The proliferation of research and intervention programmes regarding bullying in schools indicates that the phenomenon is considered a serious, prevalent and abiding problem, both nationally and overseas. Various claims of success in dealing with bullying have been made over the years by those who are paid to investigate or tackle it. Educators can be rightly cynical about such claims. In the case of bullying, I will not draw upon the academic literature, but allude only to the fact that if we were successful we would not need a national anti-bullying week nor a plethora of support charities; it would not be the priority it appears to be in Childline calls; nor would there be reports in the press of suicides, attempted and actual, of victims. There are a number of possible theories as to why bullying persists so intractably throughout schooling in the UK. One possibility is that there is no ‘cure’. Many children are aggressive, mean and sadistic, the argument runs; they are just born that way. They get pleasure from hurting others physically or mentally, and will do that until they are stopped one way or another. Bullying persists therefore, due to constraints in
Many of the losers in education know
place from the time they leave Y1.
Even very young children will be able to
tell their parents who is the cleverest,
the least clever, and the naughtiest in
their class. Unfortunately place-value in
class is not as fluid as we might hope;
and the relative positions don’t really
alter much throughout schooling. After
11 years, what do we expect of the losers?
To be pro-social, thoughtful, kind and
generous to their peers? Actually,
despite all their experiences some are!
But a significant number respond to
their experiences with what Frantz
Fanon and Paolo Freiere called
horizontal violence; itself another
name for bullying. Horizontal violence is
defined as occurring when people in an oppressed
state (e.g. colonisation and social) fail to
challenge or resist the machinery of the
system that oppresses them (vertical violence)
and instead turn upon
their peers. Such behaviour is not
restricted to the lowest orders but can
be enacted by individuals in the middle
and upper tiers too, as a means of
preserving a precarious advantage
within an unfair system.

Freedom to choose
Can we really compare modern
schooling to such oppressive regimes?
Conceptually, I would argue yes. The
four factors discussed above restrict our
freedom as educators to pass on
freedoms to our children. If we compare
institutional similarities, schools are
much more like prisons than libraries,
and might be generating precisely the
sorts of behaviour that we are charged
with eradicating. The difficulty in even
contemplating non-compulsory
education leaves many intelligent people
gasping for breath, but it needn’t. If we
consider how universities operate with
much lower levels of bullying. Imagine
how much more satisfying it would be if
we could all teach people who wanted to
learn when they were ready for it.
Perhaps if we diverted some of the effort
we expend on controlling and
disciplining towards more voluntary and
inviting learning environments, bullying
would reduce. The trend however is in
the opposite direction: more sticks,
fewer carrots. The PISA statistics have
reinvigorated calls for us to emulate our
Far Eastern competitors whose harsh
competitive ethos still needs corporal
punishment (legal or illegal), and causes
youth suicide rates that would be an
outrage in the West. Whatever one
believes is the cause of bullying in
schools, schools are the places in which
it occurs, and those institutions are ours
to change if there is the will so to do.

Dr Duncan’s fully referenced
research article can be found at:
tinyurl.com/tsDuncan