Education and the socially just recovery

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Abstract

We are living and learning in a time of multiple crises with profound implications for every aspect of our lives. Hankering for what we have 'lost' is understandable, but we need to take the opportunity to build something better. This means being wide awake to the realities of crisis and combining a sense of urgency with radical optimism and hope. Education can help equip us to face the challenges and plan for recovery without falling back into the very practices which caused the crises. This article advocates an approach to recovery based on social justice and sustainability, built on values of equality, democracy and solidarity. This would mean reconceiving the curriculum and, in England, working towards a national education service.

Keywords: crisis; curriculum; inequality; recovery; social justice; national education service

Naming the crisis

Different places and periods have faced their particular crises, but there can be no doubt that we are currently living through a period of general global crises which threaten our very survival.

The climate emergency, the Covid pandemic, unsustainable consumption, the continuing extraction of wealth from the poorer to the richer and the many injustices that flow from this – taken together, these can be viewed as a single systemic crisis of inequality. Its roots are deep and its impacts reach into every aspect of our lives.

These systemic failures can no longer be compartmentalised and we need to make the connections between them. Both the climate emergency and the Covid pandemic are inextricably bound up with the injustice of structural inequality that is both cause and effect. The world's wealthiest 1 per cent produce twice as much carbon emissions as the poorest 50 per cent, and global vaccine inequality is currently the greatest threat to global health. At the same time, the poorest and most marginalised suffer the most from climate change, the pandemic and other health crises.

Naming and framing a crisis is a political act. When the anti-racist writer and educator W. E. B. DuBois founded the periodical *The Crisis* in 1910, he was choosing to 'join the dots' of black people's experience of racism into an overarching crisis narrative which connected with a wide range of concerns and demands for race equality and black

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pride. The aim was to show how racial injustice is a single major crisis for humanity and to challenge it in all its forms. A century later, systemic racism is still all too real and *The Crisis* continues to educate and inform its readers about issues of racial justice.[1]

The Crisis took its name from James Russell Lowell's anti-slavery poem of 1845 *The Present Crisis*, which closes with a passionate case for finding new solutions to the challenges we face: we cannot 'attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-rusted key' and 'new occasions teach new duties'.[2]

Once the crisis is named and framed, who defines the causes, the challenges and the acceptable solutions? Who sets the terms of engagement? Will crisis be used as an opportunity to consolidate existing power structures or to challenge systemic inequalities and broaden democracy and participation?

Crisis changes us and makes us question our outlook and our way of life. It forces us to rethink our solutions and how we reach them. If we are to do more than endure the crisis, we need to develop a new set of values and norms.

Does crisis have to be hopeless, catastrophic, paralysing? The anxiety of living in constant crisis can be crippling, so we need to find ways to turn and face the challenges together, rather than retreating into our shells. Our responses can embrace the rationality of fear and despair as well as the promise of hope. Fear does not have to be politically demobilising; it can create the opportunity to sharpen and clarify our determination to act better. Despair comes from the sense that nothing will change, or that we have no agency to bring about change. Crisis need not be terminal, but it has consequences. We need to attend to our state of mind, as well as to the collective work of trying to do something useful.

Like the children in Michael Rosen's much-loved children's book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, we have to recognise that for each great obstacle we face: 'We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh no! We've got to go through it!'.[3]

Writing in *The Guardian* in November 2021, the US activist and writer Rebecca Solnit offered 'ten ways to confront the climate crisis without losing hope', urging us to remake the world, and remake it better.[4] Her prescription of hope in action can be applied to our wider crises.

Rebecca Solnit's key recommendations include 'paying attention', acknowledging our emotions while feeding our feelings on facts. Thinking about the future requires precision as well as imagination, and we need to check the facts and watch out for the lies. We need imagination to help us see how things could be, and how we can be the change that is needed. The obstacles are political and imaginative, and crises are worsened when our imagination fails us. As citizens together, we have the power to effect change, and it is only at scale that enough change can happen.

We need to be guided by history and to remember our predecessors. Past victories are reminders that we are not powerless and that our efforts are not futile. To read

the past, remembering how things were different and how they were changed, is to be equipped to make change and to be hopeful, because hope lies in the possibility of things being different. As Rebecca Solnit reminds us, 'the future is not yet written, we are writing it now'.

We need to take seriously our responsibility to participate and work with others. What we need is not so much the individual resilience of the heroic survivor but the collective resilience of the learning community; informed, organised and determined: the resilience of solidarity.

Living in a time of crisis has also created new opportunities for us to build and practise this everyday solidarity of collective resilience through the organised care of community action and community organising. We are not the first to face threats to our survival. People have known slavery, expropriation, persecution, exploitation, violent conflict and environmental disaster, and they have shown us how to resist and fight back in a multitude of ways.

We need to acknowledge that it is the way things are that has contributed to the crisis. The climate crisis, the sustainability crisis, the inequality crisis, the Covid pandemic with its potential for increasingly dangerous new variants – all have their origins in conscious political and economic choices, none of them inevitable. Those of us alive today have contributed to the current crisis, but we are also in the best position to do something about it. We are both the major cause and the only possible cure. We need to make crisis our teacher, to understand its reality, its psychology and its dynamics. We need to be wide awake to causes and effects, and to the connections between our local, personal crises and our global, systemic crises.

Recovering and building back

We are simultaneously 'recovering from' and 'living in' crisis. Almost as soon as the crisis is named, it is natural to start thinking about recovery and 'building back'. Crisis is seen as an unfortunate detour on an otherwise straightforward journey. Recovery takes as its reference point a stable pre-crisis normality to which we would wish to return. Even if it is 'better, fairer or greener', it is still a version of what has already failed us. The profound systemic crises we are currently living through will not move smoothly on neat tramlines. They are full of self-reinforcing accelerations and dangerous tipping points. We need to understand the dynamic and complex contingencies which make it impossible for us to 'go back'.

Once we've grasped the big picture, we can break it down again into its components in order to trace our progress. We have to believe in the day when we turn the carbon corner and the levels of atmospheric greenhouse gases start to fall, the day when there are no longer any Covid-related deaths anywhere in the world, the day when no human

being dies in poverty or the day class, race, economic and gender disparities become statistically insignificant. Each of these milestones, and many others, will be a cause for celebration, but will not guarantee that we are crisis-free; just that our collective efforts are working. We know from the history of conflicts, disasters and abuses of power of all sorts that the end of one critical phase is often the beginning of a long drawn-out 'aftershock' with many human repercussions. When the war ends, we still need to 'win the peace'. Signing the peace treaty, legislating for wealth redistribution, or 'beating' the pandemic; all these contain the seeds of further challenges.

Nothing will be the same again. People, society, politics, the economy, the labour market, the high street, all have already changed permanently. Our notions of success and progress will need to be rethought. If we are successful in developing solutions based on equality, democracy, care and solidarity, we should be able to consign the excessive accumulation of wealth and power, the market takeover of public services, unsustainable consumption and growth to the history books. In a healthier, more egalitarian society, 'disadvantage', 'levelling up' and 'social mobility' would be overtaken by new preoccupations.

This is 'recovery justice' – a 'justice-led' approach to recovery – and it will flow from a shared analysis of the crisis and a consensus about the necessary direction of travel. In British sociologist Ruth Levitas's model of utopian thinking, we draw on our utopian imaginary reconstitution of a better society which then opens up the possibility of 'prefigurative practices' in which better ways of being or doing things are tried out through new social institutions.[5]

None of this is easy. We cannot simply wish into existence a better world by force of hope and vision. In her 2015 book about the climate emergency *In Catastrophic Times: resisting the coming barbarism*, the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers defines catastrophe as a crisis from which there is no recovery.[6] Living in catastrophic times means being in a moment where problems manifest as having no solutions; where existing social imaginaries and practices no longer produce the outcomes they once did, but the new imaginaries or practices we need have not yet been created.

In this situation, it becomes difficult to imagine anything other than the status quo, and we move towards 'disaster managerialism' leading to even more extreme global inequalities based on the unequal competition for security and access to resources. This managerialism offers us a narrow range of 'infernal alternatives', some 'less bad' than others, thus demobilising people and preventing the production of genuine alternatives.

Like Rebecca Solnit, Isabelle Stengers believes in 'paying attention', which means not only looking closely at the problems we face but also asking questions of, and intervening in, those things we are not expected to meddle in. Seemingly 'scientific' issues need to be reclaimed from technocrats, in order to become 'common' questions and the basis for collective political action. Like naming and framing, 'paying attention'

and socialising enclosed expert knowledge are political acts. They expand the role of human beings in shaping recovery.

Education and crisis

What is the role of education in periods of crisis and in helping to plan for recovery? It has become commonplace to speak of education's key role – but what education? It is true that any coherent recovery programme must have an educational dimension. But we cannot assume that everything done in the name of education is positive and emancipatory, leading inevitably to social progress. We know that education can create and reinforce inequalities, as well as opportunities for human flourishing. The sorting, selecting and segregating role of the English system in particular, its social hierarchies and its market-competitive aspects, already drive inequality, and those who start with the least economic and social power are also the worst affected by crises. More of the same will simply widen the gap.

Past recovery efforts have often been characterised by bursts of optimism and idealism, followed by periods of slow reform at best, or retreat at worst. It is worth recalling some of the key moments in 20th century educational recovery planning in England.

In 1916, the world was in the midst of a catastrophic war which was to claim 20 million lives overall, one million of whom were from the UK. The country was facing an existential crisis and spent the five months between July and November reeling from the deadly battle of the Somme, which claimed one million lives. And yet, in that year of fear and carnage, British workers were able to formulate a visionary programme for a better, fairer post-war education system.

In October 1916, Bradford Trades Council organised a conference to discuss 'Education after the war' and to consider policy proposals from local trade unionists. Carolyn Steedman gives a fascinating account of this in her chapter on 'The Bradford Charter' in *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party*.[7] The Charter was proposed by William Leach, a Bradford manufacturer and Independent Labour Party member. It built on the existing TUC programme for educational reform, but went beyond anything current at the time by calling for compulsory secondary schooling for all children until the age of 16 within a common secondary school to which all forms of competitive entry would be abolished, and within the framework of a unified national system of free education from nursery school to university. These were radical proposals at a time when the very idea of working-class education was highly contested and child labour was both legal and widespread.

The Bradford Charter became Labour Party policy in 1917, putting educational equality and comprehensive values firmly on the agenda for the trade union and labour movement where they remain as key themes for policy development, although progress

has been slow and intermittent.

Twenty-seven years later, in the midst of another devastating world war, the coalition government's 1943 Educational Reconstruction White Paper set out another positive view of what post-war education could be. In its own words it sought nothing less than to 'recast the national education service' and 'to secure for children a happier childhood and a better start in life; a fuller measure of education and opportunity, the means for all of developing their various talents and so enriching the inheritance of the country whose citizens they are'. These expressions of broad personal and social flourishing as the purpose of education are far from today's narrow concepts of 'human capital', 'education for productivity' and 'high-value courses' for high earnings.

The 1943 white paper saw a unified national system as a necessary prerequisite for social cohesion: 'Unity within the educational system will open the way to a more closely knit society [and] give us strength to face the tasks ahead'. It paved the way for the reforms of the 1944 Education Act, which fell short of creating a fully comprehensive system. Education was not to experience a post-war 'NHS moment'. Over three-quarters of a century later, the struggle for comprehensive secondary education in England continues, and the goal of a coherent universal national education service still feels distant.

An educational response to our current crises

How could education help us address today's challenges? Since the days of the Bradford Charter, the school-leaving age has risen, child labour is no longer legal and educational opportunities have massively expanded. Nevertheless, evidence of educational inequality is still all around us.

Based on current trends, it will take over 500 years to close the achievement gap between 16-year-olds at opposite ends of the social hierarchy in the UK,[8] and the 2021 figures from the higher education admissions service UCAS show a widening gap in progression between the top and bottom quintiles (roughly equal fifths of the youth cohort), meaning that if this trend continues the gap will never be closed, despite the growing numbers of young people progressing to higher education overall.[9] Clearly, more education is not in itself the solution to inequality.

There is no doubt that we need to invest more in education. We also need to ask whether the resources we do have are addressing these gross inequalities and what kind of policies are needed. Otherwise, the default setting is that any additional resources will be disproportionately claimed by those who already benefit the most from the current system.

The pandemic has brought differential disruption to students, and this has magnified class, ethnicity, wealth, disability and geographical inequalities. The solutions proposed

so far to address the educational impacts are insufficient and fail to recognise fully the experience of already marginalised groups, and the racial and class gradients of these impacts. Growing inequalities cannot be overcome with a few additional tutorial or coaching sessions for students to 'catch up' on 'lost learning'. We cannot simply top-up students' educational accounts with the time they've lost and expect to cancel out years of systemic reproduction of social inequalities.

We need to understand, critique and challenge the drivers of inequality: class privilege, white privilege, male privilege and the labelling, sorting, ranking, selecting, rationing and segregating which take place at every stage of the education experience.

On assessment, for instance, much of the debate about pandemic disruption has been about how to preserve the sorting function of exam grades when exams are cancelled, with little consideration given to the possibility of alternative ways of assessing students. As we recover, we should find a way to move on from our current education market, where qualifications are seen as proxies for learning and even for wealth creation. When we look back on this period, our obsession with tiny grade differences and performance tables may well seem ridiculous.

The British educationalist, Terry Wrigley, who died in 2021, wrote extensively on social justice in education. He explains in his *Schools of Hope*[10] how education's dominant tropes map closely to those of our current social order:

- The idea that every education provider and every student can 'win' the performance competition regardless of systematic inequalities.
- The idea that knowledge can be banked, stored and accounted for.
- The idea of an externally imposed curriculum as an instruction for delivery.
- The idea of rewards as extrinsic to learning, with learning seen as exchange-value divorced from use-value and separate from experience, emotions and meaning-making.
- The idea of education providers as links in a chain of production whose priorities are determined elsewhere.

Wrigley was writing about schools, but this analysis applies to all phases of education.

Isabelle Stengers' and Rebecca Solnit's emphasis on 'paying attention' in a crisis recalls US educationalist Maxine Greene's entreaty to 'attend' in the educational context, becoming 'wide awake' to the world, discovering diversity, making community and defamiliarising the 'ordinary' as a way of developing a social imagination and reconceiving our world and our lives.[11] In her brilliant *Releasing the imagination,* Greene quotes Sartre to support her case for this 'wide awakeness':

> If I am given this world with its injustices, it is not that I might contemplate them coldly but that I might animate them with my indignation … discuss them … as

> abuses to be suppressed … It is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we decide that these are unbearable.[12]

Making crisis our teacher: a curriculum for a time of crisis

The world is complex, difficult and unpredictable but it is also full of opportunities for flourishing and fulfilment. Education is a statement of confidence in the future and a concrete investment in that future. We are educating lifelong workers, citizens, carers and learners who need to understand the world as it is, while also acquiring the tools to make it what it could be.

Crisis requires a new approach to deciding what knowledge and skills we value and what kind of curriculum is of most use to us. A curriculum for social justice would look very different to what is currently on offer. We need to build the curriculum from agreed common aims, co-construct it with our students and review it regularly by asking: what do we need to know and what do we want to know to help us shape a better world, and how will we work together on that shared project?

In a time of crisis, values, care and solidarity matter more than anything. These need to be at the heart of our curriculum. We also need to teach about risk, complexity and uncertainty and nurture hope, the ability to 'pay attention' and the capacity for collective action.

A new framework for thinking about the curriculum could be based on the development of 'critical literacies'. 'Critical' because they are essential for survival, but also as contexts to develop criticality as a standpoint. A 'literacy' requires mastery of both knowledge and its applications in a field of study. Such essential critical literacies might include:

- literacy and numeracy, including 'statistical literacy'
- economic literacy, including sustainable/circular economics
- physical and mental health literacy, including well-being and mindfulness
- political literacy, democracy and citizenship, including community organising and co-operation
- scientific and technological literacy, including health studies and the social implications of science and technological processes
- global/planetary literacy, including protecting biodiversity, addressing decarbonisation and global environmental challenges
- cultural literacy, including an understanding of global history and access to a broad range of global culture; literature, visual and performing arts
- emotional literacy, including social as well as individual resilience.

Preparing for recovery

The response to the pandemic has shown us that rapid and radical action is possible and that massive resources and ingenuity can be mobilised when it is deemed necessary. We need to ensure that this mobilisation is focused on social and economic change, can tackle the causes rather than just the symptoms and is not a short-term sticking plaster.

We need to remember that it is possible to make a difference at local and systemic levels, and that we can develop a practical social-justice recovery programme. This would require us to:

- place equality, democracy, solidarity, sustainability and survival at the centre of our thinking
- understand the various dimensions and impacts of the crisis
- understand the structural, systemic drivers of inequality and privilege and how 'disadvantage' is socially constructed
- listen to our communities and students and engage them in the process of change
- collaborate and share intelligence, resources and responsibility
- take a whole-system approach to the transformational changes education needs.

To take on these challenges we need a coherent, lifelong system for everyone. A key aspect of the educational response to today's crises is making the case for our unequal and dispersed patchwork of markets and hierarchies to be reconceived. The idea of a national education service for England is as vital and relevant now as it was in 1916.[13] It is also a potential vote-winner for any party that advocates it.

We should now be fleshing out proposals to bring together public sector education provision and put it at the service of all citizens. It is time for education in England to make the shift from market to system and contribute to a social justice recovery.

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Notes

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