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### Scarring Thoughts: *Harry Potter* and the Neoliberal Education Reform

“According to Madam Pomfrey, thoughts could leave deeper scars than almost anything else” (J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*).

**Abstract:** This paper probes the resonances between neoliberal education reforms and the wizarding world of *Harry Potter*. This interdisciplinary research project aligns the sociologies of literature and education to reveal how the neoliberal reforms found within the Global Education Reform Movement [GERM] manifest within popular culture, and how popular culture naturalizes, frames and patrols particular modes of discourse about school, teaching and learning. This paper creates a discursive dance between neoliberal theories of educational reform and the popular cultural educational reforms in *Harry Potter*. This paper demonstrates that the *Harry Potter* series provides ways of understanding the impact of these education reforms on teachers, students, and the everyday workings of a school.

**Keywords:** *Harry Potter*, education, neoliberalism, popular literature, schooling

This paper explores the discursive dialogue between neoliberal education reforms and the configuration, framing and shaping of schooling, teaching and learning in the wizarding world of *Harry Potter*. The paper focuses specifically on the fifth book in the Potter series by J. K. Rowling, *The Order of the Phoenix*, which has previously been studied by researchers as an example of how modes of control over curriculum and students are introduced and embedded, and the mode of resistance that emerges from student activists. The book portrays

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the struggle for control of the wizarding school Hogwarts between the school's headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, and the Ministry of Magic (the arm of the government that oversees England's wizarding population). The Ministry increasingly exerts its power over the school and introduces a number of educational "decrees" that control the curriculum, pedagogical approaches, extracurricular activities, and socialization of the students at the school.

Accompanying these decrees is the appointment of the generally reviled Professor Dolores Umbridge, firstly as teacher but then as "High Inquisitor," a position that surpasses the headmaster in terms of power and scope to design and implement educational decrees. A number of these decrees and the Ministry's strategies for implementing the changes are resonant of current reforms driven by neoliberal ideologies in contemporary education systems.

Sahlberg described the Global Education Reform Movement [GERM] as a neoliberal reform movement sweeping many countries, including the United States of America, England, and Australia. This paper focuses on reforms from each of these countries as providing a framework for Rowling's wizarding world and the non-magic "Muggle" world. The discursive dialogue between these policy interventions and popular culture provides a series of reading options and frameworks for readers and film viewers. The choice in this paper to highlight reforms from multiple countries was deliberate to show the pervasive nature of these reforms. This is a transnational movement, increasing the appropriateness of an international popular cultural framing of these changes. But further, we create an iterative loop between popular culture and policy to show how neoliberalism is naturalized and blocks the consideration of alternative ways of thinking about learning, teaching and power. Lingard et al. highlighted the global nature of education reform policy in GERM countries, identifying the way education systems borrow elements of policy from other countries, resulting in similar policies that espouse high external accountabilities and close monitoring of schools in an effort to improve student results.

Acknowledging the interdisciplinary nature of scholars studying popular culture (Grindstaff 211), this paper draws upon educational sociology and literary sociology, making use of specific examples from the Muggle world to parallel the portrayal of education reforms in a seminal piece of popular literature such as *Harry Potter*. Specifically, we probe and prise open the productive space between teaching, learning, writing and popular culture (Brabazon). This paper does not offer textual analysis or theories of representation. It is a post-poststructural, post-Baudrillard conversation between cultural studies and education studies. It summons high popular culture (Redhead and Brabazon) to create a space for activism, space and change. This approach provides ways of making sense of education and of the impact of education reforms on teachers, students, and the workings of a school.

### ***Harry Potter* as a Popular Culture Phenomenon**

The *Harry Potter* series has been described as a pop culture icon (Heilman 1). Between the original books and films, spinoff books and films, merchandise, video games, and theme parks, it has spread into multiple facets of popular culture. Heilman confirmed that because of the influence of the *Potter* series, it has become embedded into our global culture (2). Therefore, the goal of this paper is not to explore Harry Potter as popular culture. That work has been done with profound success.<sup>1</sup> Instead, we allow these texts to resonate contextually. What is its functionality in theorizations of teaching and learning? By adding theories of neoliberal education, this paper seeks to contribute to the field of popular culture researchers studying the series with innovation and activating a distinct and distinctive lens.

The *Potter* series has been established as a source of academic inquiry by scholars across the fields of cultural studies, literature, sociology and education. These have included analysis of representations of diversity (Vezzali et al.), historical analogies and parallels (Lacassange) and religious symbolism (Hennequin; Ostling) within the books. A body of

research exists in relation to its use as reading material in classrooms and its influence on younger generations of readers.<sup>2</sup> The commonly espoused notion that the series created a new generation of readers has been contested by Heilman, who suggested that although the *Potter* series has been read by millions, those people did not necessarily go on to read other books with the same vigor (2). This further highlights the uniqueness of the *Potter* series in relation to its influence in popular culture.

Educational sociologists have made use of the series as an area of study, and of particular relevance to this paper is an analysis of this same book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and its configuration of control and resistance of curriculum for students (Helfenbein). In it, Helfenbein identifies some similar parallels between education reforms and elements of *Order of the Phoenix* that are extended in this paper. However, Helfenbein focuses mainly on notions of curriculum control and student resistance to this level of school regulation, but this paper analyses education reforms more expansively and provides insights into the parallels between reforms in the wizarding world and the Muggle world. Birch also briefly explores some events in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* as part of a discussion detailing how effectively the curriculum and the wider institution of schooling met students' needs in the books.

Using the series as a sense-making device enables us to understand how popular culture texts (in this case, the *Potter* series) reflect contemporary discourses about education and schooling. Grindstaff notes that popular texts enable readers to make sense of their own experiences and Lacassange highlights the way Rowling has developed realistic discourses woven throughout the series. Though the fantasy elements of *Potter's* wizarding world may not be echoed directly in our world, the school reforms introduced in *Order of the Phoenix* are dialoguing with contemporary global discourses about schooling which enables us to understand "the structures of human society" (Elias 36) such as schools and education.

## **Popular Culture as a Dialogue with Schooling, eTeaching and Learning: Theoretical Approach**

This paper draws its theoretical approach from the long history of sociology, fusing a particular connection between the sociology of education and cultural sociology. It extends and critiques reflection theory as a starting point (Albrecht; Griswold) to suggest that popular culture including literature does dialogue with a social order. The authors of this paper are careful to say “a” social order, rather than “the” social order, acknowledging the significant diversity between schooling systems around the globe. The focus of this article on the discursive dialogue between the specific phenomenon of GERM reforms and the reforms in *Potter* ensures the paper does not make generalizations about schooling or education worldwide, or suggesting that reflection theory can be universally applied in popular culture studies.

Drawing upon previous research from the sociology of literature in particular provides a framework for scholars to investigate the insights available from a series like *Potter*. The paper builds upon previous scholars taking a sociological approach to interpreting the insights offered through Rowling’s description of schooling in the *Potter* series. Lacassagne (320), in particular, emphasizes the “rich sociological insights” available from a study of the *Potter* series. In addition, Szakolczai’s discussion about the sociological insights available from novels includes the argument that they serve as “instruments for understanding the modern world” (16). Birch suggests that education scholars can understand constructions of schooling in popular culture by drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from cultural and media studies, literary theory and education studies. Belcher and Stephenson highlight the possibilities specifically inherent within the *Potter* novels when they noted that the fantasy element of the series provides readers with the distance to critically examine contemporary issues. Belcher

and Stephenson suggest that Rowling's wizarding world provides commentary on our own "political and ethical" (4) circumstances. We contend that the exploration of the advancement of neoliberal GERM education reforms in contemporary schooling aligns with this argument.

### **The Global Education Reform Movement [GERM] Phenomenon**

Sahlberg describes GERM as the "unofficial educational agenda" (99) found in many countries, capturing and applying neoliberal ideologies and promoted in education systems and policy-making decisions by private corporations and interests. These reforms, "global in origins and framed by neo-liberalism" (Lingard 42) have spread rapidly throughout a number of countries, including the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, and a number of countries in the developing world (Sahlberg 99). Neoliberal influences commonly found in education reform initiatives include high-stakes accountabilities in an effort to raise standards (Apple; Brathwaite). Other elements of neoliberal education reform less relevant to this particular paper include the notion of increasing school choice for parents, with *Harry Potter* canon suggesting there is, at most, one wizarding school per country. This is regulation and differentiation of education. Privatization through market-based reforms and the devolution of power from a centrally-managed system to local school management with little state involvement (Brathwaite) is one key element of neoliberal ideologies not represented in the book, which in fact represents tighter control from the government and a removal of school-based decision making. This notion of privatization is often accompanied by a rise in business-based principles being introduced into schools, treating parents and students as clients and using market logics of choice and competition to argue that results will improve as an outcome (Brathwaite). Due again in part to Hogwarts's positioning as the only school choice for British

wizards, this ideology is not as clearly evident in the series. However, notions of customer (parent) satisfaction are invoked as justification for the implementation of radical reforms throughout the book, so there is some evidence of the inclusion of this particular aspect of neoliberal education reform ideology.

GERM features a number of common policy elements, including standardization of education commonly constructed through external high-stakes student testing and teacher evaluation systems, a “back to basics” discourse focusing on a prescribed core curriculum, and higher external accountabilities for teachers resulting in rewards or sanctions for teachers and schools depending on their performance in these accountability mechanisms (Sahlberg). Each of these reforms can be found in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. This article now shifts to an analysis of examples of these reforms in action, comparing the school-based reforms to its Hogwarts counterpart, and using responses to these reforms from the Potter characters to illustrate some of the impacts of these GERM reforms on Muggle educators and students. This paper focuses in detail on specific examples from Australia, the United States, and England to draw these parallels, thus affording a deeper analysis of the impact of these neoliberal reforms and their counterparts in the *Potter* series.

### **Neoliberal Education Reforms Evident in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix***

Governments invoke discourses of crisis in the media and public consciousness to justify their extreme education reforms. This approach of the constructed crisis is highlighted as a common element of neoliberal reforms by Helfenbein, who notes parallels between the Ministry’s comments in the *Daily Prophet* and the discourses presented by the Bush administration during the launch and initial period of *No Child Left Behind* in the United States. As with all of these GERM parallels, due to the global nature of the reform movement, this approach is not isolated to the United States and the Wizarding World. In Australia, after

inaugural national student literacy and numeracy testing was introduced, discourses of crisis were invoked by the government as a precursor to rapid and far-reaching reforms at state and national levels. These discourses have been used in the past to increase the sense of urgency around reforms and to advocate for their very need, because “business as usual is not an option” for schools (Nordin 118) and governments can thus place the blame for perceived failures at the feet of teachers and schools.

The reforms closely associated with GERM are then justified as a response to the resulting public mistrust of educators (Cranston). These public constructions – imaginings – of crisis have driven policy reform in Queensland, Australia, where the then Premier (head of state government) noted that she was “obligated to respond urgently” (Lingard and Sellar 647) to these perceptions of crisis and failure. This is evident in *Harry Potter* where the Ministry of Magic uses the *Daily Prophet*, the major wizarding newspaper, to sow the seeds of discontent and manufacture a crisis to which they can respond. The Minister for Magic introduced an “unprecedented level of control” (Rowling 274) over Hogwarts, noting in the newspaper that it was in response to “concerns voiced by anxious parents, who feel the school may be moving in a direction they do not approve” (274-275). The Ministry spokesperson further suggested that these reforms would enable confidence to be restored in the school.

*Harry Potter* offers researchers insights into the impact of this public mistrust of educators and the ongoing construction and proliferation of discourses of crisis. When students returned to Hogwarts for the beginning of the new school year, the reader is shown the impact of the public narrative of crisis on parents’ confidence in the school and its teachers. Rowling provided insights into different parents’ responses to these discourses of crisis, which can most clearly be seen in responses from three students in particular – Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom. Seamus’s mother was portrayed as engaging with the crisis narrative presented in the *Daily Prophet* and, as a result, not wanting to send her son back to the school.



This narrative arc performs the loss in confidence that can result from constant negative media portrayals and is mirrored in Mockler's analysis of media portrayals of education reforms in Australia. After analyzing the dominant discourses about schooling in the country's most widely read newspapers, Mockler identified that these discourses were about distrust, choice, and performance (5). The first dominant discourse—distrust—serves to pave the way for neoliberal reform stalwarts of choice and performance, both of which are fundamental elements of GERM (Sahlberg). As discussed earlier in this paper, the neoliberal narrative of choice is removed from the world of *Harry Potter*, due to the lack of school choice among wizarding folk. Narratives of distrust in the mainstream media were found to be aimed at educators who opposed the neoliberal reforms being implemented, while notions of performance were related to measurable outcomes and to transparency of school performance (Mockler), a narrative echoed in *Harry Potter* with comments from the Minister's proxy advocating for "a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability" (Rowling 192-193).

In contrast to Seamus's mother portraying the influence of negative media portrayals, Dean Thomas's parents, as Muggles, did not follow the wizarding news and thus had no compunctions about Dean returning to Hogwarts for the school year. In a similar portrayal of parents or carers not being influenced by the negative media portrayals, Neville Longbottom's grandmother (established early in the series as being cantankerous and outspoken) categorized the media portrayal of Hogwarts and its teachers as "rubbish" and pronounced that the newspaper itself had gone downhill, rather than the school (Rowling 198). These outspoken parents and carers, are in the minority, though, and *Potter* portrays a school community that is plagued by doubt where the seeds of mistrust have been sown successfully by the media and the government, paving the way for neoliberal reforms represented by GERM's reforms of accountability, audit, and performance.

## Neoliberal Reform: Discourses of “Back to Basics” and a Narrowing of Curriculum

*Harry Potter* also reflects neoliberal GERM reform ideals of “back to basics” and a traditional curriculum. Sahlberg described this as an increased focus on core subjects, where basic knowledge and skills are emphasized over more creative pursuits and in addition, these policies and discourses discourage teachers from taking risks with teaching approaches (101). This can potentially result in a focus on very traditional teaching approaches being the norm in classrooms, which result in “safe” lessons that are more likely to improve test results. As the newly appointed Ministry representative, Professor Umbridge foreshadowed the changes that would eventually narrow the ways teachers could teach, and even work with students, at Hogwarts in a speech at the beginning of the school year. Amid a long speech discussing the new era at Hogwarts, she encourages notions of returning to, and maintaining traditional approaches at the school when she proclaims:

progress for progress’s sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering ... Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited. (Rowling 193)

The portrayal of this shift in focus is most clearly shown to influence student enjoyment and engagement. Traditional teaching methods are greeted with disappointment and frustration from the students. For example, when Umbridge takes over a class that in previous years had involved the practical application of magic, and shifted to a theory-focused textbook-based teaching style, students were “gloomy” because “the order ‘wands away’ had never yet been

followed by a lesson they had found interesting” (Rowling 215-216). The lesson was described as being “desperately dull” by the students (Rowling 217), indicating the level of disengagement.

Students in *Potter* express concern about the lack of practical teaching and the notion that it would be difficult to master skills through reading and theory only, particularly when they would only be given their first opportunity to demonstrate these skills in standardized testing environments. A similar debate has captured education in the Muggle world. GERM is characterized as encompassing an increased focus on core subjects (Sahlberg 100) with basic, measurable, skills being “highly valorized” (Mills and Niesche) over others. These traditional skills are being focused on to the detriment of arts and the humanities (Sahlberg 101) and the debate rages on, with opinion divided about the effectiveness of these approaches. The neoliberal-based GERM reforms are intended to lift “slipping” standards and improve measurable outcomes on testing regimes.

The *Potter* narrative provides an example of questioning the effectiveness of changing and reconfiguring traditional learning methods. It highlights the debate and shows perspectives from students who are seeking engagement and practical skills development, and who express concerns about their ability to transfer these skills into demonstrations in exam conditions. This is contrasted in the books with perspectives from Ministry representatives who advocate for these traditional teaching approaches. In the Muggle world, these approaches are promoted as a means of improving performance on testing. For example, in the United States the *No Child Left Behind* government policy, followed by the *Race to the Top* policy, both implicitly encourage a focus on a narrowed curriculum to ensure students would achieve better on performance targets as measured through standardized testing. A body of education research has highlighted the pernicious effects of this approach, with a particular emphasis on the potential for a narrowed curriculum to eschew more holistic aspects of education. Another key

issue highlighted by scholars is the resulting tendency for schooling to focus on basic lower-order skills, rather than higher-order skills (Hanushek; Jones and Thomas; Lehr). In addition, the students most affected by a narrowed curriculum brought on by these reform policies tend to be students in disadvantaged schools or students (Belcher and Stephenson; Ladson-Billings; Rothstein and Jacobsen) who had the farthest road ahead of them in achieving the targets and benchmarks being measured or “valorized” (Mills and Niesche 2) in the narrowed curriculum. The potential then for student disengagement is significant, as has been examined in the past by researchers (Belcher and Stephenson; Kreig). In the *Harry Potter* series, this focus on lower-order thinking is represented through textbook-based recall rather than the application of magical theory, evident through the “wands away” discussion earlier in this section and the resulting response of disengagement from students. This is also indicative of Sahlberg’s GERM reforms, where a focus is often placed on low-risk teaching methods to deliver “guaranteed content” (101), such as that found in Umbridge’s textbooks.

In the *Potter* series, the narrowing of curriculum includes the range of practical skills being taught to students, as well as the ability to address issues that arise throughout the year. Instead, Umbridge emphasizes to the students that they would be following a Ministry-approved curriculum with no deviation. This was paralleled in the Muggle world where many schools drew back to focusing on reading and mathematics, the most commonly tested areas in neoliberal accountability regimes such as those seen under GERM reforms. This is referred to by Ladson-Billings as a no-frills curriculum approach. The authors of this paper acknowledge the obvious differences between the *Potter* series, where previous years had seen students unexpectedly have to learn to battle dark magic that held potentially deadly consequences (such as fighting off soul-sucking spirits known as Dementors) and the Muggle world, where concerns about a narrowed curriculum include a loss of creativity and the arts, critical and creative thinking, social justice, or personal and cultural diversity (Keddie et al.; Lingard and

Sellar; Minarechová). However, the comparison of the narrowed curriculum and “back to basics” discourses provides a way of seeing similar responses of frustration and disengagement from students who perceive they are engaging with a limited curriculum.

There is also a further ‘meta’ issue to address. The Potter series offers a critique of ‘theory’ affirming practical ‘skills.’ Such a binary opposition – of theory and practice – is Aristotelian in its origins. The ideology built on this binary opposition assumes that ‘practice’ is useful, while ‘theory’ is esoteric. Yet in these *Theoretical Times* (Redhead), assuming that theory is redundant or irrelevant is anti-intellectual. That is why the Potter series is complex. It is not a critique of neoliberalism. It offers ambivalent engagements with regulation, with ‘top down’ imposed regulation. But regulation is a statist solution to enhancing quality, accountability and transparency. Assuming that individual teachers and schools hold expertise without accountability is not a critique of neoliberalism. It is a critique of regulation. Therefore, the Potter series confirms an argument that the School was superior without ‘top down’ intervention. Yet without the ‘top down’ intervention, and as shown in the previous books, mischief, mayhem and accidents result. So, while there is a critique of the market economy ideology in the Harry Potter series, the anti-regulatory imperative is derived from another source.

### **Neoliberal Reform: Discourses of Teacher Inspection and Audit**

One of the more significant reform initiatives in *Harry Potter* is the appointment of Professor Umbridge to the role of High Inquisitor, with an announcement in the *Daily Prophet* that this reform is intended to “get to grips with what some are calling the falling standards at Hogwarts” (Rowling 275). To address this perceived crisis (a method of justifying reforms discussed earlier in this paper), Umbridge is awarded with “powers to inspect her fellow

educators and make sure they are coming up to scratch” (Rowling 275). Umbridge relays this to a colleague with the comment that “the Ministry is determined to weed out unsatisfactory teachers” (Rowling 388). Correspondingly, Sahlberg characterizes a major element of the neoliberal GERM agenda as an attempt to standardize teaching and learning in schools. Part of this, he suggests, was the introduction of external testing of teachers to offer a quick fix to the discourses of crisis discussed earlier in this paper. This external testing of teachers emerges in the form of external or internal evaluations and can sometimes be associated with performance-based pay or sanctions, depending on the outcome of the evaluation. Sahlberg emphasizes the limited measures used to judge effectiveness of teachers under these standardized approaches. External evaluations of teachers have been taken up by a number of GERM countries (including Australia and the United States), but they were established as one of the main ways of evaluating schools in the 1990s in England with the establishment of the Office for Standards in Education [OFSTED]. A significant amount of research has focused on the introduction and evolution of OFSTED inspections, and their impact on teachers, students, and wider school communities. This paper draws upon some of this research to explore parallels between the increased surveillance of Hogwarts teachers and OFSTED’s ongoing surveillance of teachers in England.

These external teacher inspections in England were introduced under the notion that they would improve student outcomes, though scholars have questioned this intention, with findings suggesting the inspections were more about controlling teachers and teaching than they were about improving student outcomes (Courtney). Upon its introduction, the OFSTED inspections quickly shifted focus from students’ knowledge and understanding to teacher performance and a “stronger scrutiny of teachers” in particular (Case et al. 610). This slippage is significant. The focus on learners and learning quality is crucial. But assuming that teachers are directly accountable for student learning and outcomes is a flawed and incorrect theory. Highlighting

the power imbalance of these particular neoliberal reforms of teacher inspections, Fielding suggested that the process “carries with it an over-confident and brusque carelessness born of too much power” (697), and indicated that the reform included serious inequities of power between those being inspected and those performing the inspections (699). This imbalance of power can be seen clearly Rowling’s portrayal of Umbridge – herself a novice teacher – imposing inspections upon more experienced Hogwarts professors. This initiative is able to be implemented due to the imbalance of power at Hogwarts where Umbridge had been appointed to a position of overarching power by the Minister of Magic.

Under the OFSTED inspection framework, research revealed that some teachers felt their worth was being “reduced to the observation of a few lessons” (Jeffrey and Woods 326) and that they were being closely monitored, with external values being imposed (Fielding 697) that challenged notions for teachers who had previously been child-centered and passionate about their work (Jeffrey and Woods 326). Instead, some teachers began to approach their work more mechanically, seeking to align with the inspection framework that emphasized specific types of teaching methods. This could be seen in *Harry Potter*, in an interaction between the enthusiastic Hagrid and shrewd Hermione. Hermione is shown throughout the novel to understand the underlying aims of the ministry and how to maneuver within the policy changes that were happening at Hogwarts. When discussing Hagrid’s forthcoming inspection, she demonstrates her awareness of Umbridge’s goals of removing teachers who did not align with these more traditional approaches. She begs Hagrid to plan a low-risk lesson for observation, asking him to “teach ... something dull that’s bound to come up in our [exam]” (Rowling 389), but Hagrid describes the effort he had put in to plan something “really special” (Rowling 388) and instead plans to continue with his intended lessons.

Case et al. highlighted the fact that these neoliberal reforms were having a “deleterious impact on morale and performance” (606) for teachers, which is paralleled in *Harry Potter*,

where Rowling portrays teachers as losing their confidence during inspections and the impact of the negative inspection is shown very clearly afterwards. During the inspection of his lesson, Rowling shows Hagrid, who starts confidently, to be increasingly “uneasy” (395) and “anxious” (396). Similarly, Professor Trelawney, usually a very theatrical teacher, is described as being “disgruntled” (Rowling 279) at being inspected, and her nerves are illustrated through descriptions of her “slightly trembling hands” (279), shaking voice, and shrinking body language “wishing to protect herself as much as possible from the indignity of the inspection” (281). Rowling’s portrayal of the impact of Umbridge’s inspections on some of the teachers at Hogwarts parallels prior research that highlights the emotional responses of teachers under the OFSTED inspection regime, with common themes from studies finding that teachers felt under immense pressure, showed significantly increased levels of illness and absenteeism, and experienced feelings of professional inadequacy and futility (Case et al.; Jeffrey and Woods). Trelawney is shown throughout the book to be increasingly anxious and impacted by Umbridge’s treatment as an outcome of the inspection, culminating in a very public commotion where Umbridge fires Trelawney from her position due to her “pitiful performance” (Rowling 524) during inspections.

Jeffrey and Woods cautioned that the inspections could have a higher personal and professional impact on newer teachers who were more susceptible to having to change their approaches to meet the values and expectations of the OFSTED observers. Professor Trelawney was already in a vulnerable position at Hogwarts, due to her imprecise subject area and eccentric behavior, a point which has been echoed by previous research (Birch). Similarly, Hagrid was a novice teacher and half-Giant who was in a vulnerable position that was amplified due to wizarding stereotypes of giants and their intellectual abilities, and was flustered by Umbridge’s questioning and overt prejudice in this vein during his inspection (Rowling).



In contrast to Trelawney and Hagrid, Professor Minerva McGonagall is a vanguard teacher at Hogwarts. McGonagall is portrayed as a traditional teacher who runs a strict classroom and achieves high student results (her high expectations for student achievement are demonstrated when she noted that Harry would need to achieve a certain grade to continue in her subject). As such, she is shown to respond very differently to Umbridge's inspection, treating it as an irritation and ignoring Professor Umbridge during the inspection itself. At one point, McGonagall even implied that Umbridge should not be interrupting her teaching if she wanted to observe her teaching methods, a seemingly unexpected pushback that resulted in Umbridge looking "as though she had just been slapped in the face" and prompted "furious" scribbling (Rowling 287) on her evaluation form. This is a reclamation of power from McGonagall, who is then portrayed as "looking supremely unconcerned" (Rowling 287). Another long-standing Hogwarts teacher, Professor Flitwick, is described as having been inspected by Umbridge with seemingly positive interactions and results, potentially due to his polite interactions with Umbridge during the inspections and the fact that "he usually gets everyone through their exams alright" (Rowling 279).

McGonagall's and Flitwick's experiences are not representative of the intention of the inspection audits, which were designed to "weed out unsatisfactory teachers" (Rowling 388). The teachers being targeted by these discourses of failure and underperformance, the more vulnerable Hagrid and Trelawney, demonstrate the types of responses that come through most strongly in the literature relating to teachers' experiences of OFSTED inspections. In this parallel, it is possible to view the human impact of this type of neoliberal reform, where the sense of anxiety and pressure are illustrated by Hagrid and Trelawney's responses to the externally imposed audits.

The question remains one of regulation. Surveying and assessing teaching are a way to critique and undermine 'the public,' particularly public education and public health. Showing

flaws in the public system opens up a system to market forces and competition, assuming that these two ideologies are benevolent and can increase standards. However, assuming that individual teachers can disconnect from the system and be under-regulated or unregulated is also unwelcome. This critique of regulation emerges from neoliberalism as a strategy to remove the state from discussions and validate the imperatives of the market.

## **Conclusion**

Through an analysis of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, this paper has shown the way in which popular literature can provide an insight into the contemporary education system, including the configuration and regulation of teaching and learning. *Harry Potter* provides us with insights into the impact of neoliberal reforms and approaches in education, through a long-established approach in sociology and popular culture studies that literature can reflect some elements of ‘real life.’ In this case, exploring the education reforms present in *Harry Potter* provides insights into the impact of neoliberal education reforms and initiatives on teachers, students, parents, and the wider school community.

By focusing on the GERM movement this paper explored the widespread nature of these neoliberal reforms at a global level, and by exploring specific examples in Australia, the United States, and England, it highlighted three key elements of the GERM agenda. Exploring the impact of public discourses of mistrust and crisis in *Harry Potter* shows the decisions and discussions that can often be hidden inside families’ homes and are not always accessible to educators or those promoting the discourse. It is possible to see the impact of discourses on a number of families whose children attend Hogwarts and this provides a window to better understand the different ways these discourses of mistrust and crisis can impact upon school trust – or, conversely, how and why they might be disregarded. Drawing parallels to

contemporary discourses of crisis and mistrust in public education in Australia provides a window for understanding the similarities between fiction and reality.

The exploration of the narrowing of curriculum approaches in the United States was facilitated through an analysis of the narrowing of the curriculum at Hogwarts. Through this element of the plot, Rowling shows the potential impact of the “back to basics” debate on student engagement and student confidence in their abilities to translate theory into practice in exam conditions. Emphasis on examinations forms a major element of GERM reforms, as well as a major element of the *Order of the Phoenix* storyline.

Finally, an exploration of the parallels between Umbridge’s inspections on her fellow Hogwarts teachers and England’s OFSTED teacher inspections provided a way of better understanding the influence of neoliberal teacher inspection reforms on teachers’ wellbeing and ability to teach as they saw fit for their students. In *Harry Potter*, readers saw the human impact of high-stakes teaching inspections where power imbalance, control, and surveillance is a cause for stress and anxiety among teachers, as has been seen in England’s ongoing culture of external inspections and teacher evaluations.

This article has not suggested that Harry Potter “reflects,” “represents” or “mirrors” the schooling system. The relationship between popular culture and social structures will always be more complex, intricate and iterative. The neoliberal GERM agenda continues to pervade schooling systems around the globe and through this sociological approach to literature and education studies, it is possible to better understand and explain the impact of these ongoing reform initiatives.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example Goodman; Kidd; Nylund.

<sup>2</sup> See Fain; Wallace and Pugh.

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