
English Education in the Time of Coronavirus

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ABSTRACT This article looks at the consequences of COVID-19 for English education and the injustices it has illuminated. Homeschooling under the pandemic has revealed significant inequalities of class and race. The article maps these, particularly in relation to online learning and the differential class and racial access to education during the school lockdown. Drawing on R.H. Tawney, it then explores the barriers raised by the pandemic for socially just education in the future, and the possibilities opened up.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has accentuated two seismic fault lines in English education. First, education is no longer viewed as an end in itself – a public good. Rather, its value is considered to lie primarily in the contribution it makes to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the labour market (Gibb, 2015). Even those supposedly on the left politically have argued that the view of learning for its own sake is ‘a bit dodgy’ (Vasagar & Smithers, 2003). We have an education system whose chief purpose for the political elite is servicing the economy. The premature government injunction to expand the opening of primary schools on 1 June 2020, and the ensuing conflict with the teacher unions, highlighted this (National Education Union, 2020).[1] As the pandemic has progressed, there have been evident tensions between a cautious public inclined to prioritise safety and collective welfare (Kekst CNC, 2020) and a government driven by economic imperatives and desperate to get the economy up and running again (Ashton, 2020).

This shift from education for the common good to education in the service of the economy goes hand in hand with a drive to privatisation. This was particularly evident in the government’s rescue package for ‘left-behind’ children for the 2020-21 school year. Rather than invest in state education by funding extra teachers and teaching assistants in classrooms to provide more

learning support, a majority of the money is going to the totally unregulated £2 billion private tutor industry (BBC Radio 4 In Business, 24 June 2020).[2] The government has decided to use over half of the money allocated to commission private tutor agencies to deliver individual and small-group tuition (Adams, 2020). The proportion of money going directly to schools is woefully inadequate. It equates to just over 1% extra in spending per pupil in 2020, and would still leave spending per pupil more than 3% below its level in 2010 in real terms (Santry, 2020).

Second, schooling in disadvantaged areas has become a branch of social services, propping up and supporting a much depleted and under-resourced welfare state. Here, the other major argument for an early return to schooling – namely, that the vulnerable and poor in society would suffer not just educationally but also psychologically and materially if school closures continued (Blundell et al, 2020) – exposed the extent to which schools with predominantly working-class and low-income BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) intakes are seen as sanctuaries against the worst deprivations of an increasingly unjust and unequal society. As Javid Khan, chief executive officer of Barnardo's, told the Education Select Committee on 10 May 2020: 'the teacher cannot be the teacher and the social worker and the therapist and the counsellor'. But many teachers in disadvantaged areas were already juggling these roles, and the pandemic and its aftermath will intensify the pressures on teachers to multitask in these ways, not least because the pandemic, to date, has seen an additional 300,000 children descend into poverty.

The trends to see education as a means to economic ends and as a branch of social services were well established before the pandemic and had become entrenched features of education throughout the preceding years of austerity. However, COVID-19 has revealed deepening fissures of growing concern.

Over the past 30 years, I have often resorted to Basil Bernstein's (1970) dictum that 'education cannot compensate for society'. Yet, wider social and economic conditions are still overlooked, despite the myriad educational reforms to England's state educational system over the last 30 years and the many millions of pounds spent in associated costs, resulting in very little substantive change in academic levels (Bolden & Tymms, 2020). But perversely, in austere times, and especially in coronavirus times, schools are expected not only to compensate for but also to take major responsibility for alleviating the consequences of inequalities that are a direct result of neo-liberal policies of austerity, state centralisation and the erosion of the welfare state – that is to say, for those very contextual factors that are not taken into account when schools are judged on their academic performance. The many injunctions throughout the pandemic for schools and their staff to 'step up' are part of a disciplining and instrumentalising of public sector workers that no regular clapping rituals can disguise.

Deflecting the Blame and Distorting the Discourse

Confinement and school closures often have longer term consequences, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized, magnifying already-existing disparities within the education system. In addition to the missed opportunities for learning, many children and youth lose access to healthy meals, and are subjected to economic and social stress. (Giannini & Grant Lewis, 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in nationwide school closures that affected approximately 99.4% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020). We became a world of homeschooling, with online lessons and Zoom conferencing. This shift to remote learning during lockdown made the implications of children and young people's unequal access to information technology equipment and connectivity even more stark. When education goes online, the poorest, who are disproportionately from BAME backgrounds (Social Metrics Commission, 2020), are the most adversely affected. For many on low incomes, Internet connection is slow, unreliable and only available through a phone screen. This was the case in England, as it was across the rest of the globe. In 2017, only 47% of low-income British households had home broadband, and low-income BAME households had lower access than their white counterparts (Ofcom, 2018). Official figures from 2013 found that more than a third of the poorest children did not have the Internet at home and a similar number did not have a computer. In stark contrast, children from the wealthiest homes all had Internet and computer access (Office for National Statistics, 2013). More recent analysis of data from the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment found that while more than 70% of advantaged secondary school students in the United Kingdom had access to online learning platforms, only 40% of their disadvantaged peers had the same access (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Even in normal times, this adds up to a glaring inequality divide. In the time of coronavirus, with most children being homeschooled, there was a growing clamour of concern that such a 'digital divide' severely harms poor pupils' education and widens the social-class attainment gap (Montacute, 2020). Teachers in a survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research during May 2020 expressed concern that limited access to information technology was a significant challenge for 27% of their pupils (Lucas et al, 2020).

Perversely, the premature return to school in June 2020 exacerbated rather than eased such inequalities. Children's homeschooling environments are vastly unequal but, under the pandemic, who goes to school is also vastly unequal. As a study from the Institute for Fiscal Studies found, 53% of affluent families expressed a willingness to send their children back to school early, while only 29% of less affluent families indicated a willingness to do so (Andrew et al, 2020). A Teacher Tapp (2020) survey conducted at the beginning of the phased return to school revealed that, while a majority of middle-class children were returning, less than a third of pupils have returned to

schools serving disadvantaged communities. From a sociological perspective, this is unsurprising. The mainstream discourse that schools are a sanctuary for the poor and 'vulnerable' is rarely shared by those groups themselves, who are more likely to find education an uncomfortable space of judgement and labelling (Reay, 2017). Rather, it has always been the upper and middle classes that education provides a sanctuary for.

Reinforcing working-class discomfort in education is the 'pedagogy of poverty' (Hempel-Jorgensen et al, 2018) to which members of that class are often subjected. Growing research shows that children are experiencing significantly different forms of pedagogy according to their social class and that, for the working classes, pedagogy is too often characterised by a narrow didactic focus on teaching to the test, discipline and low academic engagement. The pedagogy of poverty is set to become even more entrenched if the government has its way. Department for Education guidelines for September 2020 reopenings advised that some subjects for some or all pupils may have to be suspended for two terms to allow 'catch-up' on core subjects such as English and mathematics (Gibbons, 2020). This sacrifices any semblance of a balanced curriculum for those who are seen to have fallen behind academically – primarily, those from working-class groups in society. The difficult, stressful exigencies of working-class lives are part of the reason why a far lower percentage of working-class children have returned to school after the lockdown, but so too is the narrow, target-driven, hyper-competitive curriculum they routinely experience. The current focus on Black Lives Matter, in part generated by the pandemic, has exposed the inadequacies of the curriculum to reflect BAME lives, but this neglect extends to all working-class groups in English society.

In England as well as globally, unequal access to broadband is only one of many educational inequalities highlighted by the pandemic. Appalling educational inequalities existed long before COVID-19, but the isolation of many families from community and friends, and the further impoverishment of the already poor it has caused, has exacerbated those inequalities, even if these have yet to receive sufficient visibility and public attention.

The most vivid way of exemplifying the inequalities that coronavirus has accentuated is by describing two contrasting realities under lockdown. In one, two children live in a house with a garden and have their own rooms, equipped with a computer and broadband access. Their highly paid parents work from home because of the pandemic. Both children are learning through remote access, as well as retaining access to their regular extracurricular activities, which include art, dance, drama, gymnastics and private tutoring through online resources such as Zoom and Skype, and continuing resources to pay for them. Compare that scenario with two other children sharing a bedroom with a third sibling in a seventh-floor flat in a high-rise tower block with only mobile Internet access and no computer or surplus money for lessons of any kind. Their learning from school is much narrower than that of the other two children. It consists of worksheets supplied by their school. Both parents work in poorly

paid casualised jobs in the service sectors. They are now forced to subsist on 80% of what was already an inadequate income with which to meet their basic needs. As well as insufficient economic resources, this family is struggling with the intense psychological pressures of anxiety and depression, the result of long hours of being cooped up in a small space worried about debt, not having enough food, and having to cope with a range of health problems the family members suffer from. Both families will feel increased pressure at a time when they are already stressed by the frightening circumstances. But it is the second family who will inevitably end up struggling the most with the homeschooling of their children. Most parents are not trained educators, but the parents in the first family have experience of educational success and a sense of confidence and entitlement in relation to education. The parents in the second family lack all that. Consequently, their children are highly likely to find themselves among the 84% of working-class children not accessing their school's online teaching resources on a daily basis (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Their children are also at risk of going hungry. Although, officially, families with children who were eligible for free school meals in England were to be provided with additional support during the school closures, mainly in the form of weekly shopping vouchers, a poll found that four weeks into the lockdown 54% of parents with children eligible for free school meals had not yet received any substitute meals (Loopstra, 2020).

But it is not just about inequalities between families. There are also unequal divisions between schools, with unfair differences in how schools are equipped not just for remote learning but also for providing enrichment activities and access to a broad and balanced curriculum. Cullinane and Montacute (2020) found that while 60% of private schools and 37% of state schools in affluent areas had online platforms to receive pupils' work, only 23% of schools in the most disadvantaged areas had such facilities. Helen Pidd (2020) paints a stark picture of two schools in Manchester: a private school where all the pupils have been taught a full timetable online since the beginning of the lockdown, and a state school where over 50% of pupils do not have laptops. Even more concerning research by Teacher Tapp (2020) found that while 60% of private primary schools and 85% of private secondary schools were providing online lessons with teachers, in the state sector the comparable figures were 11% and 5%, respectively. A digital divide exists in hardware, software and technological skills both between families and between the schools children attend. Here again, the schools with fewer resources are often the ones teaching children from families with fewer resources.

The cost of the lockdown to the most disadvantaged children in English society has been very high not simply because they lack adequate access to technology, but also because their homes are overcrowded, under-resourced, and therefore often places of high stress and low solace. Many struggling families were already at breaking point before COVID-19 reared its ugly head.

As a consequence, and long before the pandemic, austerity and cuts to services in schools and across social services resulted in a proliferation of

activities undertaken by schools to support pupils, from contacting and coordinating with other agencies involved in helping children to feeding pupils and, increasingly, their families. But it is important to underline yet again that this is primarily a problem of inequality and burgeoning poverty, not something the educational system can realistically be expected to address. Yet the current discourse around 'vulnerable' children and the pandemic is rooted in a belief that schools can, and should, do so. This has always been the case to an extent. As a teacher, I was heavily involved in outreach work with families living in poverty when I worked in the Inner London Education Authority in the 1970s and 1980s. This social-work element of educational labour was growing before COVID-19, but the lockdown further accelerated the social-worker role of teachers as staff in disadvantaged areas became delivery people, ferrying food to the homes of their poorest pupils. Just as the National Health Service, struggling to cope with the sick and dying, faced an impossible situation because of decades of austerity cuts, so the school sector found itself ill-equipped to meet the educational needs of its most 'vulnerable' students once the lockdown came into effect. A BBC *Newsnight* report on 26 April 2020 found that, although entitled to go on attending school throughout the closure period, only 20-25% of 'vulnerable' children were actually doing so. In Norfolk, that figure dropped to 13%, while in one northern region, only 10% of children designated as 'causing concern' were attending school. Labelling such children as 'vulnerable children' clearly did not help with take-up and signalled a continuation of historical processes of labelling poor and working-class children. By the time primary schools started to reopen to Reception class and Years 1 and 6 at the beginning of June, that figure of over 20% had dropped to 15% across the country (Department for Education, 2020).

Whose Lives Matter? The Never-Ending Road from Rhetoric to Realisation

Most of us who have the time and energy to read articles like this will have an uneasy sense of what it means, but no personal experience of living in a cramped and overcrowded living space. We will be technology-rich unless we choose otherwise, have a degree of educational success, and be used to voicing our opinions and having them heard. Some of those privileged voices are already suggesting that our collective experience of the pandemic can lead to a more united and fairer society (Harris, 2020; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2020). But at the same time, there are competing voices from the right (Forrest, 2020; Stubley, 2020) which suggest that the poorest will suffer most from any future government measures to recoup the money spent during the COVID-19 crisis. Ian Duncan Smith told BBC Radio 4 on 18 May 2020, without any sense of irony, that 'it is the British people who will have to pay back all the money the government has had to borrow. And that burden will fall heaviest on those on low incomes' (Forrest, 2020). In the United Kingdom, we still lack any collective consensus that the existing order is a deeply unjust one and that, in

the wake of COVID-19, it is imperative to construct a more equal society. However, there has been a progressive shift in public opinion. The COVID-19 opinion tracker found that a majority of people across the United Kingdom want to see a more caring, compassionate nation as we emerge from the pandemic, with the top priorities being for the government to pay and fund key workers more, especially health-care workers, as well as look after the most vulnerable in society (Kekst CNC, 2020). Both priorities have implications for education in relation to levels of funding and which groups should be prioritised.

Currently, there is much speculation about how the changes wrought by the pandemic can lead to progressively innovative advances in teaching and learning as technology comes to play an increasing role in education. According to Andreas Schleicher, head of education at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development:

It's a great moment for learning. All the red tape that keeps things away is gone and people are looking for solutions that in the past they did not want to see. Students will take ownership over their learning, understanding more about how they learn, what they like, and what support they need. They will personalize their learning, even if the systems around them won't. (quoted in Anderson, 2020)

But Schleicher overgeneralises, failing to acknowledge the capital reserves that are necessary for students to capitalise on the shock waves delivered to education across the globe by the pandemic. What those who celebrate the progressive potential of technology in education rarely touch on is how the digital divide could become more extreme if educational access comes to be dictated by access to the latest technologies.

The Labour Party's 2019 manifesto pledge to provide free universal broadband to all was much derided. Lynsey Hanley (2020) reminded her readers of 'how everyone who already had superfast broadband laughed'. Yet free broadband would have been an important step towards improving fairness in education. Implementing the policy would have given the least advantaged children half a chance of keeping up with their more privileged peers during corona times. Furthermore, government action to redress digital inequalities during the pandemic turned out to be distressingly inadequate, with fewer than half of the children who were eligible for the pupil premium in schools being allocated laptops under the government scheme. The majority of eligible pupils still had not received laptops two months into the school lockdown (Whittaker, 2020a, b). By June 2020, most schools had not received a single laptop for disadvantaged Year 10 pupils (Ferguson & Savage, 2020). Despite the 'all in it together' rhetoric, COVID-19 has not been an equaliser. Far from it. Rather, its impact has been to solidify and increase already existing educational inequalities in significant ways.

A recent Education Endowment Foundation (2020) report on the impact of school closures on the education attainment gap estimated that the median

percentage by which the gap would widen was 36%. The number of working-class children failed by the system will increase. The extent of that failure will intensify. One positive light in the dark is that the pandemic has had a destabilising influence, cutting a swathe through educational orthodoxies and conventions, and raising important question marks over whether education can continue as usual or whether we need new, less confining ways of educating our children and young people.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated much talk about reimagining education. But the imagination has not escaped from the spell of the 'grammar' of schooling ... The grammar of schooling, such as standardized organizational practices in dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into 'subjects,' is so powerful that it has persisted despite many repeated challenges by very courageous, intelligent, and powerful innovators. It has persisted despite mounting evidence and widespread acknowledgement that it is obsolete and does not serve our children well. (Zhao, 2020, p. 198)

The hope is that schools will be revolutionised by the pandemic. That may well be. But there are bad as well as good revolutions, ones that sweep in regressive changes. We are seeing even greater penetration of the private sector into schooling as tech firms seize the opportunity the pandemic has opened up. As Williamson et al (2020) argue, the pandemic may have presented the global edtech industry with remarkable opportunities for profit-making, as well as enhanced influence over the practices of education.

Increasing control of education by big tech companies is one regressive change. There are many others. We on the left need to be proactive in responding to the threats and possibilities opened up by COVID-19. As R.H. Tawney (1964) pointed out over 70 years ago, as long as the privileged in society are capable of greatly advantaging their children in terms of education, financial assets and cultural resources, equality of opportunity will remain a sham, for existing inequalities place citizens from different social classes into vastly unequal starting positions. As Tawney (1964, p. 110) memorably put it, talk of equality of opportunity would sound like 'the impertinent courtesy of an invitation to unwelcome guests, in the certainty that circumstances would prevent them from accepting'.

Under COVID-19, those circumstances have worsened for working-class and low-income BAME groups in society, widening what were already vastly unequal starting positions compared with other social groups. Long before stockpiling became endemic under the pandemic, the privileged in society have been stockpiling educational advantage. Opportunities to rise up the occupational hierarchy, Tawney (1964) concluded, must be complemented by

greater equality of condition in order to ensure that the majority, and not just the 'exceptional few', have the opportunity to live fulfilling lives. But greater equality of condition has always required those with more resources, with their stockpiles of economic, social and cultural capitals, to share them out.

COVID-19 has revealed new contradictory 'truths'. Working-class and BAME groups are the most exposed and at risk to infection not least because they have been working largely unprotected and untested at the sharp end of the pandemic. Yet there has been a growing recognition among the English public that these groups, previously taken for granted, have an important value and are making enormous contributions to society in extremely difficult conditions. Converting this rhetorical recognition from what mostly remains 'impertinent courtesy' into tangible rewards and improved status continues to be an enormous challenge in education, as in other areas of society. By prioritising the economy over people, the English ruling class has presided over the highest death toll in Europe, the abandonment of care-home residents to their fate, a test-and-trace system beset with blunders and an economy at the edge of recession (Horton, 2020). The same neo-liberal mindset has resulted in the plundering of our educational system through underfunding, outsourcing, privatisation, and the demoralisation and denigration of teaching staff.

For schools to be revolutionised, whether by the pandemic or any other tumultuous event, requires a revolution in the national psyche. It requires an overturning of the strange mixture of English stoicism, fortitude, reserve and deference that has allowed our ruling class a licence to continuously act in their own self-interest rather than for the common good. Historically, the English working classes have constantly suffered poor treatment at the hands of the powerful in society. And an already existing culture of hierarchy and elitism has been turbo-charged by decades of neo-liberalism. English education has always exemplified a system working for the privileged few rather than the many, and the pandemic has reinforced rather than weakened this tendency. Current research shows that the pandemic is making the rich even richer as poverty increases (Collins et al, 2020). Despite austerity being 'a failure of imagination' (Kelton, 2020), a major threat is that the pandemic will usher in austerity's new wave, bringing in its wake rising unemployment, poverty and possibly economic recession, which will, in turn, intensify the already existing pressures on the educational system and may well exacerbate both class and racial inequalities.

Yet, at the same time, the pandemic has shown us that the economy is a very limited and constraining way of organising life and deciding what and who are important. In dealing with COVID-19, the population has shown that it can do solidarity even if its leaders cannot (Reicher, 2020). A collective sense of entitlement has been far more difficult to develop. The English have had centuries of being told that good things can only be accessed individually and at the cost of others' lack of access. However, there are positive, if still small and tenuous, signs of change in the public outrage in relation to the treatment of BAME groups not just in the USA but here in the United Kingdom. In the

midst of many threats, it is the growing righteous indignation at the treatment of BAME groups during the pandemic that offers the greatest hope not just to BAME communities, but also to education and English society more broadly. In order for a fairer and more inclusive educational system to emerge from the pandemic, we need as a nation to develop a much stronger collective sense of righteous indignation at the unjust status quo, and at the myriad inequalities of class and race it generates.

Note

[1] <https://neu.org.uk/coronavirus-neu-national-recovery-plan-education>

[2] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0001fwj>

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