

# The A-Level Fiasco

## Peter Shukie

The A Level fiasco of 2020 appears at first to be a series of manoeuvres in which an algorithm provided naked evidence of university access being biased. A Levels – Advanced Levels – provide the educational borderland, the sifting space where young people get sorted in readiness for their university applications. In the period between school leaving (aged 16) and with two years of study, the grades of these Advanced Level qualifications decide which university a student attends. Each university and course sets its own standards – A\* as the highest, and with conditions of entry based on the accumulation of as high a series of grades as possible. Oxford, Cambridge, Russell Group universities and courses in Medicine and Law tend to set the highest tariffs. Results day is an annual event in England and Wales as the populace focuses on who has achieved and

who has not. This carnival dominates late August media coverage with a stampede by broadcast and print media to join in the furore. It all seems so natural, so common sense, although I had to add this description as I was reminded by an Italian colleague that such a system is not at all common and is really rather ridiculous.

Ridiculous or not, this system is so well ingrained in the national psyche that we often miss the massive significance it has in maintaining social stratification. The scandal of 2020 was that we saw things anew, stripped of the usual acceptance of success being rewarded/ failure being discarded we saw that the system was loaded, biased, unfair, and discriminatory. State schools were disadvantaged, private schools given priority, the better-off pupils finding easier access to the prestigious spaces of learning. As goes every other year – except this year, the sifting process of examinations did not even take place.



# What's inside?

**Cover Story:** A-Level Fiasco

**Page 8:** SEA Statement & Curriculum development and social class

**Pages 10-11:** Education, Exams and Covid

**Pages 12-13:** Norfolk against Holiday Hunger

**Page 14:** Nina Franklin

**Page 15:** Solidarity with Cuba

**Page 16:** School Governance

**Pages 17-19:** Structural racism

**Pages 20-21:** Tackling racism

**Page 22:** Inspiration Trust project

**Pages 23-24:** Governance and community engagement

**Pages 25-26:** "Standards Not Structures?"

## About *Education Politics*

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Within the algorithm, two key features decided how well a student did. First, the assessment of their abilities by their teachers. Second, the historical successes of the place in which they studied. In addition, prior grading on GCSEs were included, regardless of any development over this period in a person's life. Both are removed from any individual sense of ability, potential, or agency beyond impressing someone or finding themselves in a place that impresses others. If any further proof were needed, we saw education as a system being rooted in classism. The fallacy of social mobility was thrust before our faces and we collectively roared in resistance.

The decision was reversed less than a week later, and the algorithm was removed as the arbiter. The romantic narrative of education (Meyerhof, 2017) was returned to us and universities could begin again their Pygmalion processes. But not before the curtain had dropped and we all got to see the shaping processes of ideology and status-led social engineering. The square dance of establishing value, that each of our society's young people are equal and have equal access to the nation's resources, turned into a brawl. A levels, GCSEs, and then later the degrees and postgraduate study they give access to, provide the artifice of meritocracy that allow a continued sifting of who accesses these resources. This well-established dance is one we are all aware of. We have learned these moves since the age of four, beginning the minute we were dropped off at the school gates. We all know the moves, who does what, who goes where, and when.

Without A levels, decisions were made that disadvantaged lots of people that thought they were advantaged. The music had changed, and this new tune was unfamiliar and ugly. Many educators work in situations and have experience of these sifting processes and how one accent/ background/ class dominates the better resourced places of learning. Examinations allowed us to think that being in less well resourced, less prestigious spaces, was our own fault. It was our own lack of ability, our families lack of support and care, our school's low ambition, the communities focus being elsewhere (down a pit, serving shops, weaving cotton, at the foodbank) that kept us away. In 2020, we got to see that we do not even need exams to do this. And it was at this level of exposure, at this annual carnival of 'Hell day' (Bailey & Shukie, 2020), that we got to see how social stratification works and how it has been updated for a technological age. Virginia Eubanks (2017) described the use of algorithms and deep data sets as a process of Automating Inequality and profiling, policing and punishing the poor (Eubanks, 2017).

The U-Turn pacified the revolt and subsequent apologies from government made clear the importance of the romantic notion of social mobility through education. This narrative remains crucial while transparently untrue. The poor remain unrepresented and the working class continues to be defined as the deficit space from which to escape. Middle class aspiration drives the system and shapes the sifting processes to their advantage. This was reversal of policy that maintained advantage to the advantaged and not one that widened access to the perpetually dispossessed. There will be no U-turn on policies that keep poor working-class communities away from accessing the rich resources that universities and subsequent professions offer. Noting the delay in the BTEC examination grades and the lack of attention given to that, anywhere, by anyone, may help those not convinced of the class-base to all this. We might find ease of recognition in a three-class system, upper, middle and working class and ignore concepts of race and hierarchies in citizenship status.

The principles of meritocracy justify this whole process as education as transformation while masking that in reality it is not what you know

or can do, but where you come from that makes the difference. We are encouraged to find solace in Diane Reay (2018) and others like her, that found a route out from what can only be the misery of a working-class existence. Reay described feeling she 'had been lucky, a chosen escapee' (Reay, 2018. p.13) and the whole A Level charade remains rooted in this escape and salvation narrative

Plato's (Robertson Rusk, 1957) three social tiers of gold, silver and brass are largely uncontroversial even now. The splitting of inherent, never-to-be-altered status markers means that we are born into a class and regardless of the odd escapee, those classes remain. For Plato and his current-day classical acolytes, Gold and Silver add the glitter of wealth to the top two classes of governors and professionals. The working class, the 'brass', have endured millenia of policies that see that we, 'have no place in the government of the state; their characteristic virtue is obedience...to know their place and to keep it'. (Robertson Rusk, 1957, p.12)

Even through escaping, social inequality is not challenged. Eliot-Major and Machin (2018) identified that aspirational parents of all classes, who they label as 'tiger mums and tiger dads' (Eliot-Major & Machin, 2018. p.83) have flexed their muscles and won the battle. Not because the 'knowing your place' Platonic model is not a good system in their eyes, it just missed them initially and they are here now to claim their rightful place alongside the elite. Their tigerish fervour was not about social equality but individual attainment for their children. Together they proved a formidable force, but a force for individualism and the continuation and justification of a sifting process, rather than for social change. The media already represents this as a short story format of despair, unfairness, challenge, revolt and an ultimate overcoming of injustice. A short-story, where everyone smiles at the end. George Bernard Shaw breathes life into Pygmalion once again and takes to the dance floor. The chosen ones begin the grand ascent, the transformation, the university experience. Plato may have been right

about the inherent worth of each of us, they seem to say, but Pygmalion provides us with a story where we can still find nuggets of gold amongst the muck and the brass. It was never about that anyway, the disadvantaged and disallowed were never the point here even while they proved useful in establishing a justification beyond pure selfish, individualistic greed. This was always about the silver and gold exchanging glances. The brass remained outside – no longer serving/ servicing in the pandemic era, so with no place here at all.

While the music returned to a steady tempo, the order of things returned to a gentle swaying series of steps, this remains an education system as far from true social mobility as it has ever been. The whole dance floor is slanted dramatically, and the entrance barred to most. The sorry debacle has thrust A Level/ Hell Day even further up the news agenda. Even more than most years, amidst the mayhem and misery, it has served to reinforce the very unfairness of the flawed system we are still led to believe is the best we can get. Universities who only weeks ago were threatened with severe reduction and precarious futures find themselves reinvigorated with clamouring hordes beating at their doors to access the continually re-imagined university experience. We once again placed Higher Education



as a pinnacle of achievement for young lives, highlighted it being a place and space solely for 'successful' 18 year olds, reassured that A Levels are the only marker of success and solidified the necessity and value of the university. Look at the desperate tears, how can the university not be worthwhile with such a desire to get in?

Maybe we will look back and see this as the greatest marketing campaign of the COVID era. From wild concerns of empty campuses and empty coffers, UK universities now find themselves beating back applicants, courses over-filled and Chancellors proclaiming their heartfelt commitment to meet the demands of the populace. So lucrative is the whole charade that some universities will pay students not to come this year, to take a gap year, to return when the dust settles (Weale, S & Adams, R, 2020). Not only is the threat of any 'new normal' quashed, the threatened monolithic educators are back, and stronger than ever.

### **Hell Day**

Twelve months ago, in an interview around establishing new routes to education that were not based around uniform ages, routes to entry and dominated by the usual suspects. I described A Level results day as 'Hell Day' (Bailey & Shukie, 2020) and it seemed a risky sentiment even then, given the significance it has for almost everyone involved in education in the UK. These celebration events are the stage in the year when academics, teachers, parents and the students themselves make the front pages of local and national newspapers, regional and national broadcasters. Social media explodes in pictures of smiling faces, envelope openings, selfies with documents held aloft like Champions League trophies. College marketing teams have giant helium filled A-shaped balloons in silver or gold as permanent inclusions on their expense accounts. This is their time, and the effervescent fanning of adolescent smiles, family hugs, leaping high above the College sign while photographers capture these annual expressions of joy is what they seem to love the most. Single letter posts dominate Facebook and Twitter, the greater the numerical indicator the better: As great, A\* better, and clock up the 2, 3, 4, maybe even the 5 A\* genius level score and all will bow down and await the glory each will deliver.

University admissions teams are poised to receive the great and the good, welcoming arms for those for whom the future is a promise, not a threat. The gift that keeps on giving as we hear which universities have the strongest claims on the nation's talent. One university wants ABB, another AAA, what is this? A\* across the board only? Must be Oxbridge that one. The whole carnival allows access to what generally remains hidden and mysterious, that academic landscape that impinges so little on the national psyche. Not today, today it is glorious, the reason for living and the only way any meaningful teenage life can be measured. Today,

briefly, amidst aromatic fog the golden gates of the academy creak open and we glimpse the best of us as they ascend into lives of beauty and purpose. Not only do we get to celebrate the bright few that ascend from amongst us, we get to see the system working in all its glorious and wondrous beauty.

Like the annual engagement with horseracing the Grand National brings, the nation finds itself immersed in a fleeting rumination of these specialised academic codes and markers. Families encouraged to see if they have a runner in this year's field, no matter how distant. Owners and runners are overjoyed and celebrated like the heroes they are. Energised smiles and leaps, gigantic alphabetic balloons and frantic marketing managers gathering temporary stars into increasingly tight selections of success, ushered to the photographers and press in branded winners' enclosures. This is no time to trouble ourselves with the subjects of study – they are read out as list of course, just be sure to avoid media studies or anything else that they don't do at Oxford, and ensure they sound established. Nobody will ask any more about them. This seems little about the content or the creation on the two years of study and much more about the generation of lottery tickets, Willy Wonka golden tickets to another, brighter future.

All well and good, the carnival of selection continues for generations and for many this seems to represent progress and fairness, social mobility, and the long-awaited meritocracy. Bright young subjects across the land, from every community, can see their greatest hopes ascend the steps to opportunity, a more brilliant what-is-to-come that justifies all previous struggles. There go the hopes of us all, where we rub shoulders with our betters and establish our own place in that precious space.

### **And then, the computer says no.**

It doesn't say no to everyone of course, it says no to certain sections of society. Those sections that might well believe they belong but really, they do not. The computer, or more appropriately the human designed algorithm, sifts those it can see are not really the right stuff. The carnival goes on, but this time there is anger amidst the helium. The curtain has slipped, and we see the murky underbelly of a system that was never really about a meritocracy. Appeals are planned and corrections sought, arguments abound that the algorithm needs fixing because it is patently inaccurate. The truth may be closer than we wish it to be, that the algorithm is perfect for the purposes for which it was designed. It is doing the socially engineered sifting that its creators envisaged, the factors and the locations it sought were imbued with the logic of a class-based education system. An immediate identification of the social stratification at play generated much of the furore over unfairness and bias. There can be no escape from the reality of a situation in which, 'Ofqual's own figures showed that pupils at independent schools received

double the improvement in A\* and A grades compared with those attending state comprehensives, while sixth-form colleges received only a tiny improvement.' (Adams, R., Weale, S. & Barr, C., 2020).

An algorithm is simply a series of calculations that make possible the system that its creators consider preferable. In that way, the whole of the education system is a gigantic algorithm of many moving parts, complex ongoing calculations, and facilitated by computers of human and technological formation. The types of subjects selected, the decision over what is 'good' or 'not good' is not neutral nor objective. This is not multiple-choice democracy or an essay on social justice, it is biased as a model of compliance and agreement with the norm. If your whole social and cultural background begins close to that norm, the advantages are already stacked in your favour every bit as much as the disadvantages are piled up the further from that norm you are.

This algorithm is archaic, and we built an entire education system around it. Hell Day remains a justified reflection of a date in a calendar that celebrates an unequal system and helps perpetuate it. Despite the weaknesses of this system as a socially just model, the dominance of these landmark events on the educational calendar ignore the challenges. Perpetuating inequality based on a weak academic justification of three-hour exams to measure two years of study is the ultimate result. These are festivals of forgetting every bit as much they are carnivals of celebration. We forget that exams measure a narrow band of intelligences and skills, we forget that the 'education system remains tilted in countless ways to the already advantaged' (Eliot Major & Machin, 2018. p.112).

We literally are still forgetting the BTEC students, still stood amidst the deflated balloons as their grades are delayed. No, Ministers, television cameras or armies of parents have shone the light of outrage in their direction. We forget that it is not all about brilliance and that these results always rely on the processes of revision and study, of comfortable homes with space

and facilities for academic work, supportive home cultures that recognise academic achievement and a view of schools/colleges as places of opportunity rather than spaces of surveillance and control. We forget this, so we do not need to do anything about those outside these spaces.

These inherent issues have not been threatened at all, and amidst all the anger and the still-boxed confetti is the need to reflect on three central factors.

1. Exams are an archaic process of evaluation that continue because they serve the current (and archaic) style of a segregating education system we have created. NOT because they are valuable means of establishing talent, skill, potential or intelligence. This is not a common-sense measure and it dominates in the UK because it represents a preferred means of granting access to resources. Such access is rooted in class and privilege, exams help skew this in favour of wealth BUT they are not an effective means of measuring talent or ability.
2. That education remains a romantic class-bound process and one that seeks the salvation of a few and the justification for the forgetting of the many. There are no golden inflatable B and C balloons, let alone D or E, while Pass, Merit or Distinction from vocational qualifications do not warrant any annual festival. This carnival is not all-inclusive and selection is always the purpose, regardless of the complications of algorithmic stratification.
3. The process of selection by algorithm is a development of an existing, and growing, digitalisation of social stratification. We might use this opportunity to see how such processes are already well-established in furthering the disadvantages of the poorest of society. We might lend a sense of outrage about this single issue of exam results to the correcting of these travesties too.

The first two of these points are interlinked. The examination processes reflect an ancient stupidity that



is enshrined by new technology. That algorithmic incompetence that created the furore cannot mask that exams in themselves are a clumsy, inaccurate model of assessment. They work for the system as it stands and we might have hoped that removing them, as we have done in 2020, might spark a new way of thinking about education. Instead, we are left clamouring for their return. The rationale for this clamour is the desire to do well and achieve on individual levels. A Strictly Come Dancing element to our moves is established where we trust the assessment of others and fall or rise based on these one-off, standardised measurements/measurers. The collapse of the processes might have sparked a revolution in thinking as the old system collapsed, exams disappeared, and we faced a future we could build again. Before we had chance to think of these in any depth, it seemed over. Like the imagined terrified face of a ballroom judge thrust amongst a wild, ecstatic rave, any new reality was too much to contemplate and the clamour was to get back to where we were before. Around the edges and in the shadows, those in the BTEC categories never getting to dance at all, and nobody seeming to mind all that much. We seemed to lack dreams, or at least we lacked dreamers and visionaries in places of power and influence to walk these new paths.

### **The Romantic narrative of education**

Eli Meyerhof (2017) asks why we do not snap at these junctures, responding collectively to the clearly unfair, biased and destructive forces of education as social stratifier. The response Meyerhof identifies is that we have become entranced by 'romanticised views of Higher Education' (p. 201). Such a position sees the academy as beyond question and the embodiment of, 'an ideal...in crisis and in need of defence' (*ibid.*). Not only must we identify the value of examinations and the system they reflect, we must join in the defence of this system if we are real and true educators and defenders of the ideal of which we are part. Blinded by a romantic vision we become part of an 'epistemology of educated ignorance' (p.199) that simultaneously thwarts efforts to find meaningful alternatives and promotes adherence to the efforts to defend the machinery of institutional education.

What led the challenge to the algorithm? What shook the system in the summer of 2020, was the threat to the Romantic vision of education as a means of meritocracy, the great leveller, the engine of social mobility. If the Hollywood William Wallace from the movie *Braveheart* was here, he might have hollered 'they can take our grades, but they can never take our freedom'. What the whole debacle, from algorithm to U-Turn, demonstrated was that freedom was never part of this deal. Compliance and obedience lies at the heart of this system and rewards for grades and attendance, being well-behaved, one of the good must be maintained. Forget the precarity of Higher Education,

of a crumbling economy and classism rife in selection. The epistemology of an educated ignorance requires a narrowing of what we learn and how we measure. This system may well be unfair, but it generates and maintains the structures of power that shape it. The amplification of inequality through technology was part of Toyoma's (2011) concern that technology served mostly to amplify inequality, not correct or level out unfairness (p.75). Reliance on the machinery, processes and enshrined biases of the powerful would hardly be a space in which to place hopes of neutrality and fairness.

### **Toward an 'Oath of Non-Harm'**

Eubanks (2017) highlighted the ways that technology increasingly automates inequality, how it 'profiles, polices and punishes the poor' (Eubank, 2017). Eubanks research provides multiple case studies with evidence of a systematic creation of algorithmic bias that prioritises support for the wealthy, and admonishment of the poor. One of her early contributors warns us to watch what is happening to her, a single mother on welfare, her spending monitored by case workers, her life choices decided by algorithms, as we 'will be next'. Sadly, such a warning seems likely to fall into our festival of forgetting moment amidst the carnival of success that followed the rejection of the algorithm. We might reflect more deeply on Eubanks' Oath of Non-Harm for an Age of Big Data (The full Oath is included below). Every one of the ten points to this oath would have helped mitigate the concerns of the last weeks, and those left ahead of us. The final one speaks directly to us as educators, that 'I will remember that the technologies I design are not aimed at data points, probabilities, or patterns, but at human beings'. While millions ranted at a government algorithm, we might reflect on the part we each play in establishing equality. The challenge now is to continue the system now we have seen that it is fundamentally creating inequality. Or do we celebrate again now the U-Turn has been enacted and forget all that were left behind?

The calling out of this structural discrimination is not going to make many friends, despite the rhetoric of social mobility. The romance that Meyerhof describes is not soft-lit and beautiful. It is viciously asserted and defended. We cannot ignore that Higher Education is big business, massive investments in accommodation, buildings, cities re-designed for the student market. The romantic narrative is the advertisement we get to consume and fight to defend. Behind it, the mechanics of corporate business are hard-edged and rooted in the language of profit and loss.

What we might do practically to respond to the destruction of a narrowing and complex system of segregation includes individual and collective actions. These might include: Supporting systems of free-labour but expensive-to-access publishing; continued adaption to increasing models of debt-fuelled education used to

subsidise wealthier, self-funded students; continued reliance of exam-based entry to courses rather than alternate models of engagement; perpetuation of a romantic notion of the purposes of education through narratives of success/achievement; maintaining ignorance of class-based assumptions and resources, practices and cultures within Higher Education; utilising resources/thinkers/ideas/practices from within universities and The Academy rather than seeking beyond these reified spaces.

### Conclusion

Just how 'lucky' Diane Reay's salvation as 'a chosen escapee' forms part of her reflection on leaving working-class habitus and the long haul to Cambridge professor. This gilded flight is surely what it is all about, a glowing endorsement for the transformative power of The Academy in British terms. What might stop us in our tracks though, is Diane Reay's reflection that,

'many years later when I tried to develop a socio-analysis of my own trajectory, I realised I had fought for every educational advance. My educational experiences were pitiless and harrowing.' (Reay, 2018. p.13)

The system it turns out is not a fair and happy place and our dancing might be made all the harder by being working class. By maintaining an escape-hatch culture of education, a romantic vision of transformation and success down the line, we might save ourselves, if not others – but to what end? As Reay concludes:

There is a terrible consequence in this silencing of those of us growing up working class. It is no longer terrible for me, but for the people I left behind, the still-working classes. I may have found a voice but no one with the power and resources to effect change is listening to it. (Reay, 2018. p.22).

We can move beyond educated ignorance and challenge a UK education system that does not listen. While making things even harder for ourselves as working class academics, at least we might understand we are beginning a meaningful change to a system that is built to segregate and deny as much as it is designed to include and transform.

### Oath of Non-Harm for an Age of Big Data

1. I swear to fulfil, to the best of my ability, the following covenant:
2. I will respect all people for their integrity and wisdom, understanding they are experts in their own lives, and will gladly share with them all the benefits of my knowledge.
3. I will use my skills and resources to create bridges for human potential, not bridges. I will create tools that remove obstacles between resources and the people who need them.
4. I will not use my technical knowledge to compound the disadvantage created by historic patterns of racism, classism, able-ism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, religious

intolerance, and other forms of oppression.

5. I will design with history in mind. To ignore a four-century-long pattern of punishing the poor is to be complicit in the "unintended" but terribly predictable consequences that arise when equity and good intentions are assumed as initial conditions.

6. I will integrate systems for the needs of people, not data. I will choose system integration as a mechanism to attain human needs, not to facilitate ubiquitous surveillance.

7. I will not collect data for data's sake, nor keep it just because I can.

8. When informed consent and design convenience come into conflict, informed consent will always prevail.

9. I will design no data-based system that overturns an established legal right of the poor.

10. I will remember that the technologies I design are not aimed at data points, probabilities, or patterns, but at human beings."

(Extract from: Eubanks, V. (2017). *Automating Inequality: how high tech tools profile, police and punish the poor*. New York: St Martin's Press.)

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# **SEA Statement on English A Level Results**

On the day before the publication of English A level results, it seems clear panic is setting in at the DfE. The desperate last minute and unworkable attempt to allow students to count mock results is evidence enough.

The situation is probably one where there are no wholly good answers. But there are some important “if only’s” that must be remembered.

If Gove and Gibb had not wiped out AS levels, module tests and most coursework the evidence base for results would now be much more robust. This was anyway an act of educational vandalism but it is also now clear that it made the system much more unsafe. It seems Labour Wales may be in a better place because of taking its own approach to exams.

And if, in March, the DfE had put in place a system for moderating centre’s estimated grades against students’ actual work through site visits or group moderations, it would be possible to have more confidence in those estimated grades.

This last is not just an academic point – we may well have a disrupted education system through the next year as it is increasingly clear that the virus is not under control. DfE should be planning for this now not just sticking its head in the sand and pretending all will be well.

But there remains the question of what to do now if the issues revealed tomorrow are anything like those in Scotland. There is likely to be no perfect solution so we need to ask ourselves which way forward would be least

damaging.

In that case, it has to be that downgrading some students unfairly (especially from disadvantaged areas) is a greater harm than using teacher predictions and allowing substantial grade inflation for one year. Addressing the specific harm to individuals must trump the problems posed for the system by over generous results in some cases.

One way of getting there would be an open, generous and rapid appeal system that allowed students to present evidence of their actual achievement not just of procedural failings. Depending on the scale of the problems to be revealed tomorrow .... and next week at GCSE...this may well be simply unmanageable in the time available.

That would leave the Scottish solution – bite the bullet and accept teacher grades and leave it to universities and employers to sort things out.

No one should pretend this would be a good outcome. But it may well be the least damaging given the mess that this government has got us in. And above all we must remember that:

- We did not need to be here, and it is a huge failing of government that we are
- We must not be back here in a year’s time facing the same problems
- We need to restore a much broader approach to assessment so that students build a portfolio of results

## **Curriculum development and social class: time to demand a bigger, broader and braver curriculum**

With the pages of the education (and for a few days last month, the national) press, social class was dragged to the centre stage amid what for socialist educators can barely be called news amid the reported discrepancies in academic achievement; or, more accurately, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds being disproportionately affected by Ofqual’s downgrading measures. So, is now the time to demand a bigger, broader and braver curriculum and pose the question: what kind of school curriculum can pave an alternative road out of this pandemic?

As a school governor I have heard a lot about the “recovery curriculum” recently and as a trade unionist I’ve read a good deal about the “emergency curriculum” – but what I’m really interested in as a socialist educator is a curriculum that paves an alternative road out of this pandemic that our schools could take and build for a different and better future.

Curriculum development has, for me, always been concerned with three interwoven strands: the

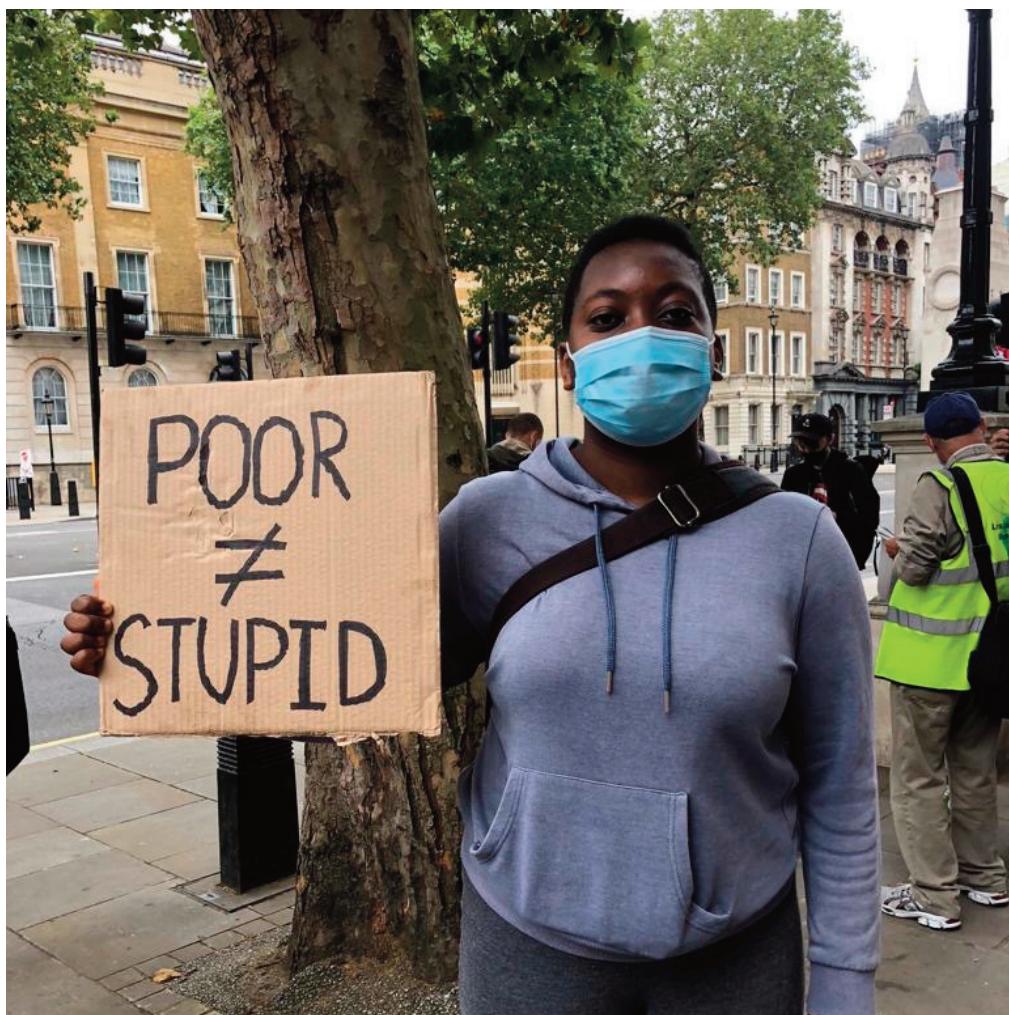
development of skills, knowledge and general education/enrichment with entitlement as its strong backbone. In short, our curriculum needs to be bigger, broader and braver.

### **Economics, history and pedagogy**

Government-sponsored generic skills initiatives, from common skills to core skills to key skills, the dabbling in essential skills and, most recently functional skills, relate to a narrow vocational curriculum but there have been occasions (in the mid-90s and again with the Tomlinson Report, 2004) when a broader and more meaningful wider curriculum has attempted to cross the academic/vocational divide and a genuine learning curriculum has seen the light of day.

### **Failed government initiatives and interventions**

Problem-solving, teamwork, learning skills and communication have a crucial role to play in post-14



education and the notion of either a knowledge-free curriculum or of a content-free pedagogy is a manifest absurdity.

While the basic, or mechanistic, model of skills development has been back in vogue in all its Govian squalor, the fuller, more developmental version of skills comprising improving own learning, working with others and problem-solving, while in retreat, still has its champions outside of the mainstream. These wider survival skills that can be seen as working-class street wisdom seem to be undervalued and undermined by those who decide on what the curriculum is and who it is for.

The economic imperative has raised broader educational and social questions. It is not just vocational training that people should receive. They have a right to be educated more broadly. Once again that might be seen purely in economic terms. How else can people experience fulfilment as human beings? Questions like this are as vital as ever, perhaps more so.

Successive governments have failed to address the skills gap. Similarly, the genuine assessment for learning models that have not just been state-sponsored assessment objectives sought to foster a more progressive curriculum.

Curriculum development and delivery and assessment methodology alike need to be matched with both the appropriate skills and attitudes and the

appropriate learning objectives in order to enable pupils to develop a well-considered personal and critical response.

### A bigger, broader and braver curriculum

Armed with tools, a teacher can enhance the learning experience in ways that have a positive impact on teaching and learning styles and develop the curriculum in its broadest sense.

Ever since I can remember there have been problems about the assessment of generic skills in vocational education, be it liberal education; general studies; communication skills; general and communication studies; social and life skills; people and communication and, more recently, functional skills. So why assess them? Why not just develop them?

If there is nothing new about the problematic nature of assessing these transferable skills – supposedly a prerequisite for a competitive British industrial and service workforce – why the commotion on the pages of the education press and beyond?

Perhaps it is because now, these “core” skills are, for the first time, making an impact on schools and traditional academia as well as vocational further education.

There were certainly a number of false starts and missed opportunities under Labour, but a decade of coalition and Tory governments has so narrowed our curriculum that educators now bandy the terms “recovery” and “emergency” curriculum when what we need to be doing is building a different and more meaningful skills-based curriculum with transferable skills as its spine, community and care as well as employability in its stomach and humanity and entitlement as its heart and pulse.

Ian Duckett  
SEA NEC

This article is based on a talk on social class and curriculum development at the Working Class Academics Conference, July 15 2020.

# **Education, Exams and Covid**

One of the truer statements made about covid-19 is that the virus doesn't discriminate – it reveals. It reveals in particular the inequality and the inefficiency that already exists in our society. The last few months have highlighted huge issues in the governance of the UK – not just in education but across the board. As a result, there have been more deaths and a deeper recession than in any other advanced country. And in education specifically, there has been the extraordinary saga of the 2020 examinations.

As we look to the future, we might first ask ourselves whether it had to be like this. So, for a moment, let's imagine ourselves in a parallel universe – how might a different school and examination system have risen to the challenge of covid?

## **Where we could have been**

As covid 19 hit the UK in the early spring of 2020, schools had to be closed as a key part of a national lockdown that could not be avoided. A critical question facing the education system, was how could the future of the class of 2020 be secured when all the normal progression routes had been shut down? As it turned out, almost uniquely amongst English institutions, the education system came through with flying colours.

The first challenge was how to enable learning to continue during the physical closure. But, having built for 10 years on the Labour government's National Grid for Learning, Britain was able to lead the world in the transition to on-line learning. It had been a priority for some years to ensure that all young people had genuine access to the internet and that teachers were trained in the development of blended learning. The distinction between school and homework had been disappearing for some time and the country was in a good place to take this further when schools closed.

Assessment was always going to be a challenge with schools closed. It was critical that 2020's year 11 and year 13 had fair and equal access to qualifications – without it they would have been permanently disadvantaged compared to older and younger cohorts.

Since the abolition of primary SATs and the 11 plus well-established systems for monitoring achievement in primary schools had been put in place. They were based on school self-assessment and a robust system of moderation run by local authorities. Since the abolition of Ofsted, it had been one of the roles of a reformed national advisory service to ensure that local self-assessment was consistent across the country.

In secondary schools, since the implementation of the Tomlinson Review, all students had built up a portfolio of evidence about their achievement starting at year 10. The modular curriculum, running for four

years and covering levels 1, 2 and 3, enabled students to work at their own pace and to mix and match units from a range of pathways. Assessment was a mix of externally set end of module tests and school-based research and practical tasks moderated by visiting examiners.

So, the class of 2020 had already built up 75% of its final results. Once it was clear that schools would not be re-opening quickly, it was possible to adjust the existing data and to produce final results that carried confidence with students, teachers and the wider public. In fact, it proved possible to publish final results in June, well ahead of the usual timescale.

Universities had adjusted to the Tomlinson system by making offers to students in the spring once the first module results in Year 13 were known. Normally these were conditional on the final module results but were always very close to the final outcomes. There was no real problem in converting them to firm offers. Clearing was brought forward to July and everyone then knew where they stood. The well-established systems for managing numbers ensured a proper balance between student choice and university viability. The same applied to recruitment of 16-year olds into sixth forms and FE colleges.

In fact, there was then time for universities to reach out to all their new students and find out what impact closures had had on their learning and to make adjustments to their own teaching programmes to take account of this. They also had the time and the detailed information needed to plan in detail for the very different kind of student experience that they would have to provide.

In this unprecedented crisis, the systems worked. Schools, colleges, teachers, unions, local authorities and central government had confidence in one another and respected one another's professionalism. There was remarkably little attempt to score political points and as a result the system delivered for the classes of 2020 despite the massive challenges.

## **Where we are**

This is, of course, not how the real world turned out. Ministers' fixation on avoiding grade inflation led to the adoption of a statistical approach that was never going to survive contact with real live students. Gove's so-called reforms to exams meant there was no back-up data that could be called upon. Worst of all, it seems there were warnings but ministers allowed such flawed results to get to publication before the inevitable u turn set in – thereby causing not just distress to so many students but chaos in the university sector.

But, in the immortal words of Donald J Trump "it is

what it is". Our task now must be to try and work out how we can manage the future better than we did the past.

We can perhaps start by imagining what the DfE's risk register in relation to assessment and progression might look like as we approach the next academic year. This includes dealing with the backwash of 2020 and planning for 2021 in good time.

It should include understanding that

- returning to school must be the aim, but it may well be disrupted by new outbreaks of the virus – this could affect anything from a single class to a whole school or even to a whole town or city. How this plays out is wholly unpredictable but the chances of getting through the year without problems must be pretty close to zero.
- so we will need to have in place arrangements to ensure continuity of learning for all in the event of this kind of disruption. In particular, we need to guarantee all students will have access to the technology that they would need and to an appropriate working environment.
- exams in 2021 are at risk of being unfair because covid will have impacted very differently on different students. This includes the hugely variable impact of the closure since March 2020 but also that of all the other unpredictable events that are likely to follow.
- the impact on universities will be huge and for some will be potentially disastrous. Some will have too many students, others too few. This will then impact on the class of 2021 whose opportunities will be affected by how student recruitment has played out in 2020.

### What we need to do now

Coping with all this is going to require the DfE to think out of the box and begin to understand what a mess the country's education system is in. So far, the signs are not good. We have a government that has acknowledged in its guidance to schools that more disruption is likely. But its plans to deal with it are hopelessly inadequate.

This kind of situation can be a challenge for oppositions. In times of crisis, no one wants to hear what Johnson calls the "doomsters and gloomsters". Optimism is at a premium. Nevertheless, it is

important to try and get out in front of the coming problems and be clear that current policies are simply not going to be up to the challenges that are coming. In particular:

- Plans to deal with local outbreaks of the virus assume that schools will be prepared for any class or year group to switch to remote learning with maybe 24 hours notice at best. This could best be described as a somewhat heroic assumption.
- The catch-up programme based around a centralised one size fits all provision of small group tutoring is typical of how this government operates. The laptop fiasco and the free meal voucher fiasco – not to mention Track and Trace - should have taught us that this approach just doesn't deliver.
- The proposed tinkering round the edges by Ofqual to examinations in 2021 doesn't begin to address the scale of the problems year 11 and year 13 will have faced both this year and will face next. The union campaign to change the exams more fundamentally is absolutely right.
- Removing the cap on admissions by individual universities without a strategy for dealing with the fall out of that decision is just pushing the problem into next year.

Essentially, this amounts to a 'head in the sands' assumption that everyone will somehow catch up, nothing too bad will happen in 2020-21 and so exams and progression in 2021 will operate as if nothing much has really happened.

Two immediate principles need to underpin exams in 2021. Firstly, we need a plan now – not in desperation in June 2021 - to cope with the disruption that has already happened and, just as importantly, for what may happen in the next year – any good system does that and it is a condemnation of the Tories' approach that there was no such plan in 2020.



Secondly, assessment must always be based on work that individual students have actually done – it was the failure to understand that which quite inevitably led to this year's fiasco. Assessment through algorithm was always going to fail – the only uncertainty was how exactly it would fail. The varying and hard to predict performance of tens of thousands of students could never be contained by a formula.

Given that these two principles are not negotiable, what could we do to make sure we deliver on them? Final exams do need to be more radically revised to allow for the very different experiences students will have had. This should mean much greater choice of questions and topics in all subjects, recognising that syllabus coverage will be inconsistent from school to school.

Then, because it will be so difficult to make exams fair, we should plan for teacher assessment to contribute to the final grade in 2021. But we should add to that on-site moderation of grades by examiners so as to build in a greater assurance of consistency across the country. If we start to plan now, this could be delivered and would provide real security for the students whose education has been so disrupted.

The other key issue is to ensure that 2021 students are not denied access to universities and other progression routes because of what has happened this year. Once 2020 admissions are finalised, government should require all universities to identify what they need to ensure that the opportunities future cohorts are entitled to expect are going to be available in 2021 and beyond. In some cases that will mean building more capacity where universities have over-recruited this year. In others it may require support to sustain institutions that have fallen short of the numbers they need. Those plans then need to be resourced – crucially this is a situation that just cannot be left to the market.

These are things the DfE needs to be doing now to prevent another shambles hitting them in a year's time. But these are just short-term fixes. We need to plan to build back something better. The examination system set in place by Gove and Gibb is clearly not fit for purpose. Perhaps the greatest irony was their assertion that high stakes final exams would prepare people for university – at a time when universities were developing modular curricula and broadening their approach to assessment in recognition of the fact that they need to try and measure a much wider range of skills.

Which takes us back to the “might have beens” at the start of this article. Dealing with covid is not the only, not even the most important reason for a radical reshaping of the 14 to 19 curriculum and assessment. But it should be the spark that enables a real debate to catch fire and lead us to real, overdue change.

# **Norfolk ag**

*a model of trade union solidarity in the face of government indifference*

## **On the cusp of education and social care**

In the last issue (Ian Duckett, *On the cusp: education and socialism in the time of Corona*, EP 141, June 2020) we covered some harrowing experiences encountered by victims of abuse and violence to hunger and neglect. It provided insights into the huge importance provision of free school meal vouchers for families who are starving because of the Conservative Government's cold indifference. Some children in Norwich were totally dependent on their local authority provided Aldi meal deal voucher. Now we report on a related development.

## **Norfolk against Holiday Hunger campaign**

Norfolk against Holiday Hunger (NAHH) campaign seeks to provide a model of trade union solidarity in the face of government indifference. The NAHH organising group was established by Norfolk NEU and Norfolk Unite Community and later additionally bank-rolled by Norwich RMT and Norwich Trades Council.

NAHH recognises the on-going importance of the all but abandoned Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda. ECM was the radical government initiative for England and Wales that was launched in 2003, at least partly in response to the death of Victoria Climbié, is one of the most important policy initiatives ever introduced in relation to children and children's services. It led in the short to medium term to massive and progressive advances to the children and families agenda, leading to the Children Act 2004.

## **Campaign aims**

Established in the wake of the inspired intervention of its patron saint, Marcus Rashford, who famously took the Tories to task on this issue, the NAHH campaign has twin aims:

- Expand the entitlement to free school meals to include all children from low-income families (households earning less than 60% of the median income) and children of families who have no recourse to public funds.

- Extend the current scheme to include all school and half-term holidays.

A large part of the campaign is built around an open letter to Norfolk MPs. To date, 480 supporters across the county have signed this letter. A further aim of the campaign is to promote similar projects to NAHH based on union co-operation in other parts of the country.

# against Holiday Hunger

## The worsening situation in Norfolk and beyond

The Covid crisis has exposed the many inequalities of our current economic and political system. People working in low paid professions, those living in poorer areas and those from ethnic minorities have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. But as Sally Warren, Director at The King's Fund states: "The scandal is not that the virus has disproportionately affected certain groups, but that it has taken a global pandemic to shine a light on deeply entrenched health inequalities."

A government social outcomes report estimates that of the 4.6 million children that live in poverty only 1.3 million receive free school meals. That means 3.3 million children who do not receive free school meals could potentially be going hungry. By 2022 it is predicted 5.2 million children will be living in poverty.

In Norfolk of the 24,825 children living in low-income households only 13,953 receive free school meals, leaving 10,872 children potentially going hungry during school time. Financial pressures on families due to high rents and the cost of living could mean nearly 25,000 children are going hungry during the school holiday. A study published in SAGE journals in May 2018 indicates food insecurity during school holidays can lead to a child's learning stagnating or even declining, as well as effecting health and well-being.

As outward looking members of our communities we are increasingly concerned about the impact poverty and in particular holiday hunger is having on the children of Norfolk, and indeed, nationally. We have welcomed the government's Covid Summer Food Fund but with the prediction of the biggest recession in history just round the corner and summer support about to end this problem is set to worsen. Given this, members of the NEU, Unite and RMT have congregated around hunger to form a campaign, comprising teachers, parents, students, community organisers, grandparents and other residents of Norfolk.

## The legacy of Every Child Matters

One of the objectives of NAHH is to promote similar campaigns involving NEU, trades councils and other unions in projects where the legacy of ECM prevails. ECM issues around the safeguarding and welfare need children and young adults up to the age of 19, or 24 for those with disabilities and it is important (especially perhaps in the time of Coronavirus) to remember its keynotes:

- stay safe
- be healthy

- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being

Ian Duckett and Rowan Shingler

Norfolk against Holiday Hunger and Norfolk and Suffolk SEA

## Norfolk against Holiday Hunger - Open Letter

A government social outcomes report estimates that of the 4.6 million children that live in poverty only 1.3 million children receive free school meals. (The number of children living in poverty is set to rise to 5.2 million by 2022.) The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that only around 30% of school-age children that live in food poverty receive free school meals in the UK- that's around 3.3 million children who do not receive free school meals and are potentially going hungry. A study published in SAGE journals in May 2018 indicates food insecurity during school holidays can lead to a child's learning stagnating or even declining, as well as causing suffering to health and well-being.

Norfolk Against Holiday Hunger seeks to provide a voice to all those across the county who find it unacceptable that children in Norfolk, and across the entire country, continue to have to miss meals and face hunger in 21st century Britain.

We commend the brilliant work that volunteers and donors across the country continue to do to ensure that those most in need are not going hungry. But we need to go further. Our campaign aims are to:

- Expand the entitlement to free school meals to include families earning above the current £16,200 and to include children of families who have no recourse to public funds.
- Extend the current scheme to include all school and half-term holidays.

When parents in Thetford were surveyed recently by councillors asking their views about the well-being of children in receipt of free school meals, 100% of respondents stated they were deeply concerned about the suffering caused by holiday hunger.

We undersigned call on all Norfolk MPs to work alongside us by publicly supporting this campaign, pledging to vote in favour of legislation which meets our aims and, if possible, donating to our campaign.

# Obituary: *Nina Franklin*

Nina was a major figure for at least 40 years in the National Union of Teachers and National Education Union. Nina was Secretary of NUT Avonwood which became NUT South Gloucestershire, NUT Bristol, National Executive Member and NUT President in 2011.

Nina was appointed as a NUT Regional Officer in 2012, a role she continued to hold as an NEU Regional Officer until retiring in December 2018. Nina's knowledge and experience also led her to serve on Employment Tribunals. Following retirement Nina continued to be active in the NEU as NEU Bristol Treasurer and in other causes and campaigns.

The South West Regional Office have been inundated with messages of condolence, with each communication referencing the significant impact Nina had on the lives of pupils, members, colleagues, and those she met through her international campaigning.

Nina will be remembered for her lifelong commitment to fighting for justice; Nina was an outstanding trade unionist and socialist; passionate about education, workers' rights, the rights of women, anti-racism, was hugely influential in equalities issues, and international solidarity.

Nina was modest on her impact, but those who lives she touched were in no doubt of difference she made; providing a voice, courage, encouragement, and power to those she supported.

Connie Armstrong, NEU Guernsey District Secretary, describes this well; "you were always grateful and reassured to have her on your side! She'll also be remembered for the training she gave to reps and for her kind and gentle personality and her sense of fun."

As a committed trade unionist Nina developed and encouraged new activists and campaigners, instilling in them the importance of the collective and sharing her passion for justice. Debbie Brown, NEU Swindon District Secretary recalled "Anthony & Nina trained me as a Rep...they lit the NEU fire in me and I will always be so grateful to them. As one of our Swindon Reps said, when in a challenging meeting I always ask myself 'what would Nina do?'. Our Branch and District will always be grateful for Nina's work. I'm so glad that, as the years progressed, I was able to call Nina a friend - she was a legend!"

Colleagues from across the South West trade union movement and SWTUC have shared their grief and Nina's great loss to trade union movement and the Labour Party, with an overwhelming recognition for a true trade unionist who will be greatly missed.

Not only was Nina highly respected by her colleagues across the union and wider movement, but she was revered by employers too. Andy Woolley,

NUT and NEU South West Regional Secretary 2001-2019 recalls "Nina made a significant contribution to the Union's work and its campaigns as well as being a highly effective negotiator and representative for members at local level. At one meeting I attended with her a local authority officer told her she was "robust" in defence of members collectively and individually and then added "and that is meant as a significant compliment". He wasn't wrong."

Sir David Carter, previous National Schools Commissioner, spoke of his upmost respect for Nina. Ian Payne, HR Director of the Cabot Learning Federation recalled Nina as extremely knowledgeable; "I found her to be fair, thorough and able to see the bigger picture. She cared passionately for her members and represented them well."

Nina was also a committed internationalist; she took part in NUT delegations to Cuba and Palestine making friends in both countries who are grieving her loss.

Louise Regan, NEU National Officer – Membership & Equality, has shared; "Alongside her lifetime commitment to fighting for justice here she understood the need to fight for justice globally and she stood in solidarity with workers struggling on the international stage. Nina was particularly committed to the plight of the people of Palestine. She visited Palestine numerous times and built a strong bond with the people there. Nina fought injustice wherever she saw it and this could not be more apparent than in her fight for peace and freedom for the Palestinians. Nina will be missed by many, many people but I know from friends in Palestine that they are devastated by the loss of a true champion for their cause."

In the South West Regional Office Nina's knowledge and experience was invaluable. Nina was an excellent colleague who supported, encouraged, and inspired her colleagues, and was a very good friend. Nina's regular insights, sense of fun, including her excellent style advice was very much missed following her retirement, and her colleagues will greatly miss her friendship.

In so many of the messages NEU South West has received Nina has rightly been described as an amazing and inspiring woman. Nina will be sadly missed in the trade union and labour movement, and by all who knew her.

As Robin Head, NEU National Executive Member and NEU Somerset District Secretary said;

"Quite frankly she's been legendary in the South West. Her passing leaves a huge hole in the South West NEU family."

# Solidarity with CUBA

by Nina Franklin

It was great to be in Liverpool this year at the NEU conference and celebrate as two containers of musical instruments donated from every corner of the British Isles were waved off on their way to Cuba. Locally there was a proud moment when our Bristol comrade Esther Giles was thanked for her donation of her extremely valuable boudoir grand piano, which is now on its way to one of Cuba's conservatoires.

As well as musical instruments over 3000 pairs of ballet shoes from the Royal Ballet are also on their way. As NEU President pointed out in her speech that whilst this was an amazing act of solidarity against the US blockade, there was also a tinge of sadness for us as teachers. We were sending these wonderful instruments to Cuba where music and the Arts is so greatly valued whilst, at the same time, British children are being starved of music and the arts in the curriculum. So one of the lessons to be learned from this is that we campaign to get music back and the arts back into the curriculum so that it is valued as highly as it is in Cuba.

2019 marks the 60th anniversary of the Cuban revolution and the 80th year of the Cuban Trade Union Federation. (CTC). For almost six decades, this small Caribbean island has been under a relentless blockade and has survived everything that it has been up against.

It's also important to remember that Cuba is a 'developing' country – it is not perfect, no country is perfect - but it has achieved a lot, with very limited resources and all of these achievements have taken place in the context of a David and Goliath struggle.

The blockade remains the single most important issue for the Cuban people. The US has tried every method possible to overthrow the Revolution in Cuba: The blockade, Bay of Pigs invasion, terrorist attacks, subversion, the deliberate introduction of dengue fever onto the island, assassination attempts on its leaderships (638 ways to kill Castro), and constant regime change attempts.

Yet despite all the attacks and relentless interference from the US, Cuba has not just improved the lives of its own people with its society based on health, education and social justice, but its internationalism has transformed the lives of millions of people across Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and the developing world.

The exact words used by the State Department in 1960 explained the intentions of the blockade "To create hunger, desperation and the overthrowing of the Cuban government." We must never forget this. No country will ever be forgiven for introducing socialism, especially not an island just off the US' shores.

Despite re-establishing diplomatic relations under Obama, it's important to recognise that during his eight year administration, there were 49 fines totalling at almost \$15 BILLION under for US and overseas companies trading with Cuba. Under Trump things have worsened again. The optimism that existed has now been replaced by renewed threats.

Originally Trump was in favour of the new path, but he changed his line two months before the election to appeal to Miami crowd – and now counts on the hardliners support in Congress.

In June 2017 Trump announced his "new" Cuba policy, which has tightened the blockade and made travel to the island even more difficult for US citizens. He's all but closed the US embassy in Havana, and the US has stopped issuing visas for Cubans on the island.

Recent cultural exchanges including dance groups, skateboarders, chefs entering competitions in the US, have all been cancelled, as they were all denied US visas

Cuban trade unionists can no longer visit the US or speak at conferences So Trump is rolling back the clock and trying to freeze Cuba out again.

In 2016, Trump said he was against US interference and more wars, but has since surrounded himself with anti-Cuba hawks such as Macro Rubio and John Bolton. He's tightened travel restrictions for US citizens to Cuba and blacklisted 80 of Cuba's most popular hotels, meaning US residents can't stay in them – which hurts Cuba's economy.

The latest attacks on Venezuela by the US are a sign of what may be round the corner for Cuba. If they successfully overthrow the government in Venezuela, Cuba will be next.

John Bolton, the White House National Security Advisor, has labelled Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela the 'Troika of Tyranny' and threatened that "their day of reckoning awaits". The US has been attacking Venezuela at great lengths in recent times, and Cuba will be next.

Cuba now needs our solidarity more than ever, so please do everything you can to support your trade unions and Labour Party branches as well as the Cuba Solidarity Campaign in doing everything you can to highlight the injustice of the blockade and in taking parts in events to mark the 60th anniversary of the revolution.

*Re-published from the May 2019 edition of the Bristol, Bath, South Gloucs and North Somerset SEA newsletter*

# School Governance. Where now?

Two years before the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, which through local management of schools and the grant maintained opting out policy gave governors more powers than they had ever previously held, a committee under the chairmanship of Tom Taylor and made up of the great and good of the time proposed a radical reshaping of governing bodies. Its recommendations show how far we have moved from the democratic values held by most in this period.

*...we believe that all the parties concerned for a school's success - the local education authority, the staff, the parents and the local community - should be brought together so that they can discuss, debate and justify the proposals which any one of them may seek to implement.*

Not only did they recommend strong staff and parental representation they also recognised the potential role of pupils.

*Meanwhile we RECOMMEND that secondary school pupils should participate in school government to the fullest extent allowed by law until they are eligible for membership*  
This report was tackling the political cronyism which prevailed on governing bodies where membership of a local political party who were in control of the local council, and a willingness to attend a few meetings was enough to become a governor of a local school.

The Taylor report did not envisage much greater power for governing bodies. This was still to lie very much with LEAs on the one hand and head teachers on the other with governors being delegated some authority from the LEA. Thatcher changed all that. Under LMS governors became de facto employers, controlling budgets, staffing structure, and able to decide to ballot for grant-maintained status. They were also responsible for the appointment of senior staff. At the same time the democratisation which Taylor recommended only took place in part. Provision was made to elect staff and parents but they could be outvoted by LEA and co-opted governors.

The move to significantly increase governors' powers received under Thatcher's Tories has now been reversed. Academisation means that it is the entirely unelected trust which wields power and, in the case of MATS over several schools, which are no longer individual entities in law. Most MATS have maintained some kind of advisory forum based on individual schools. Even these toothless talking shops are usually all appointed with no elected members.

Schools remaining under LA control, (80 per cent of secondaries are now academies) are mainly primary schools. The government has conceded that there will still be a small minority of elected staff and parent governors. However, their ability to actually represent the interests of the bodies which elected them are

circumscribed. The emphasis now is on managerialism. Governors are appointed by NGOs to a list based on their 'skills'. This assumes the school is some kind of business which needs voluntary input because it lacks paid expertise. Governors are invited on the basis of whether they have skills in education, finance, human resources, ICT or marketing. The idea that governors might 'discuss and debate proposals for implementation' as Taylor recommended has disappeared.

## Impact of the Blair/Gove reforms on Governance

- Little or no democratic representation of staff, parents and local communities on most secondary governing bodies which in academies have little or no power.
- Governors of LA schools retain many of the powers which the Thatcher era granted them. Power though has passed from democratically elected members and LA appointees, (now reduced to one member whose appointment is not political) to co-opted 'skills based' appointments.
- The attempt to 'managerialise' governance creates unnecessary conflict between governors and professionals in schools. Roles have been blurred.
- The idea in most Labour authorities that governing bodies should reflect their communities in terms of ethnicity, class etc. has become secondary to governors bringing the 'right skills' to the school - thereby ruling out potential working-class members.
- Because of this managerial approach, governors are becoming even more white, male and middle class.

## What the left should argue for

The SEA sees a National Education Service firmly grounded in a revitalised local democratic framework. However, it has not agreed how powers should be distributed to democratic bodies.

Which powers should be retained nationally? Which should local democratically elected LAs/forums take back? The notion of school autonomy, ironically curtailed for schools in MATs, still resonates. We want to see a much stronger collaboration between schools in a local area to deliver education for all children and young people. Indeed, there could be an argument for locally democratically controlled 'MATs' where schools adhere to locally formed curriculum and pedagogy policies and where staff are directly employed by the local body rather than individual schools. In such a scenario, governors would take some powers away from heads rather than the LA, e.g. agree a curriculum framework in a school and send representatives to the local education committee or forum. This means going

# Structural Racism: The Education Legacy of Wandsworth Tories

This article explores how the Tories in Wandsworth led by Edward Lister destroyed comprehensive education in the borough and beyond, creating instead a climate where structural racism is present in the school system.

Sitting at the heart of Boris Johnson's current administration is a lesser known but equally crucial figure compared to Dominic Cummings, Edward Lister. It is interesting that on the right of politics experience in pushing forward the right's ideological agenda in education, is essential if one wants to progress to the top. (This is far from the case on the left.) Whilst Cummings was responsible for much of the Gove project in the 2010 coalition government, Lister cut his teeth in local council politics as the first Chair of Education in Thatcherite Wandsworth after the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority, (ILEA) in 1990. He went on to become leader of the Council, adviser to the Johnson mayoralty and now serves as adviser to the prime minister.

Lister was highly critical of the ILEA. In his 1991 paper for the Centre for Policy Studies, the right wing think tank, he states that when it was abolished, 19% of pupils were leaving ILEA schools without qualifications and truancy was rife. He pointed out that Wandsworth parents were increasingly choosing the private sector or out of borough schools. They could do this of course because of selection in nearby boroughs such as Kingston and Sutton which was already undermining the comprehensive nature of ILEA schools. Further he ignored the changes happening on the ground in the borough where schools themselves were becoming increasingly aware of the need to improve and were taking steps to do so. His solution was 'comprehensive education' but not comprehensive schools which he saw as 'a pretence' in the sense they could not possibly cater for the wide range of pupils and make available the full range of subjects. His solution was as a series of 'magnet programmes' to which pupils would be selected. 'Selection is the means whereby children are matched to the education which suits them best'.

back to a democratic model in which parents and staff have equal representation and together have a majority over co-optees from the community – a version of Taylor. Pupils should be included too.

As well as future policy development, those of us who are on governing bodies can push for more democracy now and ensure school governing bodies do reflect the school communities they serve and listen to the opinions of pupils.

James Whiting (General Secretary SEA)

His paper contained the roots of current Tory thinking on free schools and academies. 'We must stop trying to 'plan' the education service at national and local level ...We must regard the surplus of places as an asset rather than a liability the central means of creating the market conditions where genuine variety can be created.' It also contains contradictions that persist at the heart of right-wing dogma:

1. trying to square a 'free market' for parents with an education system designed to select 'the best' for the economy.
2. providing surplus places whilst at the same time maintaining Wandsworth's growing reputation for cuts in spending, low Council tax and ruthless efficiency.

In both cases despite Lister's stated intentions, Wandsworth Council attempted to plan a magnet school system and also closed schools it saw as surplus to requirements.

Opposition to the Lister plans was quick to grow. It came not only from the NUT but school leaders who were still loyal to ILEA principles around comprehensive education as well as wanting to strike out on a new path committed to excellence. The combination of a firm belief in equal opportunities and the pursuit of excellence was personified by the principal of Burntwood School, the borough's girls school. Brigid Beattie was strongly influenced by feminism and anti-racism. The school still bears her motto 'the best education today for the women of tomorrow' and the highlight of her career was personally settling in a black student, whose parents had not gone to university, into her Oxford college. Burntwood and three other schools took advantage of the 1988 Education Act to opt out and become grant maintained in order to escape the Wandsworth plans. Ironically, the act which was designed to enable individual schools to escape from the so-called horrors of Labour left wing councils was used for the opposite purpose. This posed a problem for those of us on the left at the time. Would more school autonomy and the increased marketisation which goes with opting out really help maintain a comprehensive system with genuine comprehensive schools? In retrospect the answer was no.

As those schools with a following amongst the affluent liberal middle class of Wandsworth opted out, the Council showed it had further strings to its bow. In a shrewd move in 1994, it applied, as the 1988 act then allowed, to make the boys school, Ernest Bevin, it still

controlled, a 'bilateral' or partially selective school selecting 33% of its pupils on general ability. This proved to be a Sarajevo moment and the consequences of the decision would be felt outside the borough in Lambeth too. It coupled this application with a threat to Burntwood School. For equal opportunities reasons, the same number of selective places had to be available to girls. If Burntwood failed to agree to provide the places the Council indicated it might have to open a girls grammar school on a closed school site. In reality this was extremely unlikely to happen. But Burntwood did not put up a fight and relented. After all Wandsworth had abolished the ILEA banding system back in 1990 because 'it limited parental choice'. This had endangered the school's ability to guarantee a significant number of 'able' pupils in its intake.

The Burntwood decision caused a domino effect. Graveney School, a mixed comprehensive in the more suburban south of the borough, applied for and received permission to select 50% of its pupils. Other schools applied for a banded intake too. In reality, there were not enough 'able' pupils to go round. Dunraven School in neighbouring Lambeth as well as the Lambeth Catholic comprehensive were also quick to apply for and get permission to operate forms of selection, all biased in favour of the 'more able'. Graveney School proved to be the extreme, virtually becoming a grammar school. In 1998 at the school open evening the Head boasted that only 9 pupils got in by distance. 50% were selected on ability (one came from Brighton every day), the school then gave priority to siblings, and social need which included staff children. This had the effect of freezing out children living close to the school and sparked a campaign for access from local parents.

New Labour introduced specialist schools and an adjudicator with the power to vary though not abolish percentages of selection. This led to changes as did academisation and the arrival of a City Technology college. The current situation regarding Wandsworth Schools is shown in the table below. All schools are academies now, apart from Ernest Bevin still run by the borough.

The 11 plus is known to discriminate against the disadvantaged when applied to grammar schools. Only 3% attending grammar schools claim free school meals. A recent NFER report into partially selective schools shows that 11% claim free school meals in these schools compared to 16% in non-selective schools. However, there are not many partially selective schools nationally. The figures above confirm that the school of choice for mainly white affluent parents is Graveney School. The % of pupils on FSM currently there is 9% which is incredibly low for a school in an inner London borough. It also has the lowest EAL figure apart from the C of E school. The borough is mixed throughout like most in inner London with expensive middle-class

housing interspersed with social housing. Higher concentrations of social housing exist in the north of the borough in Battersea. Despite this there is a clear hierarchy of schools emerging from the figures. Graveney School is the go to choice for more affluent white parents and it has the highest proportion of \*white pupils. Southfields on the other hand in the middle of the borough with affluent housing close by is around \*90% black and Asian.

The hierarchy of schools, an intended consequence of the Tory policy in Wandsworth all along, has unleashed unconscious racism as liberal white parents fight to get their offspring into a school where there are high concentrations of similar pupils.

The fight among schools for 'able' (perhaps sadly white) pupils has had consequences for black pupils at Graveney which emerged in the recent BLM protests. Graveney School which had its percentage selection figure cut from 50% to 25% has had to accept a more diverse intake. However, it still appears to want to remain the school of choice for white middle class parents. It therefore implements a rigid streaming policy. Pupils and some staff at the school became aware that this was, deliberately or not, resulting in pupils being divided on racial lines. The school denies this claiming that using the 11 plus enables them to take poorer pupils from across the borough rather than 'selection by house price'. Their FSM figures do not bear this out. Pupils and ex pupils have collected examples of discrimination, racist behaviour from a minority of white pupils and the school failing to act.

The local news website published this in July this year.

Students have presented Graveney School with a list of eight changes they want to see enacted in the school.

These include a restructuring of the school's setting system to "promote diversity within forms and classes", forums for students to discuss topics such as prejudice and discrimination, cultural and religious training for staff and decolonising the curriculum.

One campaign member said:

"The volume of stories we received allowed us to identify some of the root causes of racism and discrimination within the school. Many of these stories highlighted the problems within the streaming system used by Graveney, which creates a clear racial divide amongst students."

The group says it feels it has made progress on several points with the school but argues that this

"is simply the school's attempt to make the issue go

| School                  | Type            | Selection                                    | %FSM (in past 6 years) | %EAL |
|-------------------------|-----------------|--|------------------------|------|
| Burntwood               | Girls           | 25%  | 40                     | 65   |
| Chestnut Grove          | Mixed           | 18% art<br>18% languages                     | 30                     | 31   |
| Ernest Bevin College    | boys            | 33%  | 40                     | 43   |
| Graveney                | Mixed           | 25%  | 20                     | 23   |
| Ashcroft                | CTC mixed       | 11% technology plus intake banded by ability | 39                     | 58   |
| Saint Cecilia's         | C of E VA mixed | 60% by faith remainder by distance           | 29                     | 17   |
| Ark Bolingbroke         | Academy chain   | Non selective                                | 30                     | 29   |
| Ark Putney (ex Elliott) | Academy chain   | Non selective                                | 53                     | 31   |
| Harris Battersea        | Academy Chain   | Non selective                                | 69                     | 52   |
| Southfields             | Mixed           | Non selective                                | 47                     | 55   |
| Saint John Bosco        | Mixed           | Faith RC                                     | 51                     | 55   |

away without making any real changes.”

What is beyond doubt is that selection in Wandsworth has resulted in discrimination by class and by race.

Finally, a market in education brings out the worst in parents and school leaders. The fight to recruit the ‘best’ pupils or to get into the ‘best’ school complement each other in creating an environment where those least able to fight the battles lose out. Markets always make winners and losers and in education the losers tend to be those with the least resources and those facing racism already in their lives. The ILEA was by no means perfect but it was reformable. Only a strong, democratic, locally centralised body such as the ILEA can provide a bulwark against the negative forces of the market. That’s why the Tories abolished it.

James Whiting (SEA General Secretary ex Wandsworth Teacher and Parent)

(\*accurate figures are not in the public domain. These are estimates from recent pupils)



# Tackling Racism

The murder of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer and the subsequent protests against systemic racism and oppression will be impacting heavily on children/young people in the UK.

Children will be encountering information via the media, family, and friends. There can be a temptation to try to shield them from complex and difficult issues, to turn off the television and shut down conversations.

However, even young children will have often absorbed more than adults realise, and older children will be encountering disturbing images and text on social media. All need space to interrogate their thoughts and feelings.

Unfortunately, in many countries and cultures across the world, racism is still prevalent and the effects of this discrimination upon children and young people is grave. How might racism manifest in schools?

Racism in schools can be overt such as name-calling and exclusion but it can also be subtle and unconscious. It can be institutional – built into the structures, policies, processes, procedures, practice, and the culture of the organisation.

In some cases, black children do not have role models in their schools who look like them. The guest speakers and visitors that come to the school may not look like them.

In some cases, black children could be marked down

by teachers who are unconsciously stereotyping them.

Teachers could unconsciously have lower expectations of black pupils, and therefore spend less time with them or assess them with less consideration.

What can we do? Teachers are in the uniquely privileged position of standing alongside children and young people as they start to navigate the world and understand the way that different human relationships work in wider society.

What can we do as educators to dismantle these barriers to learning and achievement, and make sure that all students are equally supported to thrive and learn?

Black, Asian and minority ethnic students must learn in an environment where they feel they belong, are safe and supported. In order to do this, educators must first acknowledge that an imbalance exists - both in the classroom, in life experiences and in society as a whole. Life is not a level playing field. Yet.

This can be a difficult conversation to have, but discrimination must be named and acknowledged before it can be addressed.

Talking about effective strategies for tackling racism in the classroom can be challenging, but teachers of all backgrounds must engage with these difficult discussions without jumping to conclusions, taking offence or feeling personally attacked.

In order to develop an inclusive learning environment, the whole organisation staff team must be on board. Children learn from watching the adults around them and if educators don't try to understand the nuanced aspects of race in education, children's understanding will become confused.

Classroom environments reflect the school-wide culture. If educators (teachers, school leaders, administrators, and support staff) are not equipped with the cultural mindset (how we view one another) and cultural skill set (how we connect, create, and collaborate with one another) then it will be evidenced in student-to-student interactions.

In addition, when educators do not feel comfortable, competent, and secure discussing more difficult subjects, such as racism



# Tolpuddle

As a fairly regular attender of the annual July week-end Tolpuddle festival organised by the South West Regional TUC, it was a pleasure to zoom in to this year's online version. I watched the workshop entitled "Class of Covid 19 – what next for education." The chair was Hannah Packham from the NEU and the panel was made up of: Patrick Roach, General Secretary of the NASUWT, Gemma Haley, Co-ordinator of a Parent Organisation and promoter of "More Than A Score", Kate Green MP, the new Shadow Secretary for Education, Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary of the NEU and Jo Grady, General Secretary of the UCU.

As for the three general secretaries, what impressed me about them was the commonality of concern and the unity in their ideas on how to solve the problems of state educational provision brought about by a reactionary Tory Government. It was also good to see a sympathetic representative of a parent organisation. She uses social media to campaign to end the current high-pressure national testing of children including the English baseline assessment of little ones. As for the MP, she spoke well enough but in fairness she had only been in the post for three weeks so it is early days for critically comment. As to how well she will work with the trade unions and the SEA, time will tell. Overall, it was an interesting debate and I urge readers to attend the festival in the future.

## To learn about aspects of Working-Class History

As a friend of the Working-Class Library, in Salford, I was invited to join in their summer lectures via zoom. I really enjoyed listening and learning about all manner of things, such as: the early history of May Day, the Irish Civil Rights Movement, the early campaigning days of Tom Paine, the work of Mary Macarthur, the struggle for women's rights, to name but a few of the subjects covered.

The other source of political interest I found was through recently registering with the South West Regional TUC's online Radical History School. So far I have listened to a lecture entitled 'The Mayflower Mavericks'. The Mayflower set sail 400 years ago, a commemoration, that marked the ending of feudalism and the rise of capitalism and colonialism. Other topics covered have been the life of the French radical Jules Michelet and inclusive history looking at aspects of global power, of race/slavery and gender.

While the current political situation in the UK and USA etc can at times be quite depressing - joining in these events, I found inspiring. They acted as a reminder of how our forefathers and mothers fought with passion and commitment, for radical change to favour the many and not the few.

among students, it will be perpetuated due to a lack of cultural skill within the adults.

In order to be culturally relevant and deeply connect with students, we must first dig deep to address our own biases on an individual basis before we can lead our students well. Harvard IAT tests (implicit association tests) are designed to help people do just that. It can be uncomfortable to see how differently our unconscious minds think compared to our conscious minds. Use your findings to guide your next steps and consciously engage your brain to make decisions based purely on evidence not assumption.

Children thrive when they feel they belong, are safe and secure, and it's a teacher's responsibility to offer an inclusive learning environment for all. Set classroom rules:

- respect yourself
- respect others
- respect the world.
- don't be a bystander

Once this foundation of mutual respect is established, learning can begin.

It's important to note that cultural norms differ, and this may lead to behaviour in the classroom that can be misunderstood as unusual or offensive. To prepare for this kind of situation:

- use neutral language.
- avoid saying that things are good or bad, appropriate, or inappropriate
- explain to students gently that there is a code of behaviour for the classroom.

This allows for behaviours and language that may be important and part of the culture outside of organisation to remain outside of the organisation and, more importantly, not be felt or perceived as being bad or wrong, just different."

Teachers have a responsibility to call out racist behaviour and language - don't 'let things slide'.

With enforced rules, and respectful implementation of these rules, children/young people will come to understand what is expected of them, and why.

It's also important to teach students self-regulation skills, so that they can identify behaviours that perpetuate racism in the classroom.

This means that students affected by racism can recognise it, and that their peers are equipped to support them too.

Teachers should establish a process for recognising, reporting, and dealing with discriminatory language and behaviour that the whole class is educated on.

Alyson Malach

Thanks To Zoom I Was Able: To watch t

# Trying to put the wheels back on the Inspiration Trust project

In EP 140 (February/March 2020) we concluded a series exposing some of the practices of the Inspiration Trust (The wheels fall off the Agnew-de Souza project in Norfolk). Well before Boris Johnson's blustering about the imperative re-opening all schools, Inspiration Trust was keen to steal the thunder and pander to particular parents. Never one to miss a trick, on 29 June Dame Rachel De Souza wrote an article for the Eastern Daily Press, titled the 'Norfolk Academy Trust reveals Saturday lessons and August return date for year 10 pupils'.

Like all schools and academies the COVID19 pandemic has taken the wheels off Inspiration Trust's schools in Norwich and across Norfolk. In the article, Dame De Souza states that pupils will be returning early from the summer break to make up for lessons lost during lockdown in a desperate effort to put the wheels back on. We think that there is another road, an alternative route out of this pandemic that our schools could take and build for a better future.

This urgent quest to reopen, particularly during a period when the Coronavirus is seen to be on the rise in some areas, in the middle of what promises to be a very busy holiday period for the region is irresponsible and short sighted in the extreme. It is plain that hubs of infection are springing up from as close as Suffolk, and in Leicester where schools are currently closing. During the "opening" period people from these regions will be flocking to our city and holiday destinations raising the level of risk.

It is not only the NEU that has been outspoken in its opposition to the Inspiration Trust's plans. Unite and GMB as well as Norwich Trades Council and the community and union umbrella organisation East Anglia COVID19 Workers Support Group have all been vocal in its concerns for public safety. Local campaigners are sure that the fixed date return will cause huge anxiety among parents, carers, teachers and students and the wider community. If one thing is certain, it is that we do not know what the infection rates are going to be in the future.

The coalition of parents and teachers - Parents and Teachers for Education (PTE) founded by chief executive of the Inspiration Trust, Dame De Souza, hardly inspires confidence since they cannot represent the interests of all concerned parents, teachers, students and the wider community. Furthermore, it is an organisation formed by the trust itself.

Of course we want to reopen schools and colleges as soon as we can. But this needs to be safe for society, for children and their families and the staff who work in them. We also would like to point out that schools never closed. They have been open during lockdown to

provide education in a safe environment for vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

The pre-conditions for a safe return to schools are: much lower numbers of Covid-19 cases; a proper negotiated plan agreed with unions for social distancing; testing, testing and more testing; whole school strategy and protection for the vulnerable. Have these tests been met? We are far from convinced that they have been. We would respectfully ask the Dame where the evidence is that the Inspiration Trust and the government has met the requirements of these criteria.

We also worry about Health and Safety Officers, who are direct employees of the trust, making these judgements. Are teachers being bullied into returning to work without adequate safeguards being in place? Do they even know what is in place? Have the teaching unions been involved in the discussion?

It is already known that some of the school buildings are barely suitable, being disused industrial units. How is social distancing to be maintained in these circumstances? No doubt there is a huge amount of work to be done before schools can be reopened safely, in terms of the curriculum and the wider community with regards to containment of the virus.

However, Dame Rachel is right about one thing. There is a crisis. It is a crisis of identity and - equally one of survival - for many of our young people lost somewhere in a wilderness between education and social care. The COVID-19 pandemic has only made this worse.

Sir Michael Wilshaw's comments stand out and are frightening: "there will be all sorts of problems in terms of social unrest, violence amongst young people that we've not seen before". This suggests that the purpose of our education system is no more than to contain the youth population. I put it to him that many among this population are educating themselves in matters that are of direct concern. This is witnessed by the movements that have focused on the virus, to name one, East Anglia Workers Coronavirus Support Group who have held online meetings, written open letters and supported the Norfolk NEU petition and who are holding weekly protests at Norfolk County Hall regarding the safe reopening of schools.

Without the interventions of an emergency post-14 curriculum with slimmed down knowledge content and an emphasis on skills like communication, problem-solving, co-operation learning and employability rather than Dame Rachel's notion of "Saturday lessons and August return date for year 10 pupils" many will not make it out of the post-COVID-19 wilderness, will have reached the point of no return and will be lost somewhere between education and social care.

# **School Governance: Community Engagement or Messaging Service?**

Dennis Charman, Chair, West London SEA

West London's Socialist Educational Association met online on 21st July 2020 to discuss the governance of schools and the potential role the SEA could play in helping to mobilise Labour school governors.

Steven Cowan opened the meeting with a presentation outlining the history of Labour's retreat since Callaghan's Ruskin Speech of 1976 which marked Labour's drift from the principles of the 1944 Education Act and 1960s comprehensivisation. He explained how an increasing focus on managerialism has paved the way for neo-liberal policies. Steven argued that there are two key questions which need to be addressed:

Is Labour capable of developing an education policy which is true to the 1944 principle of delivering an accessible and enlightened education system through which every working person is given the opportunity to play a full part in a democratic society?

Or was the blue sky thinking that led to the 2017 and 2019 Manifesto commitments to a National Education System only a moment which now has passed?

Steven said he believed that this 'moment' in Labour education thinking still existed and was waiting to be built upon. Although the National Education Service (NES) can be perceived as 'new thinking', we should remember that it is based upon core Labour principles dating from the last century which are still alive and relevant today, and we need to talk once again about learning, discovery and experience as the foundations of all educational activity. Labour and the labour movement should be talking about the distinctions between training, discipline and socialization, as well as experience, enlightenment and development. Steven said that while state funded schooling appeared to have become preoccupied with the first three almost exclusively, the last three were live and valued parts of what is taught in much of the independent sector.

Steven went on to say that too often the Left merely critiqued social policies such as those on education, and suggested ways in which we might start to plan a program for change. Just as the Early Fabians did, we need to precisely identify the mechanisms at local and national levels through which systemic change can be brought about.

Steven stressed the importance of funding for any programme of change. Public education should be centrally funded and locally delivered in ways which bring together local knowledge, democratic accountability and professional specialist knowledge to encourage diversity of innovation, experiment and opinion.

The challenge lies with the current educational landscape where Local Authorities, weakened by Tory (and Labour) marginalisation and budget cuts, struggle to manage an education system which is much larger than that envisaged in 1944. Steven said it is therefore essential to think innovatively. Steven's proposal for "Community Education Authorities" spanning clusters of local authorities was discussed as one promising model for organising and delivering public education.

The second part of the meeting comprised a talk given by School Governor and retired teacher, Dennis Charman on "School Governance – Community Engagement or Government Messaging Service?" Dennis raised several questions about how schools should be governed within the current pedagogical and structural framework.

Dennis explained that the present model of governance is essentially neo-liberal. It is presented as an opportunity for local communities, particularly parents, but others too, to have a stake in local schools, to engage with the ethos of schools and the education provided, and to provide oversight. However, the influence of local authorities has been undermined by the loss of schools to academization and the fragmentation of the system.

Dennis argued that the "English model" of governance struggles to provide communities with agency and genuine opportunities for engagement in their children's education. This was because of the sheer breadth and size of Governors' workload as a direct result of the diminished involvement of local authorities and the support and oversight they once provided.

Dennis said that the reality of the current system is that it is no longer a question of "What are the minimum set of powers and responsibilities Governing Bodies need to influence a school's ethos, vision and strategic direction and to hold school leaders to account?". Instead, the situation is one which demands: "How much responsibility can we load onto Governing Bodies until they collapse under the magnitude of the tasks in hand?".

Dennis explained that the duties of Governors include being able to absorb a plethora of Department of Education guidelines, regulations, procedures and other documents coupled with the expectation that all Governors are trained and their skills "audited". However, Governors end up spending most of their time and effort attending to repairs and fund raising, or sitting in judgement of staff caught up in health, competency, disciplinary and redundancy procedures, rather than considering the 'strategic direction' of the

school. On the rare occasions when time is found to discuss the school's 'direction', inevitably, the demands of yet another Secretary of State, DfE or OFSTED policy needs to be addressed first.

Dennis pointed out that although Governors comprise one of the largest bodies of volunteers in the country (around 370,000 in the UK, with over 250,000 in England)<sup>1</sup>, they are certainly not among the happiest. The demands of funding and related issues weigh heavily on the work Governors undertake. In addition, many schools function without a full complement of Governors. Ethnic minorities and younger people are also seriously underrepresented.<sup>2</sup> Currently, profiles of governing bodies by social class do not seem to exist. However, anecdotally, the majority of governing bodies do not appear to reflect that of the social composition of their schools.

Governors' workload, the commitment of time and level of responsibility, plus the need for constant training and updating, coupled with the amount of energy devoted to crisis management due to insufficient resources, all work against recruiting wider sections of society.

Further, top-down managerial and democratically empty approaches to education have seen Academies, in particular Academy chains and multi school trusts, reduce the significance of Governing Bodies. Dennis gave an example of recent work by campaigning education journalist Warwick Mansell which revealed that governing bodies across a range of schools run by Lord Nash's Academy Chain have moved from a community based membership to one where Lord Nash, his wife or the Trust's CEO sit on every Governing Body.<sup>3</sup>

Dennis concluded by pointing out the value of Governors as allies. He said that Governors volunteer with the best of ideals and comprise a potentially significant lobby group and set of influencers, vital for ensuring Labour's NES strategy gains more widespread support.

Several ideas for further action and consideration emerged from the discussion which followed Steven and Dennis' talks.

It was agreed that most parents want something more fulfilling for their children than an education system which is 'just about jobs'. However, we should remain vigilant that worries about unemployment and under employment may be used by government to sell a curriculum tailored to the needs of employers as the only solution. Arguments about the needs of the economy should not outweigh the NES vision of an education for life.

### Next Steps for the SEA?

1. A comprehensive briefing paper for Labour governors, councillors and activists, explaining how and why we got to where we are today, together with

an outline of best practice based on key ideas from well-performing education systems from other countries.

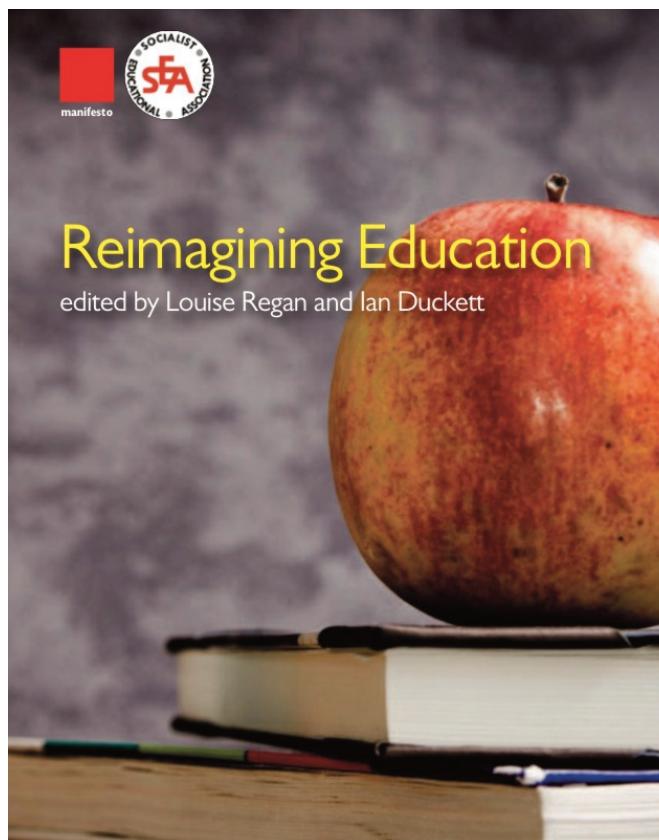
2. A reminder to CLPs of Labour's NES proposals to keep these proposals highly visible at all levels of the Party. This could be a project which involves the SEA, Anti Academies Alliance, Comprehensive Future, the NEU and other campaign groups. The West London SEA plans to start work by arranging local meetings with individual groups and urging the national SEA to organise wider meetings.

3. A great many Labour Party members and a high proportion of Labour councillors are School Governors. Using links with our CLPs and the SEA membership, the West London SEA plans to invite them to a meeting on School Governance and use this meeting to draw attention to the amount of work undertaken by Governors. This meeting will also be used to discuss what kind of work is and is not appropriate for Governors to undertake, the lack of diversity among School Governors, and how to make the best use of current organisations such as the National Governors Association (NGA).

1. It would be great to pin down the figure for England which remains, however calculated, the largest single issue group of volunteers in the country.

2. the National Governors Association, NGA Annual Survey of governing bodies shows this starkly

3. Warwick Mansell Education Uncovered  
<https://tinyurl.com/y6xooss2>



Coming soon from Manifesto press  
and the SEA

# “Standards Not Structures?”

How an old mantra blocks serious discussion of both structures and standards

If consistency is an admirable quality then one thing that might be admired about the Labour Party’s approach to education in recent decades is its steadfast adherence to the mantra that in education, at least, it is concerned with “standards not structures”.

Informed discussion, however, leads to a very different view, as will be shown. Even some of its main proponents now admit this. So why does Labour find it so hard to stop repeating this mantra?

## The mantra itself

The innocent observer could be forgiven for wondering how anyone could imagine that the outcomes (aka “standards”) of a complex societal provision, subject to many different pressures, can be regarded as having nothing to do with the institutional arrangements (aka “structures”) for delivering the provision.

The first thing to note is that this bizarre notion is not applied in other areas.

The Labour Party, with good reason, calls for a reform of the institutional arrangements for delivering benefits on the grounds that the present structure (universal credit) gets in the way of the fair and efficient delivery. In such cases Labour does not separate the institutional arrangements from the quality of the delivery. It is clear to all the critics of the present system that such a separation of structures and standards would be idiotic.

Similarly, Labour long held that higher democratic standards can only be delivered by various structural reforms ranging from the reform of the House of Lords, devolution of powers to national constituents of the UK and finally the need for a discussion of our current constitutional arrangements with a view to enhancing regional powers. No separation of structures and standards there either.

## In plain sight

Everyone, defenders and opponents of present arrangements alike, understands that the institutional (structural) separation of children into private and state-funded education has a dramatic influence over life opportunities. Similarly, no one doubts that, the motive for maintaining grammar schools is to gain relative advantage for the children that go to them. Such structures determine a division of standards.

Institutional arrangements (structures), whether based on the parent’s ability to pay or on testing for selection, have an impact on the standards that can be achieved on average by those “selected out” for the lower rungs of the system. The idea that it is meaningful to talk of “standards not structures” therefore falls at the first hurdle. A little reflection therefore soon leads to an awareness that the mantra is at best without substance and at worst deeply harmful.

Even though Labour came to power in 1997 intoning “standards not structures” regarding education, this was in marked contrast to the reality of its restructuring zeal. The 2005 White Paper **Higher Standards, Better Schools for All** was clear that the government had its sights set on a massive structural upheaval. In that paper the Labour

Government declared:

*Our aim is the creation of a system of independent non-fee paying state schools*

Reflecting on this period Tony Blair wrote in his memoir *A Journey*:

*We had come to power in 1997 saying it was ‘standards not structures’ that mattered. We said this in respect of education, but it applied equally to health and other parts of the system of public services.*

*In other words, we were saying: forget about complex, institutional structural reforms; what counts is what works, and by that we meant outputs. This was fine as a piece of rhetoric; and positively beneficial as a piece of politics. Unfortunately, as I began to realise when experience started to shape our thinking, it was bunkum as a piece of policy. The whole point is that structures beget standards. How a service is configured affects outcomes. (Emphasis added)*

Why have Labour politicians, especially its Shadow Education Secretaries, from Steven Twigg to Angela Rayner, found this so difficult to grasp? “Standards not structures” might have served for rhetorical purposes, if you are the sort of politician who is not too fussed about the relationship between rhetoric and reality, **but all the same it is bunkum**.

Even Labour’s swing to the left with the election of Jeremy Corbyn did not enable it to break with this idea. Angela Rayner, for example, said in a **Spectator** interview (3 January 2018):

*I am not interested in structures, I am more interested in standards because that’s how you improve.*

She repeated the same thought in many different ways in her various contributions to debate.

## The reasons for the mantra

For the reasons given by Tony Blair, and nearly every serious writer on educational matters, “Standards not structures” is a piece of nonsense. No one who has thought at all seriously about the problems of education could think for a moment that standards can be divorced from structures. So why do Labour politicians cling to the idea?

One reason is simple. When they say “standards not structures” they are sending out a clear message that they intend to resist demands for structural reform and intend to focus on tweaking the existing system instead. This became particularly absurd under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership in that the Shadow Education Minister was both calling for the setting up of a new *National Education Service* AND saying that she was not interested in structures!

Another reason stems from the New Labour penchant for market-like solutions to problems of public provision. Restructuring is then guided by “demand” rather than by political deliberation.

The function of the Mantra is to refuse discussion and to reject demands for reform without making any analyses or offering any arguments. It functions, in other words, as a kind of charlatan’s charter.

## What now with the “New Leadership”?

In her brief period as Shadow Education Secretary under Keir Starmer’s leadership, Rebecca Long Bailey made clear her wish to undo the “Gove Revolution” and put schools back into a local authority framework. This made Labour’s stance on education briefly more to the left than under Jeremy Corbyn! However, this was not to last. She was dismissed after five months in the job, the stated reasons for which appear to have nothing to do with her educational views. She was replaced by Kate Green.

Will Kate Green pick up where Rebecca Long Bailey left off? It doesn’t look like it. On the other hand she has said that Labour intends to keep its 2019 Manifesto pledges to abolish student fees, increase nursery provision, end the Free School programme and give greater educational powers to local authorities.

Kate Green joined a panel hosted by the **SEA** at Labour’s recent virtual Conference where she outlined some of the issues she intended to pursue. She said that

- Labour should “... re-energise the role of schools, colleges and universities as hubs of their community”.
- we have “lost that community role that schools, colleges and universities can and must play”.
- “we should be systematising and structuring and resourcing schools, colleges ...” to play a community role;
- “There’s a lot of work to be done to fill out what it [a National Education Service] looks like ...”;

All of which clearly have structural implications.

On the other hand, when asked about academies and free schools her response was “I don’t want to spend the whole of the first term... messing around just with structures. I want to get to ... what’s going on in class.” and “On scrambling successful schools for the sake of having perfect structures, that isn’t where I’m going to start. But I think we want to start with a different set of values and objectives that aren’t about pitching schools into a competitive situation.” This sounds worryingly close to the old mantra (**LabourList**, 20 September 2020). It is to be hoped that this ambiguity will be resolved in the coming months.

## A plea to Labour politicians

Can we please stop saying “standards not structures”? Even its leading early proponent came to realise that it was bunkum. Anyone using the term reveals only that they have given the matter no serious thought. Either that or they are just trying to stop the discussion we need to have about ending selection.

If you think desirable structural changes will require a long period of preparation before implementation then say so. If you think they cannot be implemented in the short term for legal, organisational, financial or other reasons then explain that. But please don’t say that you are not interested in structures. That makes you sound like a fool. Structural changes are needed for better standards. The what, when and how is a matter of discussion. It is still a discussion we need to have.

David Pavett, 2 October 2020



## Time is running out to tackle the climate and ecological emergency.

Thousands of schools across the UK are coming together to act on climate change when world leaders should have been.

Designed by teachers and students for their peers, the Youth Climate Summit is a route for all school students to speak up for their world - and for their schools to support them to do so. Everyone can be an activist - you don’t need to be on a stage or “an expert” to create change!

A lively schedule of coordinated online reflection and action will provide a collective route for young people to make pledges to change the things they can - and the tools and skills to call for things they can’t.

With CPD for teachers and events for school management the Summit also aims to equip adults to respond to growing student anxiety and provide meaningful opportunities to channel concern into action.

## 5 Days of Pledges for the Planet

Created in collaboration with teachers and young people, each day will focus on a different theme, and will have its own set of pledges for schools to make.

|  |                         |  |
|--|-------------------------|--|
|  | Monday 9th November     | Nature & Oceans  |
|  | Tuesday 10th November   | Travel, Pollution & Waste                              |
|  | Wednesday 11th November | Food, Farming & Forests                                |
|  | Thursday 12th November  | Fashion & Consumption                                  |
|  | Friday 13th November    | A Sustainable Future<br>followed by the closing summit |

# **Socialist Educational Association Cymdeithas Addysgol Sosialaidd**

The Socialist Educational Association is a Socialist Society, affiliated to the Labour Party. It began in the '20's as the National Association of Labour Teachers. SEA was renamed and broadened to include all socialists with an interest in education. It played a major role in developing the concept of the neighbourhood comprehensive school in the '60's. The aims of the SEA are:

- To promote comprehensive education, based on equality of opportunity and lifelong access, well resourced, free and under local democratic control.
- To influence development of progressive education policies within the Labour Party and to work with other like-minded bodies.
- To promote an international and inclusive perspective to education.

We have now set up SEA Cymru, a Welsh branch, affiliated to Welsh Labour.

**Since devolution, education in Wales has diverged from that in England, in many ways (except finance) to Wales' advantage. Examples include the Foundation Phase, 14-19 education, the absence of academies, trust and 'free' schools, the Welsh baccalaureate, maintenance of an inclusive, cooperative and comprehensive ethos. We welcome the Donaldson curriculum initiative, the development of Additional Learning Needs policy, and the provision of free breakfasts in primary schools. We need to elaborate a policy for Welsh education that defends and nurtures what has been achieved, but which also specifies what further needs to be done.**

Membership is open to all who have an interest in education and are eligible for Labour Party membership. Individual members are welcome (£25 waged, £12 unwaged pa) (Couples £35 or £18). CLPs and branches, including TU branches, are welcome to affiliate (£30 pa). Membership includes the right to attend meetings and conferences in Wales and of the National SEA, and includes a free copy of the journal for analysis and debate, "Education Politics"

Please contact to Mike Newman 17 Gileston Road, Cardiff, CF119JS. We will forward membership requests to the National Membership Secretary. Or contact via [newmanmike2@aol.com](mailto:newmanmike2@aol.com) (or via 029 20 382 369)

## **Socialist Educational Association**

### **Are you interested in education? Join the SEA**

The Socialist Educational Association is a Socialist Society, affiliated to the Labour Party. It began in the '20's as the National Association of Labour Teachers. SEA was later renamed and broadened so that members now include MPs, MEPs, AMs, school governors, local councillors, teachers, lecturers, students, parents – in fact anyone with an interest in education. It played a major role in developing the concept of the neighbourhood comprehensive school in the '60's. It is concerned with all aspects of education: Foundation Phase, Primary and Secondary schooling, Further and Higher Education and Life Long Learning.

### **The aims of the SEA are:**

- To promote well-resourced and free comprehensive education, based on equality of opportunity and lifelong access.
- To oppose privatisation and the abolition of local democratic control.
- To work with the TUC affiliated Teacher Unions.
- To influence development of progressive education policies within the Labour Party and to work with other like-minded bodies to the same end.
- To promote an international and inclusive approach to education.

Membership is open to all who have an interest in education and are eligible for Labour Party membership.

