

EDITORIAL

What the Virus Taught

The United Kingdom's first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported at the end of January 2020. Six weeks later, on 11 March, the World Health Organization called the international diffusion of the virus a pandemic and, as a consequence, governments across mainland Europe greatly restricted the freedom of movement of populations. In England, schools were required from the afternoon of 20 March to close their doors to all save the children of 'essential workers' and those designated 'vulnerable'. Public exams were cancelled for the year. On 23 March, a nationwide lockdown began. Right-wing Members of Parliament and sections of the media soon agitated for schools to reopen in early May. Trade unions resisted and the Secretary of State refused to support the agitation, but reports persisted that primary schools would be made to reopen for all pupils before the end of the summer term. In the event, the government failed to bring this about. It was never a practical possibility, and asserting the intention indicated just how ill-informed ministers remain about the realities of work in the classroom. A similar story might be told about the introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment, now postponed for a year after ministers spent months declaring it would go ahead in the autumn of 2020 as planned. Talks between unions and ministers led to the reopening of primary schools in England on 1 June for children in Reception and Years 1 and 6, subject to a range of safety measures and constraints. Attendance rates varied, with many schools reporting the arrival of fewer than half the expected number of pupils. Schools in Wales were scheduled to reopen from the end of June. Secondary school pupils in Years 10 and 12 also returned, subject to safety measures and constraints, though numbers attending were low. In due course, the government declared that all schools in England would reopen in September, that public exams would take place as normal in 2021, and that fines, in abeyance since lockdown, would again be levied on parents or carers in the event of their child's 'unauthorised absence'. As Patricia Floriet puts it in the postcard she kindly sent from France, the government there has made a similar declaration about fully reopening state schools, but '[w]e shall see what we shall see'.

This issue of *FORUM* is substantially given over to articles which address aspects of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am grateful to everyone who contributed at such a challenging period and in particular those contributors who found themselves caring for others, holding down a job, supporting their children's learning and withstanding the toll exacted by the rigours of lockdown all at the same time, day after day.

In the opening article Diane Reay lays out stark inequalities which watermark a society our education system helps reproduce. The virus taught us nothing new here. Who can deny that poverty intensifies the difficulties children and young people face when it comes to formal learning? Yet an indifferent Conservative government still had to be shamed into extending over the summer holidays the system of school-meal vouchers for the poorest children. As the pandemic took hold, the imposed lockdown required schools drastically to curtail what they could do for pupils and students. While staying open for the children of designated groups, schools had simultaneously to reconfigure the way teaching, learning and assessment were daily undertaken both for these children and for those accessing school remotely. Dena Eden's detailed account depicts what this was like for practitioners. Her article draws on interviews she conducted early on in the lockdown with colleagues at a number of schools in East Anglia. She illuminates the stresses teachers were under, the resilience they showed, and the questions they raised about the role of the teacher and the purposes for which children learn.

The enforced turn to 'teaching' online channelled teachers' practice towards versions of content delivery. It drastically diluted opportunities for nuanced intervention and formative assessment, the true bread and butter of teaching, and stymied the work of sustaining those nurturing relationships which are at the core of learning. For perhaps 700,000 young people without online access, or for whom access was infrequent and inadequate, the situation was even more catastrophic. These young people found themselves walled out of the virtual classroom. For them, lockdown meant week after week of exclusion. The situation facing these children has caused great concern – though not great enough on the government's part to make good in due time its promise to digitally resource the households in direst need.

As children and young people found themselves learning in families rather than classes, so parents and carers found themselves suddenly responsible for enabling, overseeing and supporting that learning. If the education of a child has always been a joint enterprise between child, school and home, with the balance tilted towards what happens in school, the virus taught us just how much parental engagement matters. In an at times impassioned piece, Jo Byrd highlights how deficit models of parenting are ascribed to working-class parents and carers, and how their approaches to parenting are pathologised. She calls for more meaningful and productive conversations between home and school, and a reconfiguration of how education is understood by all involved – as something done with rather than done to.

Fiona Carnie holds a similar view. She outlines approaches taken in the Netherlands to strengthen collaboration between school and home, and in Scotland to involve, support and empower parents through a national body with a voice in policymaking. Helen Trelford, writing as a teacher, academic and mother, reflects on the ironies which attend these overlapping roles in lockdown. She offers an account of how she and her colleagues supported their PGCE students as the virus wreaked havoc with that central element in initial teacher education: the school placement experience.

That the virus might teach us to make school better is Hilary Povey's hope. Her meditation on the human worth and educational values of curiosity and playfulness, and for a 'pedagogy left in peace', bring out what is latent in any educational encounter and is a tendency in some classrooms even within schooling under capitalism. She offers what might be called 'educated hope' by which we can orientate ourselves. Peter Cansell and Pip Marples add their voices to a gathering debate about how schooling should be recast in the wake of COVID-19. It is time, they say, to address two fundamental questions: What is the purpose of education and what are the best learning environments for our children? To this end, they have set in train a series of events called 'Education Rethought', through which these questions can be considered and proposals for action made clear.

Education continues to be warped by the way the school system is geared to focus more on the pupil's future than on their living present. Kathryn Spicksley considers this. Her article draws on research she has undertaken with teachers in the first few years of their career, which suggests that readying children for the next phase of education occupies too large a place in the minds of these practitioners. They risk neglecting to attend carefully enough to the importance of the present, in which each child's educational future is always in the making. And might the arrival of the virus have something to teach us again about the future's capacity to outwit preparation and spring a surprise?

An educational future beyond the tyranny of high-stakes public summative assessment continues to be a goal prioritised by some in the National Education Union, notwithstanding the leadership's failure as yet to rouse the union determinedly and sustainedly against SATs and Baseline Assessment. Scherto Gill outlines the benefits of what she calls a 'relational alternative' to the current system. In her words, that system 'is structured around standardisation [and] perpetuated by summative assessment and through testing and grading ... [It] encourages competition, privileges students from advantageous backgrounds in our society, and alienates others who are already vulnerable'. Her penetrating article distils the benefits to be had by getting beyond such a system.

Values proper to the system's reconstruction occupy Nigel Gann. In a closely argued text, he recounts the varieties of damage done by the policy of relentless academisation, not least to the concept of education as a public good. He draws parallels between the government's 'corporatist' approach to education (with its attendant evils) and its mishandling of the pandemic. The

way forward he commends involves new structures infused with values which have long endured.

Approaches to teaching which derive from medical models, and advocacy by policymakers of what supposedly ‘works’ or should be seen as ‘best practice’, are thoughtfully criticised by Peter Kelly. He notes how science, too, is political, and how politicians have made differing use of ‘the science’ during the pandemic, thereby contributing to a perceived loss of public trust in scientific expertise. A medico-technico paradigm, utilised, for example, by the school-effectiveness movement, strengthens managerialist discourses and plays into the hands of those who commodify aspects of practice and make money by selling schemes of work, lesson plans and so on. This conception of education is a world away from the model energised by a public service ethos of the kind, Peter Kelly notes, which everyone came out to applaud each week of the lockdown.

The last quarter of this issue of *FORUM* is mostly given over to a set of articles examining the failings of Ofsted and arguing for a better way to inspect schools. Alan Parr explores school inspection’s original, perhaps heroic, period, when inspectors were supportive of teachers and schools. Richard House and Richard Brinton expose what they see as a miscarriage of justice: the closure of a Steiner school at Ofsted’s behest. Several such schools have fallen foul of Ofsted in recent years. A review of the book on which their article is based is carried in this issue. Chris Smith, a secondary teacher, argues ingeniously for teachers to fulfil the role of inspectors in a revamped system of accountability and responsibility. Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, dissects Ofsted’s failings down the years and castigates the current organisation for damaging teacher recruitment and retention. Her considered and weighty piece should be read far and wide.

Finally, Julian Stern takes a trip through time to remind us how neo-liberal approaches to education were overcome in the years after COVID-19 too was eradicated. Care, community and curiosity can do the job, combined – one might add – with political will and organisation. His pithy and witty article anticipates the central concern of the next issue of *FORUM*: What might ‘a comprehensive education’ mean these days, and what should it mean?

That issue will appear in the spring of a new year and under the sign of a new publisher. Roger Osborn-King, since 1992 the rock on which our regular publication has been founded, inks his printing press for the last time to produce the current issue. Roger was responsible for reconfiguring the appearance of *FORUM* in 2005 to make it look more like a journal than a magazine. Some five years later, and with the help of a generous loan of back issues from the library of the Faculty of Education at Cambridge, he initiated the online archive, ensuring over many months that all back numbers of the journal were scanned page by page and digitised. Roger’s generosity enabled the e-book containing Michael Armstrong’s writing for *FORUM* to be made freely available, and for all articles in the memorial issue to Michael (volume 59, issue 1) to be freely accessible from the moment of publication. Ever genial and

patient even in the face of late-arriving text, Roger could untie the knottiest problem in the presentation of an article and always found a way to support the work of *FORUM*'s editors. His dedication to the journal over almost 30 years and 84 issues has been unflagging and extraordinary. If the virus has taught us one thing we always need to learn again, it is to value other people, not least our friends and colleagues, and what they make possible. Thank you, Roger.

Fresh-faced and possibly sporting a new jacket, *FORUM* will reappear in the spring. Until then, stay well!

Patrick Yarker

