual within the pedagogical dynamic is recognised and understood. A useful deliberation on this point is found in Hegel:

> In recognition, the self ceases to be this individual. It exists by right in recognition, that is, no longer in its immediate existence. The one who is recognized is recognized as immediately counting as such, through his [sic] being… (Hegel 1827/2007: 110).

Honneth (1995) builds on this sentiment when noting that the "crucial argument here is merely that all human coexistence presupposes a kind of basic mutual affirmation between subjects, since otherwise no form of being-together whatsoever could ever come into existence" (43).

Recognition is crucial to a pedagogy of comfort. By coming *into* recognition, teachers and students understand the mutuality of the situation and the place that each maintains within it. As a basis of accounting for the relative positionality that students and teachers hold, recognition affords the chance to orient the pedagogical incursion toward that which *matters* to each student and their teacher. This includes recognising that in different places and at different times, comfort and discomfort will emerge and will be expressed and felt differently. One is never entirely comfortable *or* uncomfortable, but across the patterns of life and in context of the relations that individuals encounter, prevailing experiences will become evident to provide meaningful prompts for pedagogical incursion.

In understanding pedagogical encounter in this way, the lived experience of students and teachers is drawn into teaching and learning as the basis of that which is taught and learned. By drawing on students' and teachers' lived experience, approaches to learning and teaching which are relevant and that recognise the student as knowledgeable proceeds (Freire 1970). Such an approach to teaching and learning also situates "the relationship between teacher, student and knowledge as the primary 'site' of learning [and] from which the contextualised realities of the experience of schooling become apparent, negotiated and grounded" (Hickey et al. 2022: 294).

iii.   A pedagogy of comfort recognises the school as contextually situated.

Biesta's (2017) observation that "the decline of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal forms of governing and governance" (328) have transformed and defined education policies in places such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, provide a point of reference for what an inclusive, recognisant and comfortable form of education seeks to work against. Extending what Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) describe as "hyper-rationalised policies,

over-elaborated administrative systems and highly regimented teaching programmes" (46), prevailing forms of schooling function under a performative logic that is defined by rationalisation and accountability, and narrow designations of 'effectiveness'. This is a situation in which "privatisation, individualisation, competition, choice, devolution of responsibility, the user-pays ideology and self management" (Smyth 2016: 314) establish a foundation for isolation and marginalisation.

By contrast, a pedagogy of comfort argues for the careful consideration of what is meaningful to students and teachers by drawing attention to the specificity of the context within which education occurs. The idiosyncrasies inherent to individual school sites, and the machinations of the larger 'structural' conditions of education systems, determine how students and teachers come to school and engage in learning and teaching. Approaches to teaching and learning that ignore these constitutive aspects of the structural dimensions of the school and the lived experience it shapes, risk irrelevancy and disconnection to the realities of students' and teachers' lives.

iv.   *A pedagogy of comfort builds capacity for learning and teaching.*

A pedagogy of comfort also requires the development of system- and school-level structures that allow for the enactment of meaningful pedagogical encounters. Generating the capability within schools for teachers to deliberate on the best ways to engage their students in learning requires school leadership teams to support and protect time and space available for deliberative collegiality and innovative teaching. By setting the tone for "a positive school climate, where students feel a sense of safety and belonging and where relational trust prevails" (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli 2020: 7), school leaders maintain the capacity to open out opportunities for pedagogical enactments that allow teachers to teach and students to learn in meaningful and relevant ways. In a climate of hyper-rationalised approaches to schooling, ensuring that teachers can teach *to* the positionalities of their students and in context of the contingencies of the school site represents an important responsibility for leadership.

Conclusion: The Ethical Responsibility of Pedagogical Comfort

This paper commenced with a critique of the problems inherent to pedagogies of discomfort and turned to argue for a deliberative, inclusive and constitutive *pedagogy of comfort*. Arguing that the normative positionalities implied in existing formulations of pedagogies of discomfort establish decontextualised and abstracted accounts of privilege and marginalisation, the paper

moved to demarcate a pedagogy of comfort that i) takes account of the diverse positionalities that students (and their teachers) maintain, ii) recognises the fraught socio-economic and political contexts that schooling is conducted within, and iii) avoids totalising accounts of students' experiences on the basis of assumed positionalities of privilege. The paper argued that a pedagogy that responds to these points provides a way of enacting a more genuinely inclusive and deliberative mode of teaching and learning.

I borrow from Bill Green's (2025) account of Australian curriculum scholar Garth Boomer's invocation of *negotiation* to draw together the arguments offered in this paper. As Boomer declares, education proceeds as a negotiation; a negotiation enacted between students and teachers on what it is that needs to be *known*. It with *how* this is enacted that the tenor of education becomes most evident and where the ethics of its conduct are most keenly felt. This ethos toward a negotiated education has notable roots in the critical tradition (Dewey 1916; Freire 1970), but I draw again on Green's (2025) rendering of Boomer's pedagogy to denote that a "pedagogy and politics of interruption" (55) operates in terms of opening space for students and teachers to negotiate what needs to be learned by attending to *where they are*. The sort of education that Green (2025) identifies here is one that remains cognisant of something beyond the curriculum alone – beyond the prescriptive regimen of content, unbending enactments of pedagogy, and tightly constrained unit plans and schedules of assessment – to engage a far more human concern. The engagement of students functions as a primary focus in this formulation of education, where the work of the teacher (and school) must be geared toward the recognition of students on the basis of who they are, and the production of teaching and learning encounters that are inclusive by virtue of their intent to remain pedagogically *comfortable*.

Invoking the sentiment carried in the epigraph for this paper, I close by emphasising the importance of an inclusive mode of education that resists the imposition of assumption and the prescriptive positioning of students. To entreat the Other in pedagogical incursions without providing space for the Other to speak represents a violence; the imposition of an "otherness of the other" (Levinas, 1969). Pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the basis of this fundamental assumption when attributing status to a universalised Other. But notably, they also extend a similar violence when assuming implied privilege.

A pedagogy of comfort isn't so quick in assigning such designations. Instead, a pedagogy of comfort works to affirm students' positionalities *as they are encountered* by taking the students' lived experience as a starting point for meaningful pedagogical incursions. This isn't to suggest that a pedagogy of comfort seeks to deny stark instances of marginalisation or alienation. Quite the contrary. A pedagogy of comfort is deeply concerned for individual students' positionalities and place in the world. But rather than universalise marginalisation and impose decontextualised accounts of alterity as the basis of the pedagogical incursion, and (by extension) invoke discomfort in students who are presumed to be 'privileged', a pedagogy of comfort seeks to broach inquiry into the world while ensuring that the pedagogical locale is *safe* for all students. A pedagogy of comfort does not attempt to 'out' students but seeks to broach critical inquiries into the world whilst attending to the physical and psychic safety of its participants.

This is all the more important in school settings where "a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change" (Ball 2003: 216) is apparent. A prerogative for a pedagogy of comfort is found in the current crisis facing mass-schooling. In effect, *all* students and teachers are prone to the vicissitudes of schooling systems that function as alienating and marginalising. A pedagogy of comfort seeks to make schooling more tolerable by responding to the positionalities that define students' and teachers' lived realities, and that afford this recognition as a basis for orienting education toward more inclusive and participatory ends.

Notes

[1] Zembylas (2015) expands on this summary when noting that "there has been a recurring theme in social justice education that students' experiences of 'discomfort' as well as 'pain and suffering' are pedagogically valuable in learning about the victims of injustice" (163). Discomfort here functions as a pedagogic 'irritation' that is useful for mobilising these inquiries into injustice and the positionalities maintained by marginalised Others.

[2] A core argument within this literature asserts that comfort functions as a 'block' to critical interrogation, and that by challenging the certainties inherent to comfortable positionalities, the generation of empathetic insight and recognition of the experience of the marginalised Other can proceed.

[3] Beyond questions regarding who is interpellated by the pedagogy of discomfort, the positionality assumed for the imagined Other is also pertinent here, leading to questions around

the way this marginalised subjectivity is framed and drawn into the pedagogical exposure. Formulations of *who* this marginalised individual *is* run the risk of universalising imposed accounts of injustice that diminish any meaningful attempts at recourse in situated and purposeful ways. It might be asked *on what basis is this account of the uncomfortable Other framed and on what authority is this naming done*? In other words, toward whom should the critical interrogation of Self be focussed? Are *all* students necessarily requiring of this incursion?

[4] Stephen Ball's (2003) diagnosis of the current educational landscape charts the nexus between global policy shifts in education, where an "apparently unstoppable flood of closely inter-related reform ideas is permeating and reorienting education systems in diverse social and political locations" (215) and that "stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual" (216). For Ball (2003) the possibilities available to educators to enact their practice as autonomous professionals are curtailed in a situation that "not simply changes what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are" (215).

[5] For schools that serve underprivileged communities, this is especially pertinent (Morrison et al. 2019; Blitz et al. 2016; Sleeter 2011).

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Notes toward a *pedagogy of comfort*: Inclusion and engagement in uncomfortable sites of teaching and learning

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Notes toward a *pedagogy of comfort*: Inclusion and engagement in uncomfortable sites of teaching and learning

Abstract

Accounts detailing 'pedagogies of discomfort' argue that unsettling the positionalities of comfortable students affords a basis for interrogating injustice. By asking comfortable students to question their privilege, pedagogies of discomfort seek to move students toward critically informed action by problematising the normative assumptions that sustain social injustice. Yet, questions remain regarding *who* constitutes the focus for these discomforting incursions. This paper argues that moving beyond presumptive attributions of privilege represents an important element in the enactment of inclusive modes of education that remain relevant to all students' lives and experiences. The paper outlines an argument for a *pedagogy of comfort* that seeks to suspend the ascription of culpability and guilt by engaging students in critically conscious and inclusive enactments of teaching and learning that recognise schools as sites of increasing alienation and despair for all students.

> *There is no place for the "otherness of the other"* (Levinas, 1969).

Introduction

Extending a longer tradition of scholarship in critical education (Dewey 1916; Freire 1970; Rancière 1987; Greene 1988; hooks 1994; Biesta 2006), a literature dedicated to 'pedagogies of discomfort' (Boler 1999, 2017; Boler & Zembylas 2003; Nadan & Stark 2017; Nolan & Molla 2018; Zembylas 2020) has emerged over recent decades to problematise the workings of privilege and the positionalities maintained by *comfortable* subjects. By asking students and teachers to interrogate the contours of their privilege, pedagogies of discomfort broach inquiries into disadvantage and the marginalisation of uncomfortable Others as focal points for socially just enactments of education.[1] The biunal arrangement of comfort and discomfort within these incursions provides a heuristic for considering the relative experience of un/comfortable positionalities (Hickey 2023; Sloterdijk 2011) and the workings of privilege within students' and teachers' lifeworlds.

At the core of pedagogies of discomfort is this 'recognition' (Honneth 1995) of the Others' experiences. Mediating an ethical stance focussed on the exposure of the contours of privilege and marginalisation, the interrogation of comfortable positionalities provides a foundation for questioning the complicity that privileged students (and their teachers) maintain in the presence of unjust social formations. This exposure of the workings of privilege are designed to prompt ethical rejoinders to marginalisation and injustice, where the pedagogical incursion mediates a critical vantage point for questioning and responding to disadvantage and the connivance of privilege. As emblematic of privilege, comfort provides a useful indicator for considering how the comfortable subject is implicated in the manifestation of disadvantage,[2] with the purpose of this exposure geared to the initiation of action and the remediation of injustice (Hickey 2023: 9).

Two forms of discomfort: Existing discomfort – Emergent discomfort

This conceptual manoeuvre is pertinent in terms of its configuration of comfort as commensurate with privilege, and alterity as the site of marginalisation. Comfort is manifest as an expression of the privileged subject's positionality, with the logic of this formulation implying that the interrogation *into* the Self will reveal the coordinates for an ethical viewpoint and subsequent action. This conceptualisation however establishes a totalising sense of privilege and marginalisation that conflates the positionality of the privileged subject with comfort, and the alterity of the Other as the site of uncomfortable marginalisation. In other words, the discomfort *of* the marginalised Other provides the material – the curricula 'object' – for the pedagogical interrogation. The apparent expression of discomfort represents a stimulus for generating exposure to the experience of marginalisation, with this invocation of dis/comfort directing the inquiry toward the experiences endured by marginalised Others, and where the marginalised subjects' positionality provides a focus for analysis. In this variation, discomfort is 'found' within the *existing* injustices endured by marginalised Others, with the injustice evident in the Others' discomfort mobilising a purpose for the pedagogical incursion.

But from this, a second variation of discomfort is also evident. Through the process of uncovering the discomfort endured by the marginalised Other, a further 'invoked' discomfort becomes evident *in* the disavowal confronted by the comfortable subject. This *emergent* discomfort, now experienced by the ethically minded, but altogether privileged subject, functions as a commensurate pedagogical objective. *Becoming* uncomfortable and less certain in the sanctity of one's own positionality – one's own privilege – represents a driving purpose

for pedagogies of discomfort, with the critical exposure of comfort's complicity in marginalisation appropriated toward the enactment of ethically intended remediative action. These two points in discomfort's materialisation – the first inherent within the *existing* marginalisation experienced by the Other, and the second *emergent* from the critical interrogation into positionalities of privilege – define the coordinates for the pedagogical enactment.

Pedagogies of discomfort in this sense seek to "wrest us anew from the threat of conformism" to face "the treacherous ghosts of other's fears and terrors" (Boler 1999: 175). By questioning the "cherished beliefs and assumptions" (Boler 1999: 176) held by comfortable students and teachers, the inquiry into the experience of the marginalised Other positions the privileged subject "to see things differently, no matter how perilous the course for all involved" (Boler 1999: 176). Under this guise, pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the assumption that "unsettling students' perceptions of knowledge, power, agency, identity, and their own emotional investments therein" (Head 2020: 80) will result in the "challenging [of] dominant beliefs, social habits, and practices that sustain social inequities" (Zembylas 2015: 163).

What emerges from this formulation, however, is a *static* sense of dis/comfort, where the arrangement of 'comfortable' students inquiring into the 'uncomfortable' lives endured by marginalised Others gains conceptualisation in 'fixed' form. What this conceptualisation fails to fully recognise is the dynamic nature of dis/comfort and how different inflections of positionality render multiple associations with dis/comfort in complex ways, across different settings and situations. The invocations required in this fixing in place of the supposed lives and positionalities of marginalised Others risks abstraction, just as the nature of marginalisation itself is cast in decontextualised form when appropriated as an object for pedagogical inquiry. Albeit enacted on the grounds of ethical purpose (and *the best of intentions*), geared as this is toward the generation of empathetic insight into the workings of alienation and alterity, the appropriation of Other peoples' lives and disavowal of the privileged Self risks fixing marginalised positionalities as always at distance and as the fodder for privileged inquiries into injustice. This formulation also denies the possibility that comfortable students, too, may experience marginality in particular ways and in forms that may not be immediately apparent. It is the totalising intent of dis/comfort in this formulation that is problematic, rendering mute the possibility for comfort and discomfort to circulate simultaneously and in complex interactivity.

This paper considers the underlying assumptions that are inherent to this dynamic. Querying the function of pedagogically mediated discomfort and the extent to which discomfort as a pedagogical motif might be useful for provoking the sorts of empathetic understandings that the literature suggests are crucial for discomforting forms of education, the argument outlined in this paper extends existing deliberations surrounding the ethical limits of using confronting content and other peoples' lives as the basis of socially just action (Boler 1999; Zembylas 2015, 2023). It also asks how far uncomfortable interrogations might remain useful as prompts toward curricula provocations, and what it means for student cohorts and their teachers to encounter discomfort *in practical terms*. Indeed, the paper asks 'who' is invoked within these pedagogical incursions, and what limits apply to these positional invocations?

Following this theme, the arguments outlined in this paper draw particular attention to what it means to broach discomfort with students and teachers who may already be well-aware of injustice and marginalisation through the contours of their own lived experience. A notable oversight in the extant literature is apparent on this front, with implicit assumptions writ-through existing descriptions of pedagogies of discomfort regarding the locus of privilege, and the assumptions invoked in determining these assertions. The paper asks: *Is it appropriate to ask students and teachers who may well be understand and experience alienation and marginalisation, but in ways that are not immediately apparent, to undertake interrogations into, and assume responsibility for, the workings of privilege?* The paper then moves to consider instead the enactment of a pedagogy of comfort that seeks to progress beyond questions of culpability and disavowal by working with (and from) the positionalities that students currently maintain and exist within. This paper asserts that seeking to engage students in terms of 'where they are' presents as a more useful means for enacting a critically realist, and socially inclusive, pedagogical incursion.

Presumptive positionalities: Who is comfortable? Who is *un*comfortable?

The implications that come from deliberating on injustice and marginality exert different effects across different positionalities, with this aspect of prevailing conceptualisations of pedagogies of discomfort not fully expanded (Boler 1999; Zembylas 2015). Although the self-reflexive interrogation of the positionalities maintained by comfortable students and teachers, in principle, presents as a generative undertaking – something that is noble and well-intentioned, drawing as this does on a longer tradition of self-reflexive critical practice (Freire

1970; Greene 1988; Giroux 2004; McLaren 2015) – it remains that pedagogical incursions of this type assume something of the students and the teachers toward whom these interrogations are focussed. Pedagogies of discomfort assume existing positionalities of privilege and marginalisation and mediate critical incursions on the basis of this normative opposition.

It occurs that in this usage, comfort corresponds with *privilege*; a by-word writ through the dominant beliefs, social habits and quotidian practices that comfortable subjects are supposed to maintain and enact. As the basis of interrogations into privileged positionalities, pedagogies of discomfort thus function as an instrument for provoking the exposure of and critical inquiry into socially mediated enactments of comfort geared to teasing out the wider social politics that implicate the comfortable subject in these enactments. Comfort in this sense represents a 'way of being' that mediates the shape and form of privileged expressions of living, with the pedagogy of discomfort providing the means to interrogate the injustices inherent within these lifeways. Generally speaking, the assumptions writ-through this formulation of privilege see the comfortable lifeway as marked by access to resources, the enactment of participation and social inclusion, the capacity to participate in the public sphere and the ability to assert agency in the determination of the life course (Hickey 2023). Privilege-*as*-comfort corresponds in forms of living that are marked by self-determination and the prerogative that comfortable subjects maintain to order their lives on their own terms.

By contrast, discomfort proceeds as consonant with marginalisation, drawing its dimensions from that which it is not: *comfort*. As Hickey (2023) identifies:

> Comfort and discomfort work in tandem, always in-relation, one informing the other…
> discomfort is always part of the equation. To be comfortable is to be not uncomfortable.
> But to be comfortable is to recognise discomfort and to know how to avoid this adverse
> state of being. (3)

Pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the basis of this biunal arrangement. Comfort mediates the expression of privilege; discomfort the expression of marginalisation. Assuming the complicity of comfortable students in everyday demonstrations of privilege, pedagogies of discomfort impose an "affective-political contingency" that requires an "ethical and emotional transformation that breaks complicity with social injustice" (Porto & Zembylas 2020: 359). By asking student to peer across to the other end of the spectrum, pedagogies of discomfort seek

this exposure through the relative accounting of the Self in contrast to a constituted Other. Pedagogies of discomfort mobilise this alterity as the basis of the pedagogical incursion and the material against which a normative ethics of social justice proceeds.

But in taking this focus, pedagogies of discomfort assert the very presence of "privileged and comfortable daily existence" (Lahiri-Roy & Belford 2021: 11) as an *a priori* condition. To expose discomfort is to assert the presence of comfort as an existential starting point. Comfort functions as a default condition that motivates the interrogation into privilege (and privileged positionalities) that in turn require the remediative enactment of ethically intentioned rejoinders. Via the acceptance of complicity and culpability, the ethically motivated (but *always-already* privileged) Self is made prone to action by seeking to repair the injustices uncovered during the pedagogical inquiry.

Assumptions regarding the presence and workings of privilege and marginalisation mediate this formulation. Asserting the very presence and form of privilege, pedagogies of discomfort render the experience of marginalisation into abstracted (but pedagogically *useful*) categories of comparison. By initially situating the focus of inquiry on the discovery of the latent privilege of the Self, the pedagogy of discomfort moves to mobilise action in the form of a remediation that responds to the injustice of the invoked marginalisation. But at risk in this move is the abstracted constitution of privilege and marginalisation, and the imposition of the relative contours and coordinates that each are assumed to maintain. As the necessary foil for the interrogation of privilege and the subsequent turn to action, marginalisation finds conceptualisation on the basis of the privilege of *which it is not*. This is to say that it is via what comes to be regarded as privilege (and *a* 'privileged' subjectivity), that a recognisable estimation of discomfort and commensurate marginalisation register. As the point of reference for this binual arrangement, the positionality of the comfortable subject establishes the coordinates for this formulation; the 'analogue' for determining what constitutes marginalisation and the point of reference in framing the pedagogical incursion.

One of the hesitations evident in existing conceptualisations of pedagogies of discomfort relates to this invocation of 'required' positionalities. Assumptions that motivate and configure comfortable and uncomfortable positionalities affirm the purpose of the discomforting pedagogical incursion on the basis of a necessary abstraction. Pedagogies of discomfort might be well-intentioned and provide a means for provoking "a more ambiguous and flexible sense

of self" (Boler 1999: 176), but it is with how the coordinates for these inquiries emerge and translate into action that the problems appear. Beyond the issues that come with naming and fixing in place relative accounts of privilege and marginalisation, the assertion of assumptions surrounding the lived experience of *actual* human beings constitutes a further, deeper, ethical quandary.[3] At stake here is the denial of a far more dynamic formulation of identity and positionality that affords individual subjects the capacity to move between states of comfort and discomfort, and that acknowledges that privilege and marginality are intersectional and differentially encountered across the aspects of one's life.

This is perhaps most apparent in context of the affective conditions that invoke experiences of comfort and discomfort. The manifestations of dis/comfort take shape in the "flows of affect, material elements and discourses [that] coalesce to form social phenomena that are beyond the individual subjective responses, feelings, and sensibilities" that each individual encounters and negotiates (Zembylas 2018: 89). In any given moment the possibilities for dis/comfort emerge or wane according to the affective climate invoked in this moment, and on the terms of which, different aspects of one's positionality will be drawn upon. Within classroom environments, the complex of relations – with teachers, with students, with knowledge, with space, with personal histories and social context – mediate different sets of association that privilege and marginalise accordingly. It is at this affective level that the prompt toward ethical accountability and action is navigated. As Zembylas (2018) reminds, pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the basis that the affective resonances that are invoked upon the encounter with an Other's marginalisation must translate into material change. But at stake in this formulation is the risk of sentimentalisation that merely "recenters discourse and pedagogical practice" (Zembylas 2018: 96) to decontextualised and disembodied accounts of privilege and marginalisation that are emptied of empirical foundation.

While I remain sympathetic to the general critical tenor of existing articulations of pedagogies of discomfort, it occurs that a far more nuanced sense of *who* occupies each end of this heuristic is required. Prevailing divisions inferring a 'privileged-marginalised' dialectic (and that extend toward a concomitant 'comfortable-uncomfortable' opposition) may not be all that useful for determining how a critically motivated socially-just and inclusive pedagogy should proceed. Beyond drawing assumptions on what constitutes an un/comfortable positionality, the relative experience of schooling as itself un/comfortable necessitates the careful consideration of what a pedagogy of discomfort should seek to achieve. This complication is especially pertinent in

this present moment where the nature and constitution of mass-schooling exerts pressures that inflect the experience of schooling for *all* students and teachers in complex ways. Predominant expressions of privilege and marginalisation that draw from socio-economic categories of distinction may not fully account for the full expression of dis/comfort evident in contemporary expressions of formal-institutional education.

The temerity of discomfort: The prevailing condition of schooling in this present moment

Across advanced societies where mass-education is organised and administrated at the level of the state, the capacity that teachers and students have to mediate meaningful participation in schooling is increasingly restricted (Hickey et al. 2022; Sandvik 2020; Sahlberg 2016; Ball 2003). As Ball (2003) notes, formal education is now constituted by the "calculated deployment of techniques and artefacts to organize human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power" (216). These 'calculated deployments' have resulted in the restriction of what is possible at the level of the classroom and where "a new 'regulative ensemble'…of physical, textual and moral elements" (218) defines the operation of schools and the performative enactments available to teachers and students.[4]

At the same time, classrooms have become sites of increased psycho-social and physical violence (Cohen 2021; Cohen & Espelage 2020; Jones 2020). For many students across the developed world, schooling has become intolerable: a discomforting site of despair and routinised control. As Giroux (2005) indicates, "public education is in crisis. It is not an isolated crisis affecting a specific aspect of … society; it is a crisis that is implicated in and produced by a transformation in the very nature of democracy itself" (137). McGregor and Mills (2012) observe that for many young people, and especially those at the edges of the socio-economic spectrum, mainstream schooling is complicated by "rigidity that does not recognise the complex lives led by many young people…and often, to these students, [is constituted by] irrelevant and meaningless curricula and uncongenial pedagogical practices" (844). This extends through the everyday encounters that young people experience, with Cohen (2021) noting that:

> …a spectrum of conscious and unrecognized experiences undermine K-12 children feeling and being safe in schools – from normative moments of misunderstanding and/or conflict to micro-aggressions or brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional – that communicate

(and/or are [mis] understood as) hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group; to the (mis)understandings and stigma associated with mental illness that affects one in five adolescents; to intentional verbal/cyber acts of disrespect and meanness; to punitive methods of discipline and classroom management; to sexual harassment, date rape and rape as well as additional forms of physical violence or weapons in school, murder and suicide. (254)

For teachers, the situation is equally problematic. Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) identify that:

> …life in education is becoming highly constrained, controlled and restricted by the meta-practices of educational policy and administration that commodify and regulate education at every level and to an unprecedented extent. What is being challenged… is the scope of action which enables educators to act and interact with freedom, agency and integrity in their professional relationships. (46)

Prone to the same hostility and incivility that students encounter (Oberg & Bryce 2022; Burns et al. 2020; Espelage et al. 2013), teachers confront "accountability pressures and the performativity culture in education" (Perryman & Calvert 2020: 6) that has generated a situation in which stress, burnout and career stagnation are commonplace (Agyapong et al. 2022; Carroll et al. 2022; Farmer 2020). This is further complicated for early career educators "because beginning teachers face a number of teaching-related stressors such as high workload, lack of support from school staff and difficulties with student behaviour management" (Arnup & Bowles 2016: 230).

It is in this context that the careful (re)consideration of pedagogical comfort must occur. This is relevant not only at the level of practice, geared to questions of what might be 'done' by teachers and students in the day-to-day encounters they share, but also for the enactment of an ethical imperative that asks questions around the purpose and constitution of schooling in this current moment. In sites of schooling where the tenor of everyday experience is defined by stress and anxiety (Berg & Cornell 2016; Tremlow et al. 2006), and where wider socio-economic pathologies exert effect in shaping how students come to and experience education (Maynard et al. 2019; Thomas et al. 2019), it is crucial that schools function as sites of engagement and inclusion.[5] Seeking to mediate enactments of education that are, in other words, *comfortable* for all students and their teachers represents an important prerogative in a

situation of global uncertainty where increased incivility and alienation mark the general experience of schooling. Looking again at how comfort might be activated and how school settings might be mediated as inclusive and supportive sites of engagement in this sense represents an important responsibility (Hickey et al. 2020; Hickey 2020; Biesta 2015; Phillips & Hickey 2013; Connell 2009).

The imperatives of *recognition* and *inclusion*

It is on this basis that approaches to schooling that centre comfort as a unifying orientation represent a hopeful means for ameliorating the conditions of the present moment. A pedagogy of comfort seeks to provoke inclusion in participatory and democratic enactments of schooling, with Nolan and Molla's (2018) observations on pedagogical respect and teacher-student engagement indicating the importance that comfort holds in creating such a climate:

> In social relations and interactions, a sense of comfort is both a condition for and an outcome of openness. Collegial and respectful relationships build trust, and create a sense of comfort and safety, which in turn make it possible for participants not only to freely share experiences and ideas but also to ask questions and seek clarification on issues that matter. It is important to note that, in a transformative learning process, the condition of comfort is only a means to an end. It is a means of creating a 'safe' learning environment so that participants can freely and reflectively express and confront their dilemmas. (Nolan & Molla 2018: 724)

A *comfortable* learning environment provokes an 'openness' to a range of experiences and accounts, with the ethical imperative inherent to this participatory sentiment manifest in the cultivation of inclusive forms of encounter. For students, this means creating spaces of recognition, where each student is valued on the terms of their positionality as a learner *and* as a subject. For teachers, this translates through expressions of collegial engagement where the capacity for teachers to teach and enact practice as professionals is nurtured. As Nolan and Molla (2018) note "collegial and respectful relationships need to be built in order to create a sense of comfort within which questioning…can occur in a safe environment" (733).

Enabling teachers to determine the course of their practice and in ways that encourage deliberation and collegial negotiation is good for teaching *and* for learning. Learning within an environment that recognises student positionality and that refuses to invoke assumptions

around who the learner *is*, reduces the risk of prescription and supposition around student identities. In the current context, where schooling systems work from the opposite end of this spectrum, recognising and valuing teachers' capacity to teach and students' capacities to contribute *as individuals* represents both a radical – but necessary – function for ameliorating the prescriptive nature of contemporary schooling. Opening out the space for teachers and students to negotiate the space of teaching and learning *on their own terms* is an important responsibility.

The ethical coordinates of a Pedagogy of Comfort

Two ethical imperatives are apparent for a pedagogy of comfort. First, by establishing educational climates that are *comforting*, teachers work toward an ethic of 'recognition' (Honneth 1995) that values individual student positionality and that utilises this understanding as a basis for enacting the pedagogical encounter. Second, by positioning the lived-experience of students as a starting point for pedagogical incursions, the groundwork is set for the negotiation of a contextually 'realist' form of education that draws on the experiences of teachers and students to inform and shape the pedagogical encounter (Darling-Hammond & Paoli 2020). A pedagogy that emphasises the significance of the encounter and the relationships that are made possible in the moment of interaction (Hickey & Riddle 2022; Riddle & Hickey 2022; Hickey et al. 2020) opens these opportunities for an inclusive education that values participatory and dialogic engagement. Generating a climate where students and teachers enter the pedagogical encounter as mutual constituents and where value is placed on the divergent positionalities each member holds motivates teaching and learning in ways that are relevant and meaningful to students and teachers and that resist the imposition of assumptions around who students *are*. It is at the 'interface' of students and teachers coming together *in-the-moment* that a dynamic and responsive mode of education occurs (Hickey & Riddle 2023).

Rather than working from the assumption that students require exposure to unsettling, but altogether universalised accounts of marginalisation, a pedagogy of comfort commences with students and teachers *where they are*. Resisting an impulse to establish an oppositional logic – a Manichean dualism – that pits students *against* an imposed but abstracted object of inquiry designed to elicit culpability and guilt, a pedagogy of comfort instead seeks to understand what matters in the students' world as it stands, and to progress from this basis. By avoiding the imposition of *a priori* categories of comfort/privilege and discomfort/marginalisation, a pedagogy of comfort seeks to invoke critical interrogations into the world without castigating

the student or teacher for the position/s they hold. A pedagogy of comfort thus avoids the imposition of abstracted categorisations of privilege and universalist accounts of marginality that risk decoupling meaningful renderings of alterity and injustice, and the further alienation of students and teachers on the implied basis of guilt and disavowal.

Constitutive characteristics of a Pedagogy of Comfort

It is on this basis that a pedagogy of comfort proceeds. The following characteristics orient a set of coordinates for enacting a pedagogy of comfort:

i.   *A pedagogy of comfort nurtures supportive relationships as the foundation of the pedagogical endeavour.*

Education, as a necessarily relational undertaking, proceeds upon 'the interaction of three agencies – the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they produce together' (Lusted 1986, 3). A pedagogy of comfort mediates this imbrication of teacher and student *with* knowledge to position enactments of teaching and learning as mutually constitutive. The relationship establishes the form of the pedagogical encounter, with inclusivity and participatory engagement providing the ethical tenor for such enactments. This is an approach to pedagogy that moves beyond "teaching innocently" (Brookfield 1995: 1) to draw attention to the nature of the exchange and the conditions that frame how students and teachers encounter each other.

To be comfortable, students and teachers must feel engaged and able to contribute openly and freely to the conduct and direction of the learning encounter. Making space for this to occur, especially within the current climate of schooling, represents an imperative for teachers and school leaders. When teachers and students are provided with space to position the encounters they share at the core of teaching and learning, a way of 'doing' education that proceeds on the basis of openness and the valuing of student positionalities occurs. This is foundational to a pedagogy of comfort, where recognition is given to "the complex web of relations that students and teachers exist 'within' and as part of" and that value the "positionality that students and teachers hold" (Hickey et al. 2021: 206).

ii.   *A pedagogy of comfort creates spaces for recognition.*

After setting the tenor for the establishment of rich and meaningful interconnections between teachers and students, it is vital that each individual within the pedagogical dynamic is recognised and understood. A useful deliberation on this point is found in Hegel:

> In recognition, the self ceases to be this individual. It exists by right in recognition, that is, no longer in its immediate existence. The one who is recognized is recognized as immediately counting as such, through his [sic] being… (Hegel 1827/2007: 110).

Honneth (1995) builds on this sentiment when noting that the "crucial argument here is merely that all human coexistence presupposes a kind of basic mutual affirmation between subjects, since otherwise no form of being-together whatsoever could ever come into existence" (43).

Recognition is crucial to a pedagogy of comfort. By coming *into* recognition, teachers and students understand the mutuality of the situation and the place that each maintains within it. As a basis of accounting for the relative positionality that students and teachers hold, recognition affords the chance to orient the pedagogical incursion toward that which *matters* to each student and their teacher. This includes recognising that in different places and at different times, comfort and discomfort will emerge and will be expressed and felt differently. One is never entirely comfortable *or* uncomfortable, but across the patterns of life and in context of the relations that individuals encounter, prevailing experiences will become evident to provide meaningful prompts for pedagogical incursion.

In understanding pedagogical encounter in this way, the lived experience of students and teachers is drawn into teaching and learning as the basis of that which is taught and learned. By drawing on students' and teachers' lived experience, approaches to learning and teaching which are relevant and that recognise the student as knowledgeable proceeds (Freire 1970). Such an approach to teaching and learning also situates "the relationship between teacher, student and knowledge as the primary 'site' of learning [and] from which the contextualised realities of the experience of schooling become apparent, negotiated and grounded" (Hickey et al. 2022: 294).

iii.   *A pedagogy of comfort recognises the school as contextually situated.*

Biesta's (2017) observation that "the decline of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal forms of governing and governance" (328) have transformed and defined education policies in places such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, provide a point of reference for what an inclusive, recognisant and comfortable form of education seeks to work against. Extending what Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) describe as "hyper-rationalised policies,

over-elaborated administrative systems and highly regimented teaching programmes" (46), prevailing forms of schooling function under a performative logic that is defined by rationalisation and accountability, and narrow designations of 'effectiveness'. This is a situation in which "privatisation, individualisation, competition, choice, devolution of responsibility, the user-pays ideology and self management" (Smyth 2016: 314) establish a foundation for isolation and marginalisation.

By contrast, a pedagogy of comfort argues for the careful consideration of what is meaningful to students and teachers by drawing attention to the specificity of the context within which education occurs. The idiosyncrasies inherent to individual school sites, and the machinations of the larger 'structural' conditions of education systems, determine how students and teachers come to school and engage in learning and teaching. Approaches to teaching and learning that ignore these constitutive aspects of the structural dimensions of the school and the lived experience it shapes, risk irrelevancy and disconnection to the realities of students' and teachers' lives.

iv. *A pedagogy of comfort builds capacity for learning and teaching.*

A pedagogy of comfort also requires the development of system- and school-level structures that allow for the enactment of meaningful pedagogical encounters. Generating the capability within schools for teachers to deliberate on the best ways to engage their students in learning requires school leadership teams to support and protect time and space available for deliberative collegiality and innovative teaching. By setting the tone for "a positive school climate, where students feel a sense of safety and belonging and where relational trust prevails" (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli 2020: 7), school leaders maintain the capacity to open out opportunities for pedagogical enactments that allow teachers to teach and students to learn in meaningful and relevant ways. In a climate of hyper-rationalised approaches to schooling, ensuring that teachers can teach *to* the positionalities of their students and in context of the contingencies of the school site represents an important responsibility for leadership.

Conclusion: The Ethical Responsibility of Pedagogical Comfort

This paper commenced with a critique of the problems inherent to pedagogies of discomfort and turned to argue for a deliberative, inclusive and constitutive *pedagogy of comfort*. Arguing that the normative positionalities implied in existing formulations of pedagogies of discomfort establish decontextualised and abstracted accounts of privilege and marginalisation, the paper

moved to demarcate a pedagogy of comfort that i) takes account of the diverse positionalities that students (and their teachers) maintain, ii) recognises the fraught socio-economic and political contexts that schooling is conducted within, and iii) avoids totalising accounts of students' experiences on the basis of assumed positionalities of privilege. The paper argued that a pedagogy that responds to these points provides a way of enacting a more genuinely inclusive and deliberative mode of teaching and learning.

I borrow from Bill Green's (2025) account of Australian curriculum scholar Garth Boomer's invocation of *negotiation* to draw together the arguments offered in this paper. As Boomer declares, education proceeds as a negotiation; a negotiation enacted between students and teachers on what it is that needs to be *known*. It with *how* this is enacted that the tenor of education becomes most evident and where the ethics of its conduct are most keenly felt. This ethos toward a negotiated education has notable roots in the critical tradition (Dewey 1916; Freire 1970), but I draw again on Green's (2025) rendering of Boomer's pedagogy to denote that a "pedagogy and politics of interruption" (55) operates in terms of opening space for students and teachers to negotiate what needs to be learned by attending to *where they are*. The sort of education that Green (2025) identifies here is one that remains cognisant of something beyond the curriculum alone – beyond the prescriptive regimen of content, unbending enactments of pedagogy, and tightly constrained unit plans and schedules of assessment – to engage a far more human concern. The engagement of students functions as a primary focus in this formulation of education, where the work of the teacher (and school) must be geared toward the recognition of students on the basis of who they are, and the production of teaching and learning encounters that are inclusive by virtue of their intent to remain pedagogically *comfortable*.

Invoking the sentiment carried in the epigraph for this paper, I close by emphasising the importance of an inclusive mode of education that resists the imposition of assumption and the prescriptive positioning of students. To entreat the Other in pedagogical incursions without providing space for the Other to speak represents a violence; the imposition of an "otherness of the other" (Levinas, 1969). Pedagogies of discomfort proceed on the basis of this fundamental assumption when attributing status to a universalised Other. But notably, they also extend a similar violence when assuming implied privilege.

A pedagogy of comfort isn't so quick in assigning such designations. Instead, a pedagogy of comfort works to affirm students' positionalities *as they are encountered* by taking the students' lived experience as a starting point for meaningful pedagogical incursions. This isn't to suggest that a pedagogy of comfort seeks to deny stark instances of marginalisation or alienation. Quite the contrary. A pedagogy of comfort is deeply concerned for individual students' positionalities and place in the world. But rather than universalise marginalisation and impose decontextualised accounts of alterity as the basis of the pedagogical incursion, and (by extension) invoke discomfort in students who are presumed to be 'privileged', a pedagogy of comfort seeks to broach inquiry into the world while ensuring that the pedagogical locale is *safe* for all students. A pedagogy of comfort does not attempt to 'out' students but seeks to broach critical inquiries into the world whilst attending to the physical and psychic safety of its participants.

This is all the more important in school settings where "a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change" (Ball 2003: 216) is apparent. A prerogative for a pedagogy of comfort is found in the current crisis facing mass-schooling. In effect, *all* students and teachers are prone to the vicissitudes of schooling systems that function as alienating and marginalising. A pedagogy of comfort seeks to make schooling more tolerable by responding to the positionalities that define students' and teachers' lived realities, and that afford this recognition as a basis for orienting education toward more inclusive and participatory ends.

Notes

[1] Zembylas (2015) expands on this summary when noting that "there has been a recurring theme in social justice education that students' experiences of 'discomfort' as well as 'pain and suffering' are pedagogically valuable in learning about the victims of injustice" (163). Discomfort here functions as a pedagogic 'irritation' that is useful for mobilising these inquiries into injustice and the positionalities maintained by marginalised Others.

[2] A core argument within this literature asserts that comfort functions as a 'block' to critical interrogation, and that by challenging the certainties inherent to comfortable positionalities, the generation of empathetic insight and recognition of the experience of the marginalised Other can proceed.

[3] Beyond questions regarding who is interpellated by the pedagogy of discomfort, the positionality assumed for the imagined Other is also pertinent here, leading to questions around

the way this marginalised subjectivity is framed and drawn into the pedagogical exposure. Formulations of *who* this marginalised individual *is* run the risk of universalising imposed accounts of injustice that diminish any meaningful attempts at recourse in situated and purposeful ways. It might be asked *on what basis is this account of the uncomfortable Other framed and on what authority is this naming done*? In other words, toward whom should the critical interrogation of Self be focussed? Are *all* students necessarily requiring of this incursion?

[4] Stephen Ball's (2003) diagnosis of the current educational landscape charts the nexus between global policy shifts in education, where an "apparently unstoppable flood of closely inter-related reform ideas is permeating and reorienting education systems in diverse social and political locations" (215) and that "stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual" (216). For Ball (2003) the possibilities available to educators to enact their practice as autonomous professionals are curtailed in a situation that "not simply changes what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are" (215).

[5] For schools that serve underprivileged communities, this is especially pertinent (Morrison et al. 2019; Blitz et al. 2016; Sleeter 2011).

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Notes toward a *pedagogy of comfort*: Inclusion and engagement in uncomfortable sites of teaching and learning

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