



02-01-2021

NEU advises primary members it is unsafe to return to work

I do not think that twelve months ago any of us could have predicted the year to come. Many were still coming to terms with the thought of a Tory government for a further four years but as the COVID cases started to rise globally and we saw the devastating impact it was having in our communities the trade unions stepped up to the mark – defending workers and their communities.

The government failed at every turn from lack of PPE for health and care workers to a failure to close education settings to stem the rise in cases.

The NEU has not held back at any point during this crisis. From its initial attack on the government's failure to close education settings quickly enough, to exposing the deep inequalities in our society which have led to significantly higher death rates in black and disabled people, to shaming the government's inability to even provide food for our children and young people who receive FSM during school closures.

When schools and colleges reopened more widely in September the union were clear that the government should have done more to reduce class sizes, enable effective social distancing and protect those at higher risk. The leaders in our schools and colleges rose to the challenge to make settings as safe as possible. The government constantly updated advice adding to their

stress and also having to run a track and trace programme giving up evenings, weekends and their holidays to keep settings as safe as possible.

However, during the autumn term cases rose exponentially and amongst children and young people at a significantly higher rate.

Despite this the government announced at the start of the new year that the majority of primary schools, nursery schools and special schools would be reopening on the 4th January.

2021 started with education unions again taking on the government the National Education Union held an online meeting on Sunday 3rd January 2021 with nearly 100,000 members attending. The union called for all settings to be closed for all but key worker and vulnerable children and young people for two weeks. The union also joined with Unison to launch an online petition. At the same time NAHT and ASCL are taking legal advice and considering taking the DfE to court.

All of this could have been so different. If the government had listened to the education unions and followed their advice at the start of this pandemic our schools and colleges would be in a very different place.

Very little positive has come out of this pandemic however what it has done is raise awareness about the importance of trade unions. Most unions have seen significant growth and engagement during this period and this can only be beneficial in the fights that are ahead of us.

Louise Regan, Editor

NEU Press Release

Our union is calling on all primary schools to move to remote learning for the first two weeks of January except to vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

We are writing to employers, urging them to look at the advice of SAGE, the Government's scientific advisory group, and we are urging our members, on the basis of that science, to use [our model letter to inform their head teacher](#) that it is unsafe for them to be in school – in crowded buildings with no social distancing, no PPE and inadequate ventilation

We are asking members to be available to work from home and to support remote learning.

This is a step we take with huge reluctance. But this Government is failing to protect children, their families and our communities. And it is failing in its duty of care to education staff who have worked tirelessly to look after children during this pandemic.

In December, we called for schools to be closed for two weeks at the start of the spring term in order to provide a circuit breaker and lower infections. Our view was ignored but our call has become even more urgent as the new variant of Covid-19 is spreading far more quickly than in March.

We now know that SAGE also called for all schools to be closed in January to keep the R rate below 1. This advice was issued on 22 December and ministers have done little to follow it.

The science now tells us that, although children largely do not become ill with Covid-19, they spread it to others. To their parents, their families and into their communities.

That is why SAGE wanted schools to close – as a way of keeping the public safe.

If Government does not act to follow the science, we must.

Our NHS is on its knees – infection rates are at their highest since March, hundreds are dying every day and hospitals are struggling to cope with a tidal wave of new cases.

Ambulances are queuing outside hospitals in the worst-affected areas, with patients being treated in car parks and some having to transfer intensive care Covid patients hundreds of miles to receive the care they need.

We cannot stand by and see our members, our pupils, their families and the communities we serve put in harm's way like this.

Our NHS heroes have been working flat out since March and are exhausted and fearful of how they will cope with the hugely increasing number of very sick patients.

We are education professionals, and we all want schools to be open for all pupils. We know, to our very core, how important education is to children's wellbeing and life chances.

But we will not sit by and see the worsening of a health catastrophe in this way.

Replacing OFSTED

Confession time. Having taken voluntary redundancy from my deputy headship role I worked for OFSTED as a 'team inspector' and later as a lead on short inspections. I have not worked for them for a year now and after experiencing inspecting a few times under the new framework I decided to resign. I am going to write a little about my personal experience I hope dispelling a few myths. Then I will explain why I think OFSTED as currently constituted is not fit for purpose. This has little to do with the people working for it, many of whom I respect and enjoyed working with. It is more to do with the contradictory role it plays, the fact that it is not independent, and its hierarchical structure which prevents discussion and debate.

Pre OFSTED, HMI were classically educated civil servants. Their function was to be liberal independent experts who could offer advice and compile reports on various aspects of the system. This is no longer the case. Now they make up the directly employed OFSTED team and are responsible for determining and implementing policy as well as carrying out inspections and gathering evidence for generic reports on topics. There are now 157 HMI. At the time I was applying 5 years ago, OFSTED recruited a huge number of inspectors after the decision to bring the service back in house. There are 2300 directly contracted inspectors. These are only paid per inspection. Most are serving heads or senior leaders. Some are recently retired or have other roles such as consultants, LA advisors, MAT directors etc. 15% of inspectors then are HMI which means it is often the case that directly contracted inspectors make up the whole of an inspection team including the lead. I would point out that in London, the white male be suited inspector though common was not typical. Teams were often of both genders and ethnically diverse.

My Experience

I often enjoyed the work. Witnessing amazing teaching, noting interesting projects and how different schools tackled the same issues was fascinating to me and I was privileged to observe it. I tried along with most others to recognise and affirm strong practice. It was appreciated.

What were the issues? The first is that inspection is based on a set of immovable criteria. Despite protestations from OFSTED that inspections are not tick box exercises, they always end with reference back to the criteria which are then matched to the evidence collected. Really the approximate decision about a grade is taken at the end of day one and day two is spent chasing any missing evidence to match the criteria. Heads are in on this exercise and advise inspectors where to go to find it. It maybe for example that on day one inspectors had not seen misconceptions being tackled enough. The following day one would be directed to lessons where this would be demonstrated. No doubt frantic emails to staff to deliver on this would have gone out the night before.

This brings me to the second issue - pressure on staff and workload. OFSTED became aware around 2010 of the impossible burden it was putting on staff. Pressure was building in unions for abolition and a joint statement was put out with the then NUT about OFSTED myths. Previously OFSTED had been grading individual lessons and reporting back to heads on teachers they thought were not up to it. They also checked books and looked for regular marking. This led to famous edicts from Chris Woodhead et al about percentages of incompetent teachers. The handbooks in 2012 forbade inspectors asking for lesson plans or any extra data, stopped the grading of individual lessons and insisted it was not looking at the frequency of marking. What is more poor behaviour seen in a lesson would rebound on leaders who would be asked what was being done to support the teacher and why behaviour systems were not working. The problem was though from OFSTED's perspective the shift from assessing individual teachers to focusing on leadership (inspections are now almost solely about holding leaders to account) came too late. The damage was done and teachers simply did not believe the change had taken place. It was to some weaker school leaders' advantage to maintain the myths too. OFSTED can be used by some heads as a means to maintain pressure on staff and frighten them. On inspection, lesson plans would often be handed to me which I would politely decline. There is no doubt that despite OFSTED's best intentions, inspection as constituted indirectly creates unnecessary workload and pressure on staff.

In most of the inspections I undertook, the school agreed with the result and had self-evaluated themselves with the same grade. Fortunately, I did not have to be part of a team putting a school into special measures. The grading system as I will explain later drains the positives out of the inspection process especially when it results in a negative grade. On the small number of occasions when a leadership team became aware that they are not going to make 'good', they become understandably defensive and professional dialogue breaks down. Just as in Dylan Williams's 'Inside the Black Box' on assessment, constructive feedback is undermined by the grade which is all the school hears.

OFSTED's Conflicting Functions

Compliance

Schools are responsible for children and young people for a significant proportion of their lives. Compared with when I first started teaching, safeguarding which as a term did not exist has become a necessary industry in itself. Keeping Children Safe in Education Guidance is updated (this usually means adding a section) annually. OFSTED has to make sure schools are implementing it. Many parental complaints come under the safeguarding heading which also includes keeping children safe from bullying and peer on peer abuse. These complaints are considered as part of the inspection evidence for the most part. Complaints showing a school failing to deal with a serious safeguarding concern can lead to an immediate inspection.

Safeguarding infringements can lead to a school being put in serious weaknesses, regardless of whether the quality of education in the school is good or not. I was on an inspection where a check on medical records and the medical room showed the school was clearly negligent in not being able to locate EpiPens for particular pupils. There were other issues too. For example, lesson registers were inaccurate. This led to safeguarding being judged ineffective and the school being put in serious weaknesses. The school managed to stop the report being published through legal action. On reinspection a year later, the school was reinspected and judged 'good'. The shortcomings in the school were serious but easily fixable in a couple of weeks. A judgement of 'serious weaknesses' which in itself is a category within 'inadequate' suggests to parents the school is failing across the board.

A further area added to the new framework is gaming (using inappropriate qualifications to improve a school's position in the league tables) and off-rolling (persuading pupils who may damage school performance figures by low attainment to leave, home school etc.). Leadership and Management are supposed to be judged inadequate if a school is found guilty of either. My experience here indicates again why the compliance function of OFSTED should be separated out. We were called to an 'outstanding' school on a section 8 inspection, the means by which OFSTED can inspect if they suspect an issue at the school. Schools are identified for this by risk assessments drawing on attendance, mobility and attainment data. We were not told as to why we had been called to the school as this might 'influence our objectivity'. The first task was to find reasons the school might not be outstanding anymore so that the inspection could be converted to a Section 5 one where the grade could be changed. The data we were provided with showed significant numbers of children leaving the school mid-year in years 9 and 10. OFSTED clearly suspected the school of off rolling. The school could provide reasons why each pupil had left. An exodus of east Europeans caused by Brexit and families on benefits being forced out of London by the benefits cap were the main reasons. We saw no reason to 'convert' the inspection. The school was working well and had done nothing wrong. Pressure kept coming on the Lead Inspector from OFSTED to do so but she stood her ground. We left and did not return for a second day. She was not an HMI incidentally. This situation did not require a team of inspectors to arrive at the school interviewing leaders and visiting lessons. It could have been resolved by one or possibly two inspectors interviewing leaders and admin staff and checking the school's records.

On another occasion I was on a team inspecting a school in a large MAT, this time led by an

HMI. We were asked to find out why the school had entered its whole year 11 cohort for an English as a Second Language qualification the previous year which then counted in the performance tables. The school had a below average number of EAL pupils. It also transpired that other schools in the area division of the MAT had done the same. The Head said that the experience (the exam takes place in November) had been valuable examination practice for year 11 and had boosted their confidence. OFQUAL removed the qualification from approved list the year we visited and the school stopped entering its pupils for it. The Head did not really have an answer as to why if it was such good practice, the school was not continuing with it after it had been dropped. This was a clear case of 'gaming'. The school was not found to be inadequate. The HMI was called into a meeting with the Chief Executive of the MAT at which no other inspectors were present. There was no further discussion in the inspection team about gaming. The school was found to be good.

I would not accuse OFSTED of always being a soft touch when it comes to academy chains. I was on an inspection of a school in a major MAT chain which was found much to their chagrin to be judged requires improvement. However, I do not doubt that OFSTED's links through the current HMCIS, academy chain directors serving on advisory groups, and the ability of MATS to poach HMIs with attractive salaries, all create conflicts of interest.

OFSTED's remit also covers compliance with the Equalities Act. This could be taken a lot further by the inspectorate. The curriculum offer is looked at to check there is equality of access for all groups to the same opportunities. E.g. Do boys have access to netball? Girls to football? Etc. This could be taken further. In my experience OFSTED is unwilling to challenge pupil grouping for example. Questions should be asked about why the proportion of BAME pupils in lower sets is high or why are there only four boys in a top set English group?.

OFSTED checks on more controversial areas the government has issued statutory guidance or responsibilities for. Prevent is one and I have no doubt they will be enforcing the PSCE guidelines about so called political bias.

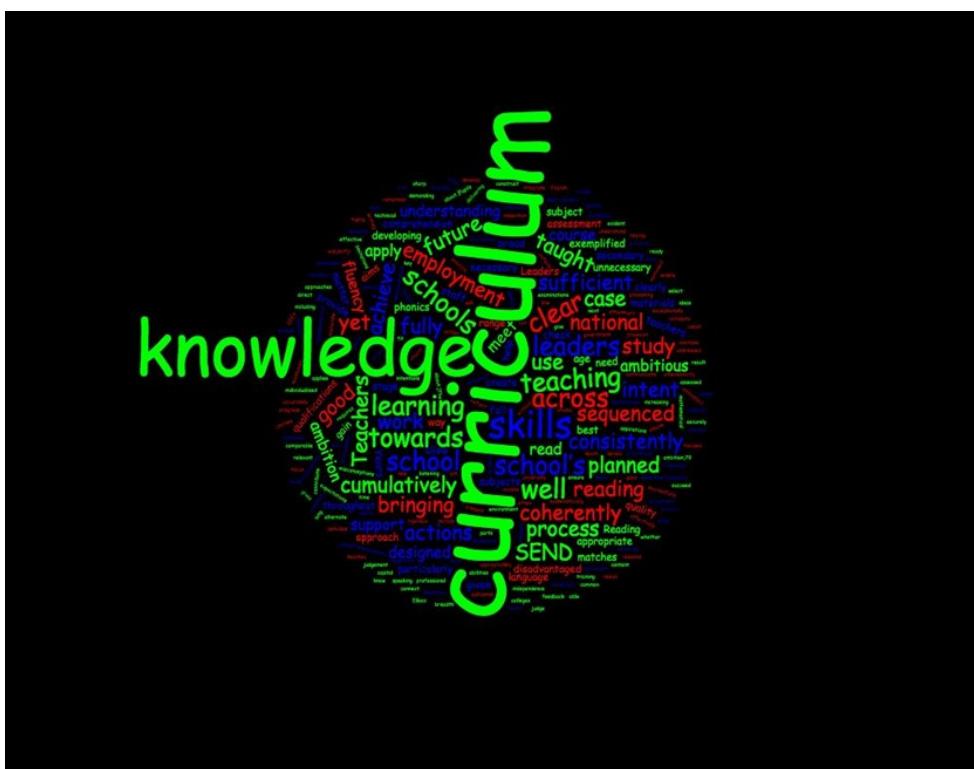
Quality Assurance and the 'Trip Advisor role'

I found grading was at the nub of all the problems associated with OFSTED. The grades and their associated criteria dominate every inspection. Head teachers are kept in touch with the inspection through the day and must be informed if the school is in danger of being "RI" (requires improvement) or worse. If a school is borderline on the second day everyone leaders and inspectors are involved in a mad rush to find the evidence required to meet the criteria. OFSTED's definition of good or outstanding meets most people's understanding of what can be found in a successful school. But when it comes to prioritising what is most important among a range of factors there will be disagreement.

This is very apparent in OFSTED's disagreement with itself. Below is a word map from the pre-2019 framework criteria for good:-



The tablets are delivered from on high and an inspection framework emerges. Overnight the definition of what a good school is changes:



This is clear evidence of the ideological nature of the new framework which I will comment on later. However, the fact that OFSTED changes what is a good school from one framework to the next is deeply problematic in itself. It is clear that a school which was judged outstanding under the old framework would not necessarily be under the new, making comparisons across school meaningless.

Schools are far too complex organisations to be reduced down through a series of supposedly measurable criteria to one word.

Fear of not achieving a good plus grade, causes leaders to do what they can to try to manage and game the inspection. The desperation in the faces of leaders as they see the 'good' verdict slip away is often palpable. Comments like 'this will mean the end of our sixth form' are voiced. The market place in some areas is harsh. Numbers start to fall leading to budgetary problems and staff not being replaced and a cycle of decline can kick in.

Free market ideology dictates that the market will sort schools into winners and losers. The OFSTED grading system is very much part of this process. Schools are measured in the same way as hotels with a star system. When hotels fail, people go elsewhere. When schools falter, those young people who cannot move away, usually the disadvantaged, are failed by the system and this has an impact on their life chances.

Negative judgements also lead to schools being forced into MATS ...if they will have them.

School Improvement

OFSTED prides itself on being 'a force for improvement'. The evidence for this is unclear.

"I have been digging deep for at least 10 years, trying to fathom out if Ofsted has actually raised school standards. amongst the abundance of research to say that it hasn't, I'm yet to find anything conclusive from anybody else other than Ofsted to suggest otherwise." Ross McGill, Teachers Toolkit.

Indeed, inspection plays little or no role in the systems of the most successful jurisdictions. Alberta, British Columbia and Finland do not have an institution like OFSTED. Instead, school leaders are directly accountable on a day to day basis to local municipalities or in Canada elected school boards.

The OFSTED inspection involves identifying what the school needs to do to improve. These areas are usually agreed with the school and again are market sensitive. No school leader wants an AFI (Area for Improvement) based on behaviour for example.

AFIs have to be based on the criteria in the OFSTED framework and are supposedly reviewed at the next inspection. This is often not the case because AFIs which were valid in a previous framework no longer apply. References to marking and feedback very common from the framework before last have to be ignored. No doubt references to generic teaching such as improving questioning or challenge will now be ignored too because teaching and learning per se, as an area, has been removed from the new framework.

Finally, OFSTED rails against giving any advice to schools as to how to improve in the areas it identifies. 'We are here to evaluate and make judgements not offer advice' a senior HMI would say. OFSTED identifies strengths and weaknesses, highlights what it considers to be the most important AFIs, gives a grade and then walks away. At no point is a school directed towards where it might find examples of strong practice, which it could learn from or how it could embark on a process of change.

OFSTED as an organisation.

Independence?

OFSTED occupies an ill-defined position in the national education ecology. They have recently used that lack of definition to their advantage. Are they independent? How far are there policies politically driven? Are they able to evaluate key government policies? The answer is that they present to the public as an independent arbiter but are in fact far from it. Recently they have gone beyond being merely an evaluator to initiating a project supported by the right in schools, whilst claiming it is evidence based.

OFSTED has always taken up the main priorities of the government of the day and has evaluated how well they are being delivered rather than judging the efficacy of the policy itself. 'Every child matters' was very much part of the inspection framework during the last Labour Government. Now phonics, the EBAC, the need to pass on 'cultural capital' are all very much taken as educationally essential in spite of each, in reality, being the subject of controversy. Consider these extracts from the current handbook criteria for 'good'.

'Reading books connect closely to the phonics knowledge pupils are taught when they are learning to read'.

What this statement is doing is preventing pupils being able to read 'real books' e.g. Michael Rosen's The Bear Hunt' because they might learn words by recognition rather than phonic decoding. It also sets in stone an approach to the teaching of reading which has been politically driven rather than based on evidence.

Or in secondary schools-

'The school's aim is to have the EBacc at the heart of its curriculum, in line with the DfE's ambition, and good progress has been made towards this ambition'.

The DfE's ambition for the EBAC is 75% of year 10 pupils will follow such a curriculum in 2022 and 90% by 2025. OFSTED here are being used as an enforcer. If the DfE believes so strongly in the EBAC, why not legislate or use a statutory instrument to amend the national curriculum to make it compulsory? Instead, OFSTED is policing 'an ambition' and holding it against schools if they do not comply.

The EBAC is another contentious government policy with many questioning the need for it at all and others wanting different combinations of subjects. It is a politically driven project based on the Govean idea of the primacy of traditional academic subjects, yet OFSTED is far from neutral on its benefits.

Unlike the pre OFSTED HMI, the current holders of the title who work for OFSTED (it is forbidden to use the title HMI if you no longer work for OFSTED) do not comment on levels of funding, teacher shortages or the state of school buildings. In 2018 Amanda Spielman stated there was 'no evidence' spending cuts affected school standards. However, in February this year she stated in a blog that funding cuts were leading to a narrowing of the curriculum. Interestingly the blog post was swiftly deleted. Ofsted said it had been published "erroneously" and would be published again in a few weeks' time, when a more detailed study on school funding is completed. The report was published and subsequently dismissed by the DfE.

To be fair there are occasional reports from OFSTED which embarrass the government, but these are dwarfed by OFSTED not only ensuring schools follow the right's ideological education agenda, but also leading its development. This is what the latest EIF (Education Inspection Framework) launched in September 2019 seeks to do.

The New Framework

The new framework which effectively represents a paradigm shift in what is expected of schools, was imposed on schools with minimal consultation. The word maps earlier in this article show what a fundamental shift this framework represents.

The first map comes from the previous framework's criteria for good and the second from the latest. Progress from starting points, challenge, have gone. The role of teachers has been supplanted by the curriculum and its key component knowledge. Further reading of the framework reveals the new reductionist definition of progress: 'knowing more and remembering more'. Schools can compile as much progress tracking data as they like. OFSTED will not look at it. Instead, they will look for evidence of a well sequenced, knowledge-based curriculum with evidence that pupils have learnt it from their work and from pupil interviews.

OFSTED insist that the new framework is more research based than previous ones. They do not reveal which published academic papers and which university education departments contributed. Instead, there is an A level Psychology level of justification around how long term memory works, the need for not 'overloading the working memory' and the need for constantly revisiting previous learning. This is leading to repeated quizzes and tests become a regular feature of lessons.

The new framework deprofessionalises teachers too. The action research into teaching strategies common in many excellent schools is not recognised. The art of teaching (pedagogy) which one would think would be central to any organisation trying to improve schools, has been difficult territory for OFSTED. The right's insistence that good teaching is about whole class teaching from the front led to tensions under Gove. OFSTED refused to recommend a 'preferred teaching style'.

Nicky Morgan, Gove's successor, floated taking the inspection of teaching and learning out of OFSTED's remit. This has now happened. Teaching quality is no longer relevant, so long as pupils learn and understand the knowledge put in front of them. The knowledge rich curriculum is more suited to a traditional pedagogical style with testing to ensure retention. This pedagogical change will no doubt happen by default reinforced by the so-called safety measures introduced during the COVID pandemic where pupils have to face the front.

Pressure on subject leaders during the new style inspections is immense and this is a huge shift from the previous framework. They are made to explain their curriculum rationale, demonstrate 'effective sequencing' of knowledge and then ensure that all this is observable in the classroom. In most successful jurisdictions the boundaries between academic subjects are increasingly blurred, but in the UK, thanks in part to OFSTED, the only permissible way of organising knowledge is into traditional academic subject areas and these divisions form the basis of inspection. And this obsession with subjects is used in primary schools too, even in Early Years. Inspectors are told to ensure that 'foundation' subjects are included in these curriculum-based inspections in primary schools, despite there often being no subject specialists as such. Sometimes a leader may take responsibility for more than one subject or there is a rotation of responsibilities. In primary schools, it is often phase leaders who check on curriculum provision as well as the progress of the pupils but they have no role in the inspection. The framework assumes and promotes a prep school model where the subject comes first and the child second.

In its enthusiasm for the traditional, the new framework is totally silent too on the role of digital technology in education. It appears the only knowledge which counts is that which is taught and directed by the teacher despite the fact that most young people access knowledge through their smart phones. This omission has come back to haunt OFSTED when it was called on to assess the quality of digital learning during the pandemic.

Conclusion

OFSTED has moved from an evaluator of the implementation of government policy in schools to not only being an enforcer but an initiator of the knowledge rich approach without serious debate, to consolidate government policy on curriculum and assessment. This might be thought of as grand claim. Nick Gibb, Schools Minister, made a speech launching a pamphlet called "The Question of Knowledge" in 2017, interestingly a few months after Amanda Spielman took over at OFSTED. This pamphlet was sponsored by ASCL (not sure if the current general secretary would have approved) and Parents and Teachers for Excellence funded by Vote Leave, Chair of Finance Jon Moynihan, venture capitalist and it lists as a director Rachel de Souza of Inspiration Trust. Nick Gibb quotes Tim Oates as reviewing the National Curriculum in 2010 because it failed 'to adequately draw from emerging analysis of high-performing systems around the globe'. The Tories then went on to pull the plug on the Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum started under Labour which recommended dividing the curriculum on non-subject lines.

It is unsurprising then that advisory committee on the new OFSTED framework was led by Tim Oates and attended by academy chain leaders. Union leaders including head teacher ones, progressive academics and subject associations were excluded. Education Uncovered, Warwick Mansell's website shows that nearly all the subject advisory groups OFSTED has set up are made up of people from the 'traditionalist' wing within educational discourse without any trade unionists and hardly anyone for subject associations.

The new framework represents a fundamental shift in approach in our schools which has happened by stealth and is presented in typical right-wing fashion as if there is no alternative. OFSTED have moved from being mainly neutral in the ideological battle in education to not only supporting but promoting one side. It is therefore clearly not fit for purpose as an inspectorate for an incoming Labour Government even if that government was a centrist one, unless they decide they are not going to jettison the right wing hegemony we are currently experiencing in education.

Recommendations for Future policy on Inspection.

Compliance

Opinion polls from parents do point to support for an overarching independent body they can trust. Any socialist government would want compliance with equalities legislation, safeguarding and any other developments particularly on the curriculum which it introduces. As our accountability framework would not include league tables, gaming and off-rolling should not be an issue. There also needs to be some organisation playing an ombudsman role which sits above those running education, in our case local authorities. I think it was a mistake of New Labour to simply change LA officers into another layer of inspectors. Those responsible for running schools should be accountable to a higher body. I would therefore propose the setting up of a body which ensured schools complied with safeguarding guidance, equalities legislation and more. It should also be able to follow up complaints from parents around these issues when they are dissatisfied with the school/LA response

Aiding the market place in education by grading schools

This should cease.

School Improvement

There are several voluntary associations devoted to school improvement. Challenge Partners which arose out of the London Challenge is a good example. Schools evaluate

each other using school staff led by an independent and experienced reviewer. Schools are also recognised for excellent practice in a particular area. This could be a subject department or promoting mental health for example. Schools then make themselves available to share practice in this area giving other schools access to the 'how' not just the 'what'. Reports showing school strengths and areas for improvement are written. Challenge Partners does have its own grading system which should stop. It has a loose framework but ultimately it is schools working together which brings about improvement. I would recommend a national roll out of Challenge Partners or similar.

James Whiting, Secretary SEA

Critical School Geography, exploring powerful and socially useful knowledge

At the heart of socialism and socialist education is the popular control of all aspects of social life. Economic, political and cultural democracy are the keys to putting society's development on a more sustainable path and overcoming such crises as those of global heating; biodiversity loss; pandemics caused by infections with animal origins; mounting debt and economic instability; the rise of right-wing populism; the assault of social media on people's minds; and the growing incidence of mental ill health, particularly among the young.

Critical social theory and powerful knowledge

In arguing for greater democracy, socialists draw on an extensive body of critical social theory developed by anarchists, Marxists, and others, including those post-structuralists who highlight the role that grand narratives, myths and discourses play in our lives. Such theory is critical in the sense that it reveals the undemocratic, unjust and unsustainable nature of contemporary capitalist societies and the role of mainstream theory in justifying the unequal power relations on which they are based. While empiricism and positivism are the two main philosophies of knowledge underpinning mainstream social theory, critical theory draws on structuralism, post-structuralism and critical realism. By revealing the structures and processes that render capitalism unsustainable, and proposing socialist alternatives, political economy based on critical theory, is key both to people's emancipation from oppressive power relations and society's transition to sustainable development or what in the context of Covid-19 is being termed 'the next normal'.

Social subjects, such as economics, history, geography, politics, and sociology, represent powerful and socially useful knowledge to the extent that they are based on critical social theory and political economy. While an integrated, project based, social education is optimal, the reality in England is separate social subjects: history and/or geography and/or sociology for the majority of students up to the age of 16; and economics and politics for a minority. Citizenship has a somewhat marginal status in the curriculum and pressures to produce results, measured by narrow criteria, exclude democratic and enquiry based (critical) pedagogy from most classrooms.

Critical school geography

So what is to be done? The answer lies partly in further developing critical versions of existing school subjects. Critical academic geographers offer an extensive body of knowledge on such issues as schooling, happiness, housing, and work that are relevant to students' anxieties and their

future lives. Critical educators offer insights into curriculum development and critical pedagogy, or the ways in which knowledge, skills and values from critical geography can be explored in democratic and collaborative ways. UNESCO's guidance on education for sustainable development and global citizenship can be embedded in such a critical school geography, and teachers can be encouraged to adopt its approach through an introductory eBook that combines theory and practice, offering sample curriculum units and links to many related websites, videos, and on-line articles.

The eBook *Critical School Geography: Education for Global Citizenship* is now freely available to download from my website (<https://john.huckle.org.uk/critical-school-geography/>). It introduces key ideas from political economy; has chapters on knowledge and pedagogy; and further chapters that link the sustainable production of nature, space and place to radical democracy and citizenship. The theory of left populism and radical democracy, as developed by Chantal Mouffe, underpins the text as do Claudia Ruttenburg's ideas on radical democratic citizenship education. Each of the sample curriculum units is designed for 14-16-year olds; reflects UNESCO guidance; specifies key learning outcomes; suggests a procedure or sequence of activities for inquiry; and allows for adaptation in the light of students' needs, abilities and interests.

Relevance to SEA members

The book should be of interest to readers of *Education Politics* (EP) and members of the SEA. It further explores the greening of the curriculum that Duckett and Cowling introduced in EP issue 141; the alternative curriculum that was the focus of issue 132; and *Re-imagining Education* (Regan & Duckett, 2020), in the light of Covid and other realities. Curriculum unit two on spatial divisions of schooling draws on the research of Danny Dorling (Caroline Benn memorial lecture 2016, EP issue 130) while chapter two considers reports on education from Compass and the IPPR. Chapter three examines causes and solutions to students' and teachers' unhappiness (alienation) linking it to neoliberal reforms that have been a continuing focus of the SEA's criticism.

John Huckle

A Fit for Purpose Post-Covid Curriculum **A Discussion Paper for Members of the LAPA Board**

Why is there a need to review the curriculum being delivered in our schools and who are the people who should be leading the change?

I believe that this is a watershed moment in education, and it is the teachers and school leaders who should be leading transformational change in what and how we teach.

A Rationale

As a teacher and headteacher for 34 years, I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on the need for a curriculum which enables children and young people to understand and enjoy the world around them, whilst recognising and embracing its complexity.

As an MP and member of the Education Select Committee 2017 to 2019, I realised more than



ever that it is essential for politicians to hear and pay heed to the first-hand experiences of professionals in education. Melissa Benn, in her recent *Guardian* opinion piece wrote, “It’s teachers rather than politicians who must now lead the debate away from statistical models and distrust”.

Who should Government ministers listen to and what is needed in a Post Covid Curriculum?

The realisation that as a board member of both the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11years) (HHCP) and LAPA, I am privileged to be working with leaders and

academics who are experts in whole child, inclusive education. It’s clear to me that bringing together the respected research and expertise from both organisations, along with advice from the British Psychological Society, we have the potential to design and deliver a relevant curriculum for every child.

Both in Alternative Provision and in Early Years Education, professionals recognise that a curriculum can only be successful if it is delivered in an environment which cultivates creativity and divergent thinking. The curriculum should not just be focused on academic knowledge and exam success.

Recent work from both HHCP and LAPA, could be, in my view, influential as a platform for the future design and direction of a new broad and balanced curriculum.

For example, a recent publication from HHCP emphasises the importance of the potential of children’s home environment to support learning and suggests that most parents instinctively know many things about how to help their children learn. The HHCP’s emphasis is on effective pedagogy and the understanding of how children learn.

Professor Dominic Wyse has summarised outcomes from a range of research into 12 principles of teaching and learning for parents and guardians.

Learning happens mainly as a result of particular ways of interacting and talking with your children

Parents instinctively know how to help their children learn

A balance between a child’s interests and what adults would like them to learn needs to be maintained

New knowledge to be learned should be related to real life so that it makes sense

Learning new things requires people to know about and build on what children already know

Many daily activities can provide great opportunities for learning

Planning for learning is beneficial, including being clear about what you hope will be learned

Flexibility to adjust plans, such as following children’s interests or making productive use of unexpected events, helps learning

Learning is not just about knowledge, it is also about new skills, different ways of thinking and enjoyment

Sufficient breadth and balance of topics for learning is needed

Learning is helped by hands-on experiences
Resources, such as computers, are only good if
teaching and learning is informed by other peda-
gogical principles

The outcomes published by the LAPA Board on the re-
turn to school for Alternative Provision children, follow-
ing lockdown, took the form of a toolkit named **Fresh
Perspectives**.

The recommendations included the importance of:

Practical, warm hearted leadership

Time and space to heal, repair and rebuild

Holistic programs of recovery, some children needing
more intensive support than others.

The Wider Background to Curriculum Development

The work of the LAPA board and the Helen Hamlyn

Centre is in tune with the recent recommendations from the British Psychological Society. The response to the report Fresh Perspectives, from the Chair of the DECP and Programme Director of the Institute of Education at UCL, Vivian Hill was, “A really valuable, holistic and psychologi-
cally informed approach to helping support all children and young people return to school”.

As a Headteacher I took inspiration from the great Sir Ken Robinson, so recently and tragically lost to us, who believed that all subjects should be viewed as equally important with no distinc-
tion between academic and non- academic. “All our Futures” or The Robinson Report, commis-
sioned by the then Labour Government, found that outdated methodologies and practices in
schools, such as a formal, fact based, teacher led curriculum, hindered learning and that collabora-
tion is the best learning opportunity for both students and staff.

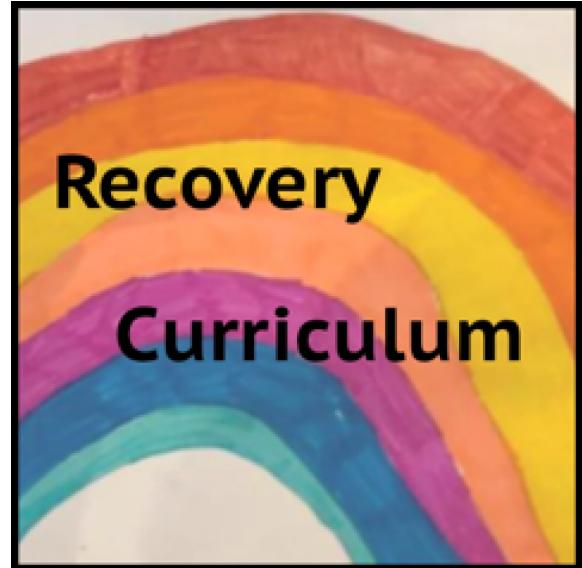
Cross-disciplinary learning is so important because children and young people link their learning in different subjects and areas and recognise the use and relevance of their new understanding. Employers want new and different skills such as team working, not just the ability to retain facts. Fundamental people skills are needed to contribute in the workplace, society and for self- fulfil-
ment. There needs to be curiosity and a lifelong pursuit of learning, along with the knowledge of the different ways learning can be achieved.

Many state schools seem to be afraid to innovate due to high stakes accountability of very nar-
row assessment systems.

Ongoing work carried out by HHCP, for example in collaboration with schools in Barnsley and
Gatley and with Ireland’s Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), is focusing on Chil-
dren’s Agency through their personal choices, and use of critical thinking as part of their educa-
tion. The emphases of this work have included child centred education in a range of settings in-
cluding non-school settings such as museums.

The aim of the work is to have an impact, not just on formal schooling but also to help the build-
ing of children’s critical thinking skills. A recent social media initiative has developed activities for
children and adults to enjoy through philosophical questions.

In a much larger project lasting for some 16 years, the HHCP initiated their Open Futures whole
-school work which was structured around three main types of classroom activity: Grow it, Cook
it, Film it. Children engage in practical work which is cross curricular and collaborative in the ac-
tivities that make up these three types of classroom activities.



What needs to change and why

The Covid pandemic has exposed inequality and entrenched deprivation, especially for our most marginalised children. Those with SEN or those placed in Alternative Provision seem to have suffered the most.

Our current curriculum has had the creativity squeezed out of it, often due to lack of funding but sometimes out of fear of exam accountability. Dull exam material is often unfit for purpose. A third of children fail to reach the required standard in English and Maths. Children, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, leave school feeling they are a failure.

Of course, core skills are needed but exams should be one part of a broad spectrum of project-based learning, coursework, speaking, listening, presenting, along with practical, collaborative work.

In his recent book, "The Power of Us", David Price writes about the "drill and kill" approach being particularly inappropriate at a time of stress and anxiety. Research shows that you don't just get better teaching and learning if you undertake collaborative group work, your outcomes get better too

Currently, the UK is the top of the International League Tables for "routine memorisation, teaching to the test and at the bottom for collaborative and critical thinking". This must change. Let us move away from test scores and let's learn from the courage of our teachers and school leaders. Our children and young people are far more than a score.

We need to bring parents and professionals together to develop a new approach which prepares our children and young people for a love of life-long learning and the confidence to make their own career and life choices.

Recommendations and next steps

A working group of academics, school leaders and teachers to be formed to collaborate on a new curriculum model.

A national/regional conference to bring professionals across education together to discuss what an alternative curriculum would look like.

Formation of an education lobby group to represent colleagues when meeting Government Ministers and members of the Education Select committee.

Thelma Walker

LAPA Board Member

Thanks and acknowledgement:

Melissa Benn, journalist, and author

Professor Dominic Wyse, The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Early Years Pedagogy, UCL

Dr Vivian Hill, Chair of the British Psychological Society

David Price OBE, Writer, speaker, trainer

Sir Ken Robinson, author, speaker, and international advisor on arts education

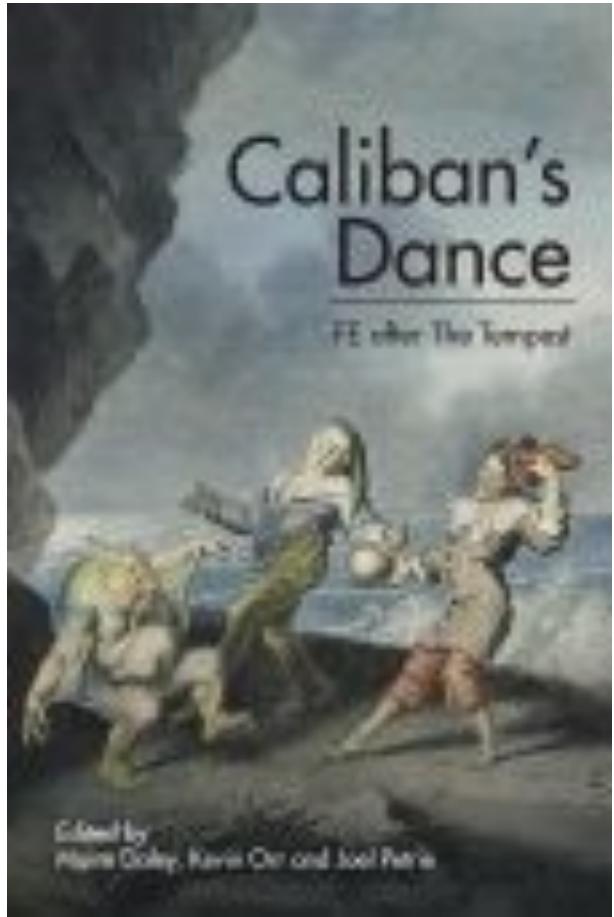
Protect Private Schools but ...

Everyone agrees with the principle that all children deserve the very best education – they have done nothing in their short lives to deserve anything less. In countries that successfully put this principle into practice the eventual pay-off for citizens is the ‘good life’ – measured by health, employment, security and trust indicators, to mention but a few. Finland has done the most amongst European countries in recent decades to see this principle successfully put into practice and it has reaped the rewards. Some argue that the UK is unable to achieve this principle, because too many of its citizens are not prepared to pay, or can’t pay, the significant increase in taxes required. However, the latest research is clear, a majority of British people are prepared to see an increase in taxes with the top priorities being health and education. Indeed, most people, especially parents, fully appreciate the value of long-term investment – the very principle tax increases are based on. Is it true, as some suggest, that too many parents in the UK apply this concept only to their own children? Are parents unaware, or do they simply ignore the facts that show both theirs and their children’s quality of life increases significantly when every child, not simply a select few, is given more equality, not less – particularly in the field of education?

Successive U.K. governments have continued to subsidise private schools (attended by 7% of the nation’s children), through tax exemptions and less regulation, whilst the Conservative Government has cut real-term funding for state schools since 2015. As a state school teacher I have witnessed the quality of state education fall steadily over the last 10 years as a consequence of reduced funding and increased costs. Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been further disadvantaged by the requirements of the 2014 Children and Families Act for schools to fund the first £6,000 of any Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) approved by its Local Authority. Evidence submitted to the 2019 Timpson Review on School Exclusions suggested that this situation, plus the English Baccalaureate and other performance indicators imposed on state schools, is likely to have contributed to instances of ‘off rolling’ SEND students in recent years. To the credit of the same Act it also widened the eligibility criteria for obtaining an EHCP, leading to significant increases in the numbers of students being formally recognised as having SEND. This in turn has further increased pressure on local authority SEND budgets and the need for new specialist SEND school places for those whose needs cannot be met in the mainstream state sector. The Government has not increased SEND budgets to cover these additional costs.

These push factors have led some parents of SEND students to turn to the private sector or accept places there because local authorities are prepared to fund them due to the lack of capacity in the state sector. Of course, for-profit private schools, have been moving into the SEND specialist sector for some years now, capitalising on the favourable (for them), supply and demand situation. Private schools do not have to operate to the same regulations and standards as state funded schools, they are free to borrow on the open market to invest in buildings, or rent buildings without the regulations most maintained schools and academies face.

Interviewing colleagues working in private SEND schools I learnt of their much poorer terms and conditions compared to teachers in the state sector. One of these teachers, working in a



Greater Manchester 'for profit' SEND school provided evidence she is paid £12,000 per year less than a colleague with much less responsibility than her working in a state funded SEND school and, unlike him, she has no access to a pension scheme. Ironically, in this same private school, teachers reported to me that they have no access to performance related pay, despite requesting it, unlike their headteacher who is paid according to performance. Unfortunately, such exploitation is nothing new in the private sector. Contrast that with state funded schools where performance related pay is near universal for all teachers whilst most sign up to nationally agreed terms and conditions. We will of course never know the extent to which terms and conditions vary between state and private schools as the latter are not required to publish, under the guise of 'commercial confidentiality', despite receiving state funds and subsidies.

Last week a parent of a student attending a recently closed private school in the Wirral wrote anonymously for Private Sector Policy Reform stating that

"private schools should not be relied on to fill the gap in state provision". That parent is absolutely right. Schools should not be run for profit, particularly at the expense of our most vulnerable SEND students. Increasingly the British public agree. Nor, should they be run, as many non-specialist schools are, with the primary purpose of creating elitist bubbles, marketed for their gilded pathways and networks that ease their alumni into exclusive universities, careers and opportunities.

The obstacles put in the way of parents of SEND students and the injustice of underfunding state schools at the expense of private school subsidies and freedoms means that the time to integrate English private schools into the state sector is long overdue. It will take time, a decade at least. However, the principle of 'every child deserving the best education' demands it, and without it our country will never reach the levels of universal educational and wider quality of life success that countries like Finland have achieved.

The last six months have seen the emergence of Theresa May's elusive Magic Money Tree. The International Monetary Fund has, increasingly in recent years, accepted the need to borrow to build our economy and at the end of October told our Government that it must borrow and spend to support the UK's post COVID recovery.

So, what precisely is the Government waiting for? There can be no better investment than the education of our children. There needs to be a large and sustained increase in the Early Years, Schools and Further Education budgets to reflect this. This will reduce demand for private school places, including those providing specialist SEND places. In addition, stop private schools charging fees, require them to adopt fair and inclusive admission policies and ensure fair national pay and conditions for teachers they employ. These are just a few of the progres-

sive policies Finland has introduced to the private sector since the 1970s. And yes, like Finland, increase taxes to fund these reforms. Most British voters are now ready for this – they have had ten years to see through the false economies of austerity which have only benefited the richest.

Creating the country we want begins by investing in the generation that will build it. That means serious, long-term investment in every child, as all decent parents will confirm. However, serious investment should be for every child and not just the 7% who are privately educated.

Steven Longden is a full-time teacher in Manchester and Trafford Councillor – writing here in a personal capacity

Caliban's Dance: FE after The Tempest
Edited by Maire Daley, Kevin Orr and Joel Petrie
Trentham Books
Price: £24.99

Apart from having the best ever title of a book about FE *Caliban's Dance: FE after The Tempest* offers a refreshing account of what FE colleges could be like if re-imagined by those who care passionately about a sector more often associated with Cinderella than Miranda, openly compassionate and unaware of the evils as she is in a world surrounded by learning.

FE is subject to reductive utilitarianism by policymakers. *Caliban's Dance* uses the metaphor of *The Tempest*, a manifesto for second chances, transformation, and learning - an FE utopia of powerful, democratic dancers. *Caliban's Dance* concludes the trilogy begun with *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses* and continued with *The Principal: Power and Professionalism in FE*. The contributors probed the question 'Where in FE is there space to dance?' then 'What restricts the dance?' Now, the editors ask: 'With no restrictions, what would a future FE dance be like?'

FE is subject to reductive utilitarianism by policymakers: *Caliban's Dance* counters with vivid dreams of a sector unfettered. The book's central metaphor is Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play that can be read as a manifesto for second chances, transformation, and learning.

All the contributors re-imagine FE as utopia. The book is impressive in the way that it sheds light on a wide range of stakeholder perspectives on further, adult, and vocational education. All the authors explore their chosen themes, be they: the rise of neoliberalism in FE, imperialist and post-imperialist attitudes towards race, class, and social justice in education; ESOL and citizenship; the relationship between practice and theory; power and control in the implementation of education policy; issues in prison education; problems and possibilities in education leadership; and the role of practitioner research in improving educational practice. 'A brave new education', by the SEA's Eddie Playfair draws on utopian thinking as well as postcolonial readings of Shakespeare's 'Tempest' and makes some practical proposals for

change. He makes the case that 'another college is possible', founded on an agreed public purpose and shared values. The college experience should give students, as part of their lifelong learning journey, opportunities to engage with knowledge, experiences, and culture in wider, more challenging ways.

In 'Towards a research Utopia for FE', Sarah-Jane Crowson, Jo Fletcher-Saxon, Samantha Jones and Amy Woodrow, advocate for colleagues in the sector being able to engage in research as professional development, for practitioners to own and develop practice and for such research to feed quality within their own settings and across the sector more widely. The chapter challenges the sector to look to the expertise within and encourages a collaborative and networked approach to supporting practitioner research.

'Red plagues, dust storms and death to utopia', Pete Shukie's chapter, explores how gonzo education offers a possible route to disrupt oppressive practice, create subjective fluidity and avoid petrifying generality. The book's core metaphoric theme from *The Tempest* is tackled thorough the author's own experiences in life and in education with Hunter S Thompson and Umberto Eco getting coerced into supporting his entertaining and educational ramblings.

CAROL AZUMAH DENNIS AND LOU MYCROFT CUT SOME SHAPES IN 'CALIBAN REIMAGINES FE'; CRAIG HAMMOND GETS JIGGY IN 'CALIBAN, MONSTROSITY AND COLLEGE-BASED HIGHER EDUCATION: COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP CENTRES AS ISLANDS OF POSSIBILITY' AND THERE ARE A HOST OF SMOOTH MOVES BY ALL THE CONTRIBUTORS IN WHAT IS A READ TO BE EMBRACED WITH A TANGO STYLE PASSION FOR THOSE OF US WITH LIVES LIVED IN AND AROUND FE.

In *Caliban's Dance*, like in every good dance, FE is urged to aspire to the words of Raymond Williams to "be truly radical ...make hope possible rather than despair convincing." I hope that in these difficult times our brutalised service is up to it.

Ian Duckett

Education Re-imagined: Assessment

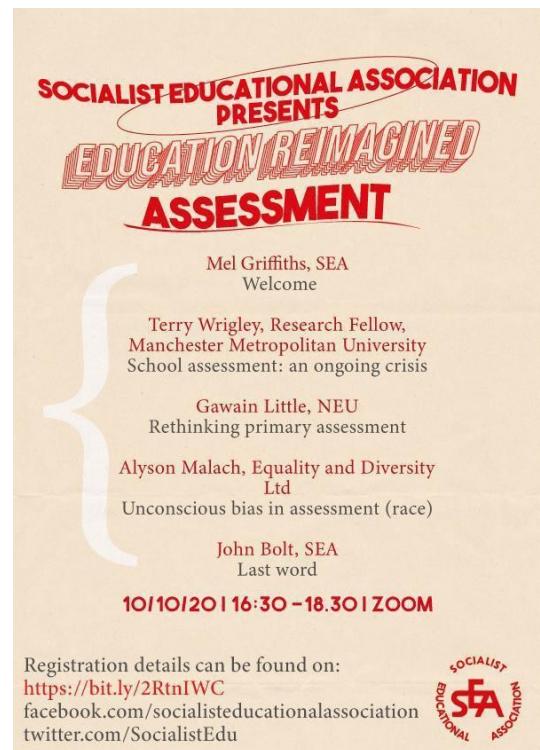
Getting assessment right is, as we have seen this summer between the ham-fisted incompetence of the Conservative government and the hapless bungling of the Ofqual leadership team, crucial. The SEA held a highly successful seminar on assessment on 10 October.

SEA member, Terry Wrigley, a Visiting Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University opened proceedings and concentrated on secondary schools, and particularly GCSEs. He explained the ways in which GCSEs, as now set up, are restricting students' education, and argued from a class perspective that this operates in ways which are deeply discriminatory. In particular, they leave no time for young people's initiative or the authentic investigation of real-world problems such as climate change. The problem is exacerbated by the accountability system, including Progress 8.

Gawain Little of NEU NEC and a primary school maths teacher addressed the educational and social damage of primary tests. His presentation focused on the pedagogical problems with the current system of primary school assessment. It posed an alternative in the form of moderate teacher assessment and outline what this could look like in practice and how it could overcome the issues inherent in the current system. It ended by arguing that now is a crucial moment to bring educators together to demand change.

Alyson Malach, anti-racist campaigner and Director of Equality and Diversity UK led a discussion on the role unconscious bias plays in teacher assessment and student achievement/outcomes. She focused on the history of inequality for black and ethnic minority students in education from an early age, referenced some of the issues faced by black and minority ethnic learners in the UK and other countries and identified some solutions, concluding with the point that it's up to all of us – black, white, everyone – no matter how well-meaning we think we might be, to do the honest, uncomfortable work of rooting out bias. John Bolt of the SEA concluded with remarks about likely scenarios the next two years, saying that it will be impossible to simply return to GCSE and A level examinations in their old form – even if that were desirable. Pupils' experiences will have been too varied and time lost too significant for that to be possible. But schools will need to know well before pupils return to school just what will be expected of them and their pupils in summer 2021 and 2022 at the least. Seriously out of the box thinking will be needed to ensure that these cohorts are not disadvantaged. Allowing schools to opt out of parts of specifications as is being proposed in English GCSE should be fully explored. Employers and higher education may well have to adjust their expectations as well.

Ian Duckett



For an anti-racist education and a decolonised curriculum

We need and an anti-racist curriculum. The Black Lives Matter agenda moved the NEU's Celebrating Education Decolonising the Curriculum project centre stage.

Race, racism and racial division represent a final frontier for human liberation on our planet. If we are to take that next step into higher collective consciousness that truly transforms the world, we must conquer the divisiveness of racism.

The dream of Martin Luther King is well within our grasp in this century and we need to work towards it. The idea that race is a social construct is well established now and by being really clear about this we can move the conversation of racism forward.

Race and racism is something that was and is socially engineered. It was a tool invented to allow for the exploitation and subjugation of others. From the outset, children do not see racial difference. You can see it in the way they play with each other when they are young, up until the point where society's influence starts to get a hold of them. Outside of this, allowed to grow in a different society which does not promote racial division, children will not see race as an issue.

In the same way that people are not treated differently because of their hair or eye colour, it is the same if we dissolve and discard the idea of racial difference based on skin colour.

This is why it is crucial that progress on race relations is made in schools with young children. A child's journey through the education system is long and greatly influences the outcome of that child. That is why schools are the final frontier in the battle against racism.

Within the same classrooms which in history children were taught about the difference between the races, they will be taught about the oneness of all of humanity.

The world faces many challenges. Global warming, wars, famine, sectarianism and now the scourge of the Corona virus that has engulfed the planet. It should be abundantly clear that the only way we can solve our problems is if we learn to work better as human beings.

This is not idealism or wishful thinking; it is in actuality a practical necessity. The way the leaders of the future who are the children of today see the world will greatly influence the outcomes of these challenges we face in the coming future.

During the period of the transatlantic slave trade, blacks were seen as property, livestock; something subhuman. However, today when the protests against the murder of George Floyd spread throughout the world, it was blacks and whites standing side by side calling for change. Society has come a long way. However, there is still a long way to go as demonstrated by the murder of George Floyd.

The question should really be: how do we distinguish what a human being is? Is a human being defined by the colour of their skin, their religion, country of origin or any other descriptors? This is the challenge of the coming future. The world is a much smaller place now. The ideas of nationhood and race are changing. The lines that used to divide us are becoming more and more blurred.

Now is the time to strike whilst the iron is hot and not be reactive but proactive in shaping the human identity of the future. It's not enough to not be a racist anymore, we must be anti-racist and to be anti-racist means to see our oneness as human beings.

This is how we should be educating our children and educating the world.

As stated before, humanity faces many challenges presently and many more in the future, the on-

ly way we conquer them is together.

NEU thinks that there is another road, an alternative route out of this pandemic that our schools could take and build back better, different and for the future. De-colonising the curriculum and anti-racist initiatives will be crucial in the re-building. This curriculum needs to be about much more than catching up with English and maths and 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 need to be doing a damn lot more than Black History Month (BHM) and diversity days. We must address the real issues: decolonisation of the curriculum; tackling racism and integration of anti-racist and multi-culturalist initiatives across the curriculum. My experience is that while BHM had a role to play it is all too often nothing more than lip service. As for diversity days, unless they are part of a much wider approach to anti-racism, they often achieve little and end up providing racists with the language to hide behind without changing their behaviour. We need something far more robust.

Decolonising the curriculum means a major reconsideration of not only who is being taught, but also what is being taught and how it is being taught. This will require a positive anti-racist approach to teaching and learning. Challenging racist language, providing a wider definition of 'English' literature and a greater awareness of the social contexts of histories are all part of decolonisation of the curriculum.

Norfolk NEU Left has developed a model for an anti-racist teaching project and a framework for decolonising the curriculum. It aims to inform an anti-racist working party from Norfolk NEU, who are planning next year's BHM and an unconscious bias training programme. The framework itself is for a new programme of learning to decolonise the curriculum. All our education, throughout the UK and in most parts of the developed world suffers from bias that is so entrenched, distorting our perceptions of society, ourselves and others, it must be rooted out, acknowledged as wrong. It has led to widespread racism. What has happened is wrong because:

Our children are denied equal access to a balanced education

Children are bullied in school

Children are not understood by their teachers

Some children fail to thrive because of the racism

We have misconceptions about each other

Some members of our communities are looked down on for no good reason

Assumptions are made about certain people

We do not know the facts about politics, the daily news, global events to be able to make reasoned judgements

If educators are genuinely trying to work for a fair society in which the products of our labours are fairly shared equally, we cannot do this unless we respect one another and acknowledge with honesty that some of the current curriculum is based on lies. Education should be all about discovering the truth and decolonising the curriculum is a crucial tool for tackling racism.

Ian Duckett

SEA NEC and EC Norfolk NEU

Introduction to thinking out of the exams box



The chaos of exam grading this year has highlighted not only the incompetence of the present administration but the consistent failure of the now highly corporate examination boards to adopt a more holistic and pupil centred approach to assessment. The dominant mode of educational thinking today has turned its back on pupils' and teachers' voices. Suggestions from educational experts, that advocate a more varied approach to assessment, have been ignored. The Gove-led approach is fixated by a knowledge-based curriculum and unseen examinations as the only valid

form of assessment. As Mary Bousted stated at a recent NEU [National Education Union] conference:

'The GCSE and A level grade fiasco...showed the fragility of a qualification system that puts all its eggs in the timed exam basket' (*Morning Star*, 5th October, 2020)

COVID has exposed the narrowness of this approach as exam boards were forced to turn back to teachers' judgements, to some extent, in deciding on grades without the written exams. It has also exposed the ever present glaring social inequalities in education as pupils have quite different access to technology and space and sometimes support for home study. Now students, teachers and parents face another year of uncertainty as the government ponders what it might do if exams become difficult to administer again.

Teachers will have to navigate the top-down requirements as best they can but this crisis provides a space where we can revisit broader, more holistic forms of assessment and consider not only when pupils should be assessed but more particularly HOW they should be assessed. By renewing our focus on how all children develop language, knowledge and skills, assessment can become a tool that allows for all pupils to gain greater personal development, enhance pupil self-confidence, the ability to collaborate and gain a deeper understanding of their subjects and the interrelationships between subjects.

One way of broadening assessment in all subjects is by placing a much higher value on talk for learning and using it to assess pupils. It is a great irony of our education system that the highest level of academic achievement, a PhD, is partially assessed through



a *Viva Voce*, an oral exam with ‘the living voice’, and yet all lower forms of assessment tend to rely primarily on solely written exams. It is also an irony that nearly all job interviews and work scenarios require oral engagement and yet talk is highly undervalued in the present old-fashioned examination requirements. This is a conscious decision by a government committed to a highly prescriptive curriculum and a rejection of past good practice in pedagogy and assessment. Valuing talk for learning does not mean that written exams should be abandoned but simply that a more varied form of oral and written assessments would allow teachers to collect evidence of their pupils attainments, perhaps in an e-portfolio, on which to base more holistic judgements of the students they teach.

Dr Valerie Coultas

NEU statements on the 2021 exams

Responding to the Department for Education’s announcement on next year’s GCSE and A level exams, Dr Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, said:

“Today’s announcement amounts to a dereliction of duty by Government to pupils, parents and education professionals. Pupils taking GCSE and A levels next summer are in a terrible position. They have missed five months of in-school teaching – a loss which impacts most severely on disadvantaged pupils, 700,000 of whom have no access to the internet which denies them access to remote learning. Many pupils are missing further schooling, now, as they isolate at home waiting for COVID test results. It is completely unrealistic, and unfair, to expect these pupils to take exams which make no compensation for disruption to school teaching time.

“In unprecedented joint advice with the other teacher and leader unions, the NEU advised Gavin Williamson that GCSE and A level exams must be altered to include greater choice of topics, which would enable pupils to be examined on what they have, not what they have not, been taught. We continue to believe that greater optionality in exam papers, along with fewer exams, will be essential to support fairness and to decrease the already very high rates of pupil stress which are being suffered this year.

“Why are the Government consulting, now, on how exams will be graded and what the fall back would be if exams cannot be taken?

Ministers have had months to plan for these contingencies which, as COVID levels rise in communities, become ever more possible.

“Today’s announcement is yet another appalling example of political ideology trumping practical reality. It demonstrates that this is not a Government which is interested in levelling up because the impact of these decisions will impact most severely on the most disadvantaged.

“It is critical for avoiding the great unfairness felt by many students last sum-

mer that Government reconsider this position immediately and introduce greater topic optionality into the exams. If Government will not reconsider and change its mind quickly, members tell us that exams, even with greater optionality, are no longer tenable. In which case, the only route to fairness would be a complete cancellation of exams and the use of robustly moderated, externally quality-assured teacher judgements."

Commenting on the policy paper Education Policy Institute position on testing and examinations in 2021, Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, said:

"The NEU has been calling for a fair system of examinations in 2021, to avoid the farce of this year and ensure that students' futures are never again put at risk by this Government. We agree with the Education Policy Institute that Gavin Williamson really should have listened sooner. Burying his head in the sand is no sort of strategy.

"We need greater optionality in order that students can be assured of a fair grade next summer. The question is why the Government has not pursued this already. Optionality would go some significant way towards accounting for the unequal impacts of Covid around the country. It would restore fairness by ensuring that students have the chance of a grade that actually reflects the things they know and can do, rather than topics which could not be accessed due to home circumstances.

"Gavin Williamson has made matters worse by failing to deliver around half of the IT equipment promised to disadvantaged students in the spring, and has since pivoted to rationing what few supplies are now available. He is baking unfairness into the system. Many young people who are forced to self-isolate will have even greater difficulty accessing learning, and current arrangements for next year's exams will conspire to work against and disenfranchise those same students.

"The Westminster government needs to catch up with the other nations in the UK. In Wales and Northern Ireland content has already been reduced to give all students a fairer chance at a grade. This is the best way forward.

"We also need nationally moderated centre-assessed grades. We recognise the issues highlighted by the EPI but it would be possible, if Ofqual and DfE move swiftly, to have a more robust version this year. In Scotland, structures are being put in place to base judgments on internally and nationally moderated evidence and if we used a similar system in England, this would mitigate the concerns raised.

"We also think it is a sensible idea to offer additional funding to exam boards to help them manage the risk of making these changes later down the line than should have been the case. It is worth the effort to do so, to spare students a repeat of the fiasco of 2020."

Commenting on yesterday's letter from the Education Select Committee to Gavin Williamson on exams in 2020 and 2021, Dr Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, said:

"The National Education Union agrees with the Education Select Committee's conclusion that exams for 2021 must take account of the differential impacts of access to education across the country. Many students are having to access their learning remotely due to the pandemic and do not have the adequate equipment or resources necessary at home to do so. As such, it would make for grossly unfair grades next summer if exams were to take place on the full course content.

"For this reason, on October 2nd the NEU, along with other trade unions and governor organisations, laid out proposals for introducing optionality into exams. The suggestions made would help account for some of the lost learning opportunities experienced across the country and the different order that schools and colleges would be teaching the various topics.

"Under these proposals students would answer questions on the topics they have covered and not the ones they haven't. There would also be a system in place, as in other nations in the UK, of grades based on moderated, evidence based judgements made by schools and colleges, to ensure that whatever the state of the virus next summer, all students can receive a grade which reflects their own achievements.

"Whilst Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have all announced measures to account for this unequal access to learning, the UK government is still dithering over what to do in England. Time is quickly running out for any meaningful changes that could give students a fair chance at their exams next summer.

"If anything, what the summer's debacle shows is that Ofqual should have far greater freedom to reject or push back on unhelpful ministerial steers, particularly when they contradict Ofqual's fundamental duties, set out in legislation, about protecting the fairness, reliability and public confidence in grades.

"The dither shown currently over what to do for next year is demonstrating that Ministers have learnt very few lessons. The same mistakes must not be made again and in order to restore public confidence, changes to make exams in 2021 fairer are critical."



PROPOSAL FOR AWARDING GCSE, AS AND A-LEVEL GRADES IN 2021

2 October 2020

Context

Students taking GCSEs, AS and A-levels in 2021 face a unique set of challenges. They missed out on several months of face-to-face learning in the previous academic year. The need for schools and colleges to implement wide-ranging health protection measures this year is impacting the ability of many to provide teaching as usual. And ongoing uncertainty around the development of the pandemic means it's possible that some, many or all students may not be able to physically sit exams in summer 2021.

Furthermore, these challenges are not impacting equally on all students. Some were able to continue learning from home much more effectively than others during the spring and summer, with significant variation in access to laptops and quiet places to study. Some are facing significant ongoing disruption, including requirements to self-isolate, while others may be able to go into school or college with no further disruption.

This differential impact is likely to further disadvantage already disadvantaged students for a number of reasons. Students from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to have access to laptops or other devices to use at home, and less likely to have quiet spaces in which to study. Poorer communities, as well as those with significant BAME populations, are also suffering disproportionately from Covid-19, meaning students in those communities are more likely to experience ongoing disruption to their learning.

It is therefore essential that the government, Ofqual and the awarding organisations find ways to:

1. fully understand what happened with exams and grading in 2020, to ensure we learn lessons from this in determining plans for 2021
2. prioritise students due to take exams in the test and trace process
3. ensure that all students due to take exams in 2021 are able to be awarded grades, and that these are as accurate as possible, even if they are not able to physically sit those exams
4. recognise, as much as possible, the different impact the public health crisis has had on different students
5. find ways to ensure the grades awarded to students in 2021 can be compared appropriately with those awarded to students in other years, without disadvantaging individual pupils or centres

Progress to date

Ofqual's consultation response on proposed changes to general qualifications in 2021 confirmed welcome, but limited, changes to GCSEs, AS and A-levels this year. These are:

- some increased optionality in GCSE history and ancient history
- some increased optionality in GCSE English literature
- removing the requirement to undertake a field trip in GCSE, AS and A-level geography
- removing the requirement or changing the assessment of practical activities in subjects including the sciences, music, PE, drama and modern foreign languages

We are aware that the government, Ofqual and the awarding organisations are currently considering further changes, to address the issues raised above. This paper is intended to contribute to that thinking. While we focus here on GCSEs, AS and A-levels, we believe the same principles apply to vocational and technical qualifications.

Issue 1 – learning from what happened in 2020

Our organisations have repeatedly called for an independent enquiry into how grades were awarded in 2020. We are aware of a number of current investigations into this issue, but we do not believe that these plans go far enough in properly exploring what happened, to ensure that we learn lessons from this in planning what to do in 2021. Given the urgency with which decisions about 2021 are needed, some of these may have to be made ahead of any formal enquiry, but our view is that it is still essential that an impartial investigation takes place.

Issue 2 – prioritising students taking exams for Covid testing

We hope that the current problems with the test and trace system will be rapidly resolved. In the meantime, we would urge the government to prioritise students due to sit exams imminently, i.e. those in Years 11 and 13, for testing, along with education staff. This would not entirely solve the problem, as it wouldn't help Year 11 and 13 students who are having to self-isolate as a result of other members of their household displaying Covid symptoms or testing positive, but it would be a step in the right direction.

Issue 3 – ensuring accurate grades can be awarded to all students

The government is right, in our view, to pursue a 'Plan A' which would enable all students to sit exams in summer 2021. Students in Year 11 and 13 are already more than halfway through their courses, and must be enabled to complete those courses as planned, and gain the awards they deserve. As these qualifications are mainly designed to be assessed by final examination, it is right that these exams should go ahead if possible.

However, it is also essential to recognise that some, many or all students may not be able to sit their exams this summer. It is highly likely that some students will have to self-isolate in May and June 2021 due to local or national outbreaks. These students must be able to gain their qualifications they deserve.

In addition, some students may suffer very significant disruption to their studies this year if they are out of school or college for several periods because of illness, self-isolation or local closures.

Contingency plans for students who find themselves in either of these situations must be confirmed as soon as possible. This is urgent for two reasons. Firstly, students need reassurance that their hard work will be recognised, and that they will be able to progress to the next stage of their education or careers. Secondly, if these contingency plans involve any form of consistent teacher assessment, schools and colleges need to start doing this now, to ensure it is as accurate as possible.

Our view is that these contingency plans could involve the following:

- The development of 'reserve papers' for students unable to sit exams on a particular date, but able to sit them shortly afterwards (e.g. as a result of having to self-isolate for fourteen days over the date of the exam).
- Formal staged assessments, undertaken by all students within school or college, under exam conditions. In order to ensure consistency across schools and colleges, the exam boards could either develop these staged assessments themselves, or signpost centres to acceptable pre-existing assessments that could be used for this purpose.
- The results of these staged assessments, along with other agreed evidence such as coursework, to be used by schools and colleges to determine grades assessed by centres for students, as a back-up for those unable to sit exams, or for those who have suffered very significant disruption to their learning.
- A robust, valid and fair process to be developed by the exam boards to moderate these grades assessed by centres, to ensure consistency across the system
- A workload impact assessment to ensure that plans are sustainable, recognising that teachers and school leaders are already working under extraordinary levels of pressure.

Implementation of these plans would, we believe, enable students to be rigorously and consistently assessed, whether or not they are able to sit exams. This would also provide the government with a scalable solution, with robust grades, submitted by centres, used for as many or as few students as necessary.

Issue 4 – ensuring grades are as fair as possible

We need to ensure not only that students sit exams or receive a robust grade assessed by centre, but that the grades they receive are as fair as possible, and recognise the different experiences they may have had this year.

There are a number of mechanisms that could be used to attempt to achieve this. These include:

- reducing content in qualifications
- introducing greater optionality, to enable students to choose to answer questions on, say, three out of five possible topics
- moving the timing of exams later, to give students more time to 'catch up'

We recognise Ofqual's decision not to remove any content from these qualifications, as doing so may disadvantage learners who have been taught material in different sequences.

Greater optionality in all qualifications is therefore, in our view, essential. We recognise there may be unintended consequences of optionality, which may impact particularly on disadvantaged learners. However, this can be mitigated with intelligent assessment redesign (such as splitting exam papers into separate topics, and asking schools and colleges to only distribute to students questions on topics they have been taught). For subjects where study of the full specification is needed for future study of the subject, the government can still require key knowledge, concepts and skills to be taught, without requiring all of these to be formally assessed.

We agree that moving the timing of exams back may be a necessary mitigation (providing results can be issued as normal) in order to provide a small amount of extra learning time. However, we must not lead ourselves to believe this will make any significant difference to the different learning experiences students have had this year, as this additional time will obviously benefit all students. Any resulting compression of the exam period could also have significant negative consequences on student performance and wellbeing, which may negate the possible benefits.

We are concerned that the changes Ofqual has already announced (as outlined in the 'Progress to date' section above) amount to merely 'tinkering around the edges' of recognising and accounting for the different experience students have had. Our view is that greater optionality should be introduced across the board, to enable students whose education has been significantly disrupted still to demonstrate their ability. Finding ways to do this without introducing confusion, and potentially further disadvantaging some students, cannot be beyond the skill and experience of those designing our exams. In fact this is already being implemented in other jurisdictions, including Wales – a development which could disadvantage English students having to study and revise for more content than their Welsh peers.

Issue 5 – find ways to ensure grades are comparable with other years, without disadvantaging individual pupils or centres

A central tenet of our exam system is that the grades awarded to students in one year can be compared with those awarded in other years. The system of 'comparable outcomes' is designed to ensure this is the case. While the use of comparable outcomes does serve this purpose, it also leads to a number of undesirable consequences, including effectively rationing the number of students who can receive a particular grade. Our organisations have raised concerns about the use of comparable outcomes in 'normal' years, and this is a discussion to which we will wish to return.

In 2021, the issues with comparable outcomes are even greater than is usually the case. Not only have students this year had very different experiences both from each other and from previous years, but the 2020 results are significantly higher than other years as a result of the decision to award the higher of a student's centre-assessed or calculated grade.

This raises two key questions:

- Should comparable outcomes be used this year at all?
- If comparable outcomes are used, should this year's results be 'pegged' to 2020 or 2019?

There are no easy answers to these questions. This is a highly complex and difficult issue, and any solution would need to be thoroughly explored to guard against unintended consequences. Abandoning comparable outcomes without careful consideration of the alternatives risks destabilising the system and devaluing students' achievements. Pegging results to 2020 carries similar risks, and punts the problem further down the road. Pegging results to 2019 risks further disadvantaging students whose education has been most disrupted, by making it harder for them to attain the grades they might, in a 'normal' year, have been capable of achieving.

These questions highlight the inter-related nature of the five issues raised in this paper. It is our view that, if only the minimal changes to 2021 currently promised take place, it would be unconscionable for comparable outcomes to apply as normal, and for students' grades to be awarded as they were in 2019, using the relevant reference year in each subject. However, implementing the more substantial changes we recommend here would, in our view, create a much fairer system, and go some way towards enabling students this year to demonstrate, and be rewarded for, what they have achieved despite the difficult circumstances.

If these broader changes are made, in such a way that allows the vast majority of students a fair opportunity to demonstrate what they are capable of, our view is that comparable outcomes could be retained. Grade boundaries could be set using the usual comparable outcomes process as a starting point, and then altered by a number of marks to increase the percentage achieving that grade to an agreed level. That level could be somewhere between what was seen in 2019 and 2020. This would retain a degree of comparability and limit the extent of grade 'inflation' permitted, whilst also recognising the disrupted learning students have experienced this year.

Ultimately, it is crucial that the system is fair to all individual students and centres, and that we do not lose sight of this when thinking about the needs of the system.

Summary of recommendations

In summary, we believe that the government/Ofqual must take the following actions as a matter of urgency:

1. Commission an independent review of what happened with exam grading in 2020, in order to learn from this when planning what to do in 2021 (while not allowing this to delay time-critical decision-making).
2. Prioritise symptomatic students in key exam years for Covid tests to reduce ongoing disruption to exam classes' learning.
3. Publish contingency plans as soon as possible to outline how students who are unable to sit exams in the summer, or whose education has been very significantly disrupted, will nevertheless receive robust, reliable grades. This could include formal staged assessment arrangements and a robust fallback centre-assessment process.
4. Review the assessment of all general qualifications to allow for greater optionality in most subjects, and consider changes to the design of assessments to ensure any issues with this are addressed.
5. If the above actions are taken, retain comparable outcomes in 2021, with results ideally pegged to a point between the grades achieved by students in 2019 and 2020.





SEA 'Reimagining Education' Book Launch

We will be hearing from four contributors to our recent publication. The pandemic has exposed the deep inequalities in our education system and the book is full of reasoned arguments from experienced educators about the need for change and what that change might look like.

Thursday 4th February 2021, 6pm

Register in advance for this meeting here:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUtcOmhrzkvHdnt-bCaHxCppjCLq-kCPuu>

After registering you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

Speakers:

Daniel Kebede, Senior Vice President, NEU

Philipa Harvey, primary teacher

Kiri Tunks, secondary teacher

Pam Tatlow, SEA Executive

'Our speakers will reflect on their contribution to the book and their view about what is needed to reimagine education post-COVID19'

The event will be chaired by Ian Duckett who co-edited the book and is a member of the SEA Executive.

