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Socio-sartorial inscriptions of social class in a study of school and identity in Ireland

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This paper explores how classed identities are constituted through the socio-sartorial inscriptions of a working class school and community in an Irish city in the twenty-first century. The data of the paper were generated through a wider three year critical ethnography of a school community. The focus here is upon the identity work of the participants as it is connected to the school and the wider community. The article makes a particular contribution to the conversation of cultural constructions of class; in this instance through socio-sartorialism and how cultural capital is embodied and performed through people. The paper offers illustrative cases formed from participant interviews and an analysis of how socio-sartorial inscription contributes to the making of class in educational contexts.

Keywords: socio-sartorial inscriptions; social class and education; Irish education; ethnography; identity

Introduction

> Interviewer: Do you think there are differences between where you live and other areas?
>
> Shane: Portown has a bit of a name but the people are very friendly and Portown is very tight-knit compared to other areas. People do think that people from Portown are scumbags … If you were talking to group of old doll … 'Ahh Portown' (heavily accented.) I went to a house party in Canley [a middle-class suburb]. They dressed differently to us and they had different haircuts. We walked in anyway with muscle tops and tattoos. All the boys in there went quiet. They felt intimidated by us.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how socio-sartorial inscriptions, such as those introduced by the above vignette, contribute to social class discrimination and how students in one school community inflict inscriptions that serve to alienate and discriminate against others. The extract above encapsulates some of the central themes of this paper in emphasising difference, classed identities and how appearance, style and dress contribute to these positioned constructions. Shane's reading of how people in his local area are constructed by others, and indeed by themselves, focuses on appearance through haircuts, clothes, accent, and the body. There is also a strong sense of the spectacle here, of dress and appearance as a performance imbued with meaning and messages. This work shines a light upon the invisible injuries of class

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perpetrated, and perpetuated, through the inscriptive identity processes of socio-sartorial inscription. First, I will introduce the approach to classed identity constructions being taken here through a short discussion of the social and cultural construction of class. Second, I will theorise socio-sartorialism whilst also introducing the key elements of the theoretical framework informing the research. After the methodology, the illustrative cases deployed here will be discussed in order to construct the theory of socio-sartorial inscription and classed identity-making being constructed in this study.

Social and cultural constructions of class

Social class is a disputed concept open to a variety of interpretations and conceptualisations drawn from perspectives such as the economic, the cultural, and the social (Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1987; Skeggs, 2004, 2015). The view subscribed to here is one where social class is both relational and interactional. It is a fluid conceptualisation that is in a constant stream of making, one that refuses the strictly defined categorisations of socio-economic models and works to infuse the cultural elements of class. The perspective taken here draws on Stephanie Lawler's (2005) work where she defines class:

> as a dynamic process which is the site of political struggle, rather than as a set of static and empty positions waiting to be filled by indicators such as employment and housing. (p. 430)

Essentially, as will be explored later , I am exploring social class as part of a relational world of difference and distinction; where definitions are often socially constructed through 'not-being' as much as they are by sameness and being (Cahill, 2016). It is a nuanced and relational concept that is deployed in a variety of ways to constitute difference between people. This paper focuses upon cultural class analysis (Bourdieu, 1984) and how our social and cultural worlds construct classed identities and positions for the young people at the centre of this study. Examining social class from a cultural perspective is not about offering an alternative to economic social class inequality positions but rather about deepening our gaze to the minutae of the moments through which classed identities become visible. Cultural perspectives on class are not uncommon (Bennett et al., 2009; Bottero, 2004; Devine, Savage, Crompton, & Scott, 2004) and the purpose here is to contribute to the field by offering an Irish perspective focused upon youth, education and community through the specific lens of socio-sartorial inscriptions and identity-making. Nevertheless, social class is a contested concept and yet it cannot be unwound from the culturally focused concept of classed identity being used in this paper. If transforming and improving the deleterious effects of social class divisions and identities is a core function of this work, then it is important that this work does not contribute to the problem it seeks to address. Therefore, the paper shows how class is a co-constructed and contested concept that is still intrinsically relevant to societal differentiation and discrimination.

Theorising socio-sartorial inscription

Social class, clothing and youth culture are very connected in terms of contemporary identity constructions (Jones, 2012; Nayak, 2006). The connectedness of appearance,

demonstrations of taste, style and class position are particularly relevant in terms of the othering of working class masculinities and femininities (Hollingworth, 2015; Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Tyler, 2008). Internationally and nationally, research has focused on the intersectionalities related to class position and gender (Appleford, 2016; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001), race and ethnicity (Darmody, Byrne, & McGinnity, 2014; Kitching, 2011).These connections and distinctions through sartorial dispositions and class positions have featured in educational research and wider sociological research (Bourdieu, 1984; Lovett, 2013).

As Francome-Webb and Silk (2015) suggest, class 'is writ large on our bodies, a part of the intimate private sphere that has now been marshalled into public spaces' (pp. 4–5). This recognition of performance and identity making is also emphasised by Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2013, p. 31) with particular reference to masculinities in the twenty-first century where 'manhood can be materially and visually acquired through work *on* the body'. This is the stuff of culturally classed identities and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The participants in this study contribute to their own identity-making. and that of others, through their sociocultural constructions of self and other through the dialectical meaning-making of daily life. It is these distinctions, differences and constitutive actions of making difference that is the focus here.

The illustrative cases that will be discussed below interrogate the construct of socio-sartorial inscriptions where students become positioned as a result of their clothing, style, appearance and hairstyles. The central interest here is how this practice of naming, describing and attaching uniforms of separation and difference influences the classed identity constructions pervading the community of Portown. As will be explicated later, many of the student participants made distinctions between people and positioned individuals and groups as other through descriptions of dress codes and physical appearance. Hollingworth and Archer (2010) point out that

> … young people's performances of 'style' and investments in producing their appearance can be read as attempts to generate capital and to claim value and recognition. (p. 595)

They argue that these alternative cultural postures are resistances to positioning as undervalued students in undervalued and negatively inscribed school and social environments.

Socio-sartorialism emerges throughout the literature as a space of mediation where class identities are negotiated and psychosocial relational positioning is enacted (Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007; Bourdieu, 1984; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Hollingworth & Archer, 2010; Lawler, 2005). The intention here is to explore how the mediated identity work taking place around styles, uniforms and dress codes interacts with psychosocial valuing, differentiating and identifying in an urban Irish school and the surrounding community. Significant, and seminal, theoretical constructs from sociological and sociocultural traditions are used here with the intention of framing socio-sartorial inscription as a significant contribution to cultural class analysis and identity. Beverley Skeggs' (2004) broad notion of inscription is a foundational concept here through her commentary that 'class formation is dynamic, produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic' (p. 5). This produced and negotiated version of social class is central to the conceptualisation employed in this paper as clothing and the perceptions of what we wear and how we represent ourselves become a part of the identity work of selves and others. Like Skeggs, this paper draws upon Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit, and

particularly the idea of cultural capital as 'embodied' and negotiated through perceptions of self and other where our adornments and embodiments act as signifiers to class position and in turn impact upon the various identity negotiations that take place in the ebb and flow of daily life (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* focuses particularly on representations and 'class … [is] defined as much by its being-perceived as by its being' (p. 483) and the data discussed below accentuates the centrality of perception in classed identity formation. In essence, the relationship between what Bourdieu (1984) calls 'being-perceived' and 'being' is vital to an understanding of class dynamics. One works upon the other, they are locked in a dualistic interplay which works to produce and construct classed positioning.

This idea of positioning is usefully constructed by Holland et al. (1998, p. 151) as 'positional identities' where 'cultural artifacts' contribute to the co-construction of variously classed identities. These artifacts may take the form of language, actions, clothing, social identifications, affinities and so on. Holland et al. define 'positional identities' as having to do with 'the day-to-day and on the ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance – with the social interactional, social-relational structures of the lived world' (p. 151). This definition encompasses not only what positional identities are but also how they operate and are operated in the world. The concepts outlined here offer appropriate lenses for the explorations and theorising that follow later in this paper.

Methodology

The three year ethnography used individual interviews, focus groups and extensive participant observation as data generation instruments. Data were generated through individual interviews with 30 students, eight parents and eight teachers who formed a core research group within the study. The shortest interview was forty minutes and the longest was one hour and twenty five minutes. There were also seven small group interviews with small groups of two-three students drawn from the participants. Although small, the sample was purposive in the sense that participants were representative of their school community in terms of sex, race, ethnicity and students with special educational needs. Participant observation was recorded through reflective journaling over the three year period. Notes were taken of various events, observations, interactions and occurrences throughout the research. All data have been anonymised and confidentiality was extended to all of the participants. This data was then coded with the interview data. Data were subject to 'meaning coding' both during and after the data generation period of the study (Kvale, 2007, p. 105). Coded data were continuously re-read, revised and emergent themes were eventually categorised. The subject of this paper, socio-sartorial inscriptions, was one of the many themes that emerged through the study through the coding and categorisation process. The analysis that follows here is drawn from the 'stories lived and told' of the participants in the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). In research focusing on inequality, school and young people, there are issues around power and the research process. The relative position of the researched and the researcher are so important, not only in terms of the interactions but also in terms of the lenses one brings to bear in the analysis of such work. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that 'our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience' (p. 121), and

that is certainly the case here. Prior to being a doctoral researcher, my professional life was as a teacher in schools serving economically marginalised communities where some of the issues raised in this research setting were also in evidence. This work is an effort to reify the hiddenness of class formation and the microscopic events that afford and constrain the identity work of people everywhere.

The cases selected below illustrate pervasive ideas of difference and identity throughout the study. For these young people, clothing, forms of dress and appearance assumed significance in the making of difference throughout their in-school and out-of-school lives.

Portown: the site of the study

Portown is a suburb in an Irish urban centre. It is a largely working class suburb that is in close proximity to a more middle class area known as Old Portown. Old Portown is a more traditional area made up of private housing estates and a population of employed families. Therefore, the close proximity of two contrasting areas provides some cultural, social and economic tensions in the geographical backdrop to this research.

Such dichotomies of place are common in urban centres all over the world. In this case there is a very particular social class dynamic that contributes to the emergence of classed identity issues. The conflation of class issues and a vibrant neoliberal market in terms of competitive post-primary schooling has also contributed to a culture of distinction and difference within this community. These market-driven dynamics have been written about elsewhere (Cahill & Hall, 2014). Such distinctions are central to the dynamics of the illustrative cases interrogated below.

The school at the epicentre of this study, like other schools in similar areas, has suffered in the education market. Middle class families have deserted the school in favour of schools in more affluent neighbouring suburbs or they have enrolled in fee-paying alternatives, of which there are many, given the urban location. Other Irish studies would also focus on the changing profile of the post-primary school landscape in the classed world of commodified and consumer-driven schooling (Courtois, 2015; Drudy, 2011). It is within the confines of this cauldron, that the dynamics of producing classed identities emerge in this study.

Socio-sartorial inscriptions: 'th' apparel oft proclaims the [wo]man'[1]

Illustrative case one: 'you kind of see, even by just looking'

This first excerpt exemplifies how clothing functions in the construction of classed and positioned identities. Rhona, a 15-year-old female student participant, explained what a 'scumbag' looks like. She also narrated herself in terms of difference, particularly in terms of appearance. She initially attended a very middle class school as well as attending primary school at a non-denominational primary school. Rhona later attended a primary Gaelscoil (schooling through the medium of the Irish language). Her varied educational biography positions her in an interesting space as she has insider experience and knowledge of other school contexts. In these excerpts, the interview explored the idea of difference and particularly the appearance of

difference in the context of hearing denigrating comments about Portown Community School.

> I: How do you feel when people say that, when people say that about the school? You go to this school you know?
>
> R: I dunno like. I don't feel like I come across as a scumbag like. I don't feel like I come across that way as other people would, d'ya know … like I feel like if you put me next to other people in the school you'd kind of see even just by looking that there was a bit of a difference, well hopefully anyway.

This exchange exemplifies notions of Bourdieuian *distinction* where the participant distinguished herself from her peer group through appearance and general demeanour. She positioned herself through positive comparisons with her peers. Rhona feels that she doesn't 'come across that way [as a scumbag] as other people would' and that there are differences that 'you'd kind of see even by just looking'. Archer et al. (2007, p. 222) point to Bourdieu's much cited pronouncement that 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu, 1984). This is clearly relevant in this instance as the participant pointed to her appearance as significantly different and in so doing also showed awareness around stratification, difference and distinction as social signifiers that distinguish oneself. By concluding with 'well hopefully anyway', the fragment of conversation was left open to scrutiny. Perhaps the participant was seeking a level of affirmation from the interviewer while also voicing a level of insecurity regarding her own reading of her distinctions from her peer group. The salient point, however, is how participants used dress and appearance to signify difference. The excerpt exemplifies the contribution of socio-sartorial inscriptions to distinguishing oneself as *different from* and *better than* in a social class context.

The extract below, again from the interview with Rhona, expanded upon this sense of *distinction* and difference particularly in terms of clothing and appearance:

> I: Okay. Do you think what people say, like 'this school is full of scumbags' or whatever, do you think that's true?
>
> R: Small bit like but a lot of people in the school you kind of have to get to know before you can say they are scumbags. They might look like a scumbag but they might not be, you know that kind of way. Like lots of people in this school do look like scumbags but when you get to know them then they aren't.
>
> I: Okay . Think about this for a moment now. What does a scumbag look like? You know when you say 'they look like scumbags', what do you mean by that?
>
> R: Tracksuits and big earrings and the hair tied back pure tight and big socks tucked into the pants or whatever. Boys then would be the same thing with a big tight haircut and a big scummy throw and a big knacker voice [spoken here with contempt in her voice].

In this extract the student narrated the uniform of the other, as she perceived it, amongst her peers. Rhona's contempt and criticism of the school cohort complies with Lawler's (2005) construct of the middle class 'disgusted subject' (p. 429). The 'disgusted subject' is the relationally constructed middle class self who distinguishes oneself from the masses through the ability to critique and objectify the other. Rhona articulated a middle class identity that relies 'on *not* being the repellent and disgusting "other"' (p. 431). Her analysis of socio-sartorial inscriptions of class was vital to her own identity work. She positioned herself as distinct and different whilst also setting about defending her peers. Rhona fulfils a dual role which is representative of a

psychosocial fluidity. She is the working class girl who has attended the middle class schools. She has returned, or has been returned, to her roots. She is a character in flux. She refuses, agentically, to be pigeon-holed by class location. However, her *modus operandi* for othering herself and excluding herself from her demonised surroundings is through the cementing of the demonised identity on to her peers and her locality. Rhona struggled to disconnect herself from the demonised landscape and yet can only re-constitute herself in terms of difference and the jettisoning of the local.

Throughout the data generated in this study, participants commented on a general dress and demeanour which act as signifiers for students from Portown and other similar schools. For instance, one parent commented that 'you see the lads in town with their hoods up, it's the walk, you know, the walk that sets them apart'. The parent then imitated a walk with extremely emphasised shoulder movements intended to display a macho and threatening gait. It is evident from this investigation that members of the wider community beyond the school, middle class and working class alike, used appearance, dress code and demeanour as signifiers of fractional group membership and as the details of making distinctions and emphasising social class differences between people through deep sociocultural wounding that solidified over time. These are the soft injuries of class that become infused into the collective psyche and served to differentiate and other without ever naming social class positions and identities as the tools of societal separation and stratification. This case, and those that follow, serve to exemplify both the influence of socio-sartorial inscription on the making of identity but also the harmful separations and distinctions inherent in the lived *classing* of self and others.

Illustrative case two: uniforms of resistance

Throughout this study, counter-cultural peer groups splintered and formed to create culturally significant signifiers and fractions that often served to create and recreate classed stereotypes that impinge upon the identities of the student participants. In the following extract, such forces played out in the context of wearing, or not wearing, the school uniform. This played out as participants reported a sense of being attacked for wearing the school uniform. Inversely, wearing a school uniform could also be seen as an act of resistance against a dominant and almost hegemonic peer sub-culture.

Some students in this study, especially those coming from a particular sub-locality (a constellation of social housing estates characterised by high unemployment and a lack of public services) within the Portown community, discussed the significance of the school uniform and how it acted as an inscriptive force in the negotiation of their lifeworld. The students who attended school from this area of the locality were enacting resistance to the counter-culture of 'The Gang'. In the following extract, Laurence discusses the negative impact of wearing a school uniform creates for him amongst his peer group:

I: Ok. Em … Do people ever say things about the school you go to?
L: Like, the way it is down my way is there's no such thing as school once … Most people over the age of 16 down in my area, there is no school. It's Youthreach [an alternative setting to school supported by a small maintenance payment for attendance] or FÁS [training agency for early school leavers], they're getting €100 a week, €200 a week. That's what they think of, like.
I: Ya?

> L: There's no … they have their opinion about the school if you ask them about their opinion but they wouldn't go out of their way to say it to you, like. And … 'cos the way it is down there, you walk through the place in a uniform you're different automatically, like. Like, I'd be two or three steps behind, say, The Gang [that's what they're called]. You'd be two or three steps behind The Gang because you're automatically in a uniform walking from a Monday to a Friday down, and you'd see the boys then with the pants tucked into the socks, and hats and all that carry on, like. So you're automatically different with the uniform on, then, for being in school.

Later in the interview Laurence expanded upon this idea of the uniform and how it operated as a particularly provocative cultural artifact in his community. The uniform mediated how he, and other students, came to be constructed by the community:

> L: It happens all the time, you see plenty people. There's people in our area, young fellas in our area who are very quiet, they do their … they're in school doing … you see them coming through in their blazers going to [names of fee-paying schools], whatever, and they're doing well for themselves, they've scholarships for sports, now, going to college and stuff. But then, if that person in the blazer doing well for himself in life knows all us for the last ten years we mightn't have talked to him. Walk past him one day in his school uniform … they could throw a glass bottle at him, like, just for being in his school uniform!

The school uniform has the quality of a cultural artifact that signifies community membership and also, as we see here, it can function as a signifier of separation. The artifact of the uniform took on differing significances depending on the standpoint of the cultural interpreter. For 'The Gang' it signified cultural control and officialdom. It was something to be abhorred, demonised, resisted, and defamed. This is classical cultural resistance to education represented by the uniform, as evidenced elsewhere (Willis, 1977). The uniforms that were accepted were those of the street and those to be resisted and defiled are those of societally imposed norms such as school. 'The Gang' wielded significant influence through social capital and intimidatory power. In sociocultural terms, the identities of the school-going boys were radically repositioned by the dominant sub-culture in the area. The school-going boys became the resistors. They were, in the microcosm of this community, the cultural warriors struggling to impose their version of the self in a world dominated by sub-cultural norms (Pye, Haywood, & Mac an Ghaill, 1996). They were struggling to self-inscribe and re-scribe despite the dominant social inscriptions being foisted upon them by wider society. Such examples as those used above display the dialectical interplay between cultural forces that mould, break, form and reform the identities of the participants, particularly through the socio-sartorial inscriptions associated with dress, belonging and classed distinctions. Therefore, in this case, Laurence is actively resisting the dominant culture of his out-of-school peer group through adopting an agentic stance of self-inscription and self-positioning. Similarly, 'The Gang' had inscribed those who wear the school uniform as representative of a wider dominating culture of school and authority. As with Rhona above, clothing (in this case school uniforms), and the connectedness of appearance and belonging are central to the cultural making of classed identities through a process of socio-sartorial inscription.

Illustrative case three: suits and hoodies

In this extract Karl and Elma explored issues of class separation through socio-sartorial inscriptions, as instantiated by the geo-politics of social and private housing and the co-constitutive nature of socio-sartorial inscription by self and others. Karl is a 14-year-old student who was interviewed in a group interview with a female classmate, Elma, who was also 14 years old. At this point in the interview we had been discussing how other people view their school and their area. Both students became quite animated throughout this excerpt:

I: Do people treat you differently because of where you live?
E: They could say things like 'Do you live in a council house – oh my God! I just talked to someone who lives in a council house' and stuff like that.
K: Ya,like up in Grosvenor Heights (private housing area in Old Portown) they buy their house and they all own them. I'd walk up there with a hoody and you just know they are looking at you from their doors saying, 'what's he doing up here?' You're not welcome there. If they come down to our park wearing a suit we might say the same to them, like you don't belong down here in your suit … They think 'I'm better than you because I own a house, I'm better than you because I walk around in a suit'.

There is a convergence of dynamics compressed into the statements by both of these participants who animated the processes of othering and demonisation they have been subjected to in their daily lives. This sense of demonisation, othering and marginalisation agrees with other findings internationally and serves to emphasise similarities in terms of classed identity construction and inscription here in Ireland (Reay, 2007, 2008). Again, it seemed it was the nondescript actions of others as refracted through the mind of the self that contributed to making of the psychosocial self. Karl was imagining the constructions of his middle class watchers and nevertheless he had a very tangible feeling of being unwelcome and of being judged. He used these imaginings to filter his own view of himself. He also showed a very perceptive awareness of this dynamic in action as he commented upon how a middle class 'suit' might be viewed in 'the parks'. There was an admirable sense of social understanding at play here. Similarly, Karl's musings displayed the agentic and enmeshed nature of the interplay between identity and social class, and between self and society. How Karl and Elma dressed, and most importantly their subjective constructions of how their socio-sartorial choices would be taken up by the middle class constituency, was formative of the classed positions constituted through their daily interactions. They have rightly recognised how class stereotypes are unjust and destructive in terms of how they position people through their choice of clothing, amongst other things. This infusion of appearance and representation through the socio-sartorial inscription of self and other shows how, as Hollingwoth and Williams (2009) have stated, 'class is rarely spoken about explicitly but is present in coded terms' (p. 479). The codifications inscribed upon others are often injurious and divisive. Karl and Emma show that they have deep awareness around how wider Irish (and global) society is positioning them in terms of wealth (house ownership) and socio-sartorial inscriptions (suits and hoodies). These positionings and inscriptions are exacerbated by the increasingly pervasive cultures of neoliberalism (unrelenting competition with others) and neoconservatism (unrelenting domination and exclusion of others).

Indeed, Karl and Emma's story coupled with Rhona's views of identity offer enactments of these neoliberal discourses of success and failure, belonging and exclusion, deservedness and undeservedness, that permeates the lives of the participants throughout this study and beyond. O'Sullivan (2005) describes how this

mercantilist paradigm has become infused with Irish (and global) society to such an extent that people are in constant searches for distinction and difference. It is such infusions of distinction and difference encouraged by late capitalist hyper-consumerism that contribute to the centrality of performances of the self that are intricately bound to appearances and judgments of taste. Indeed, such judgments of taste and dress, as evidenced above, form the 'dominant power behind [the] construction' (O'Brien, 2016, p. 84) of class from the cultural perspectives informing this paper.

Conclusion

This paper has offered an exposure of some of the 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) through demonstrations of how our world has the potential to damage, degrade, and dehumanise. Rhona demonstrated how her judgments of others were informed by appearance and how such appearances were constitutive of social class positions. Karl and Elma told us how it feels to be differentiated and denigrated through dress and appearance, and how the world of the middle class suburb and that of the less affluent 'park' community are differentially inscribed through socio-sartorialism. Laurence's story of 'The Gang' and school uniforms instantiates how socio-sartorial inscriptions are mutually constitutive of classed positions and the injuries, symbolic and physical, that ensue from the identity work of people. These injuries are at once emotional, symbolic and violent. It has also shown how identities are plurally and mutually constructed in the wider sociocultural world – within us, without us and through us. This paper has shown how such differentiations are constitutive of classed identity positions in educational and community contexts throughout the interactions of people in this Irish school and community. If there is a lesson to be learned here, it is that the wider social and political contexts of competitive individualism (embodied by market-orientated differentiation of students and schools) along with the othering of others need to be addressed at the level of educational policy at macro and micro levels throughout our education systems. Socio-sartorial inscriptions exemplify how difference and discrimination manifest themselves in the everyday worlds of schools, students and communities.

Note

[1] Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene III.

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