



Redbridge NEU

Retired Members' Newsletter

Spring 2021

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Reflections in Lockdown

I have been intrigued how we have been coping in these most exacting of times. We are all different, but as retired teachers and school workers we have certain things in common.

We are all literate, engaging with life around us through the books and papers that give us that necessary stimulation and keep us aware of the current world or allow us to become absorbed in other worlds and times. Try Daphne du Maurier's *Rule Britannia!*

We are all active members of a trade union, which helped form us - and which we helped to form. Struggles in the NUT over the last forty years were

(ctd. P.2)



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Lockdown Special #2

(from p. 1)

our struggles, and the debates and arguments were always political: about pay and working conditions but centrally too about education itself and about race, gender and class.

Solidarity for us is a fundamental part of being human.

We are all relatively financially secure, having either a teacher's or local government pension. It is salutary to recall when we started the All-London Teachers' grouping we ran an anonymous survey of the pensions of our members. Then, about fifteen years ago, there were still teachers who received their pensions before the Houghton settlement and were living on totally inadequate pensions. Poverty pensions certainly. I know that these members would have died well before Covid.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Our Lives

Some of us live with partners or family members. Others live alone. For all of us adjusting to the lack of our usual social lives and physically normal relationships has been difficult. Not being able to hold our children, parents or friends, or not being able to hug or kiss someone is very hard. While Whatsapp, phoning, texting, Facetime and zoom have been vital substitutes, not sitting next to a friend and talking/gossiping/indulging in story-telling/laughing together is a dreadful loss.

How We've Coped

And every day I am close to tears, as I listen to people talking about their grief, watch the reports from hospitals where staff are just coping, hearing of the lengths that people are going to help others and being aware that so many are desperately attempting to live a decent, non-demeaning life. The limited permitted

activities have become increasingly important, almost ritualised. Walking from home through known areas, we are absorbed in the close observation of walls, trees, birds and new flowers emerging. Some have always cooked, made marmalade, cakes and preserves, others are becoming adept. There are those keeping immensely fit in on-line classes, others running and cycling for their life's worth. Some are writing their short stories or novels. Some learning Finnish, taking up weaving, making curtains. Some just doing what we have always done: eating, reading, shopping, lolling, thinking, watching films or plays, gossiping on zoom or over the wall.

Struggles Ahead

Yet, for many, this period of lockdown is getting so much harder. For the first time ever, we are totally framed by a disease with scientists being central to our knowledge, hope and understanding, and we have to focus on the essentials of life.

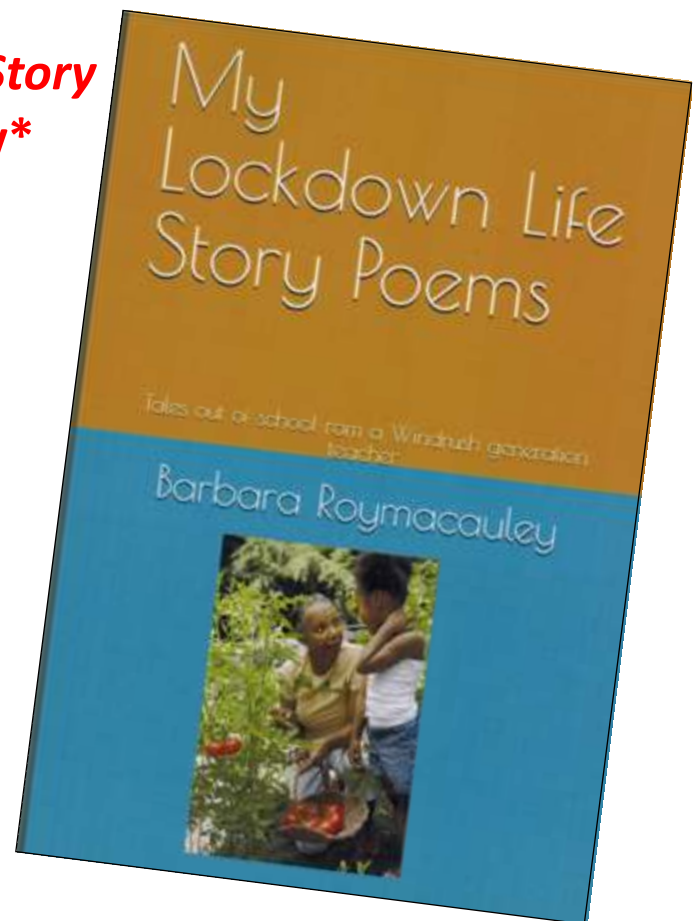
Thanking the young man who had vaccinated me, I said that after this pandemic we had to fight for three things for everybody - a fully funded public health and NHS are vital and had to be guarded against privatisation and profiteering. Knowing the dramatic impact of Covid on children and young people, education must be a central focus of the state – we need a fully comprehensive free education system from nursery to university and beyond. And the third goal is to ensure that everyone has an income which provides them with decent housing, food and clothing. 'And to make this happen, you will have to join me agitating on the streets'. At this he stared and quietly smiled.

Jane Shallice



Taking it to the street in Ilford (pre-pandemic!)

A poem from *My Lockdown Life Story Poems*, by Barbara Roy-Macauley*



IN CARE

Having been brought up by a divorcee
I was nurtured by an extended family.
I knew the safety of my own home,
I was socialised in the heredity zone.

But now I worked in the care system,
My focus was on those fostered children
Who had a vetted foster mother
And often a friendly foster brother.
What a set up swiftly unfolded -
I was a new member of the team
Working a computer behind a screen.

In our office half were nurses
Shielding children from medical curses.
Our role was
Developing projects like Stepladder,
This was because of poor exam results -
A clear insult to any teacher
And horrifying the Independent reviewing officers.

One case, a teen, went home,
She spent the weekend
with her birth mum.
However, she drifted out with a married man.
He offered her sex in the back of his van,
Sleeping out that Friday night
Gave mum and the carer such a fright.

Monday morning the social workers
and the welfare officer
Had to drive out to Hertfordshire.

Now there was an investigation
Down at the local police station,
With the policeman as a reference -
Jane or Kwame and Ms. D. Hilaire.

Sat in charge of managing care,
How can such a thing happen
To those who are still children?

That's why shared contact was at Thackery Drive,
So, both parents can preside
while being supervised.
We need to always mind the gap
Or vulnerable children
Fall down the human trap.

My Starting Points for Writing

- experiences I have enjoyed
- areas in which I have been successful
- people I have an interest in
- places where I think I have learned a lot
- new experiences/unique experiences
- family experiences/people I have loved
- sociological interests

Once I have decided on a key area, I then use typical writing techniques. In my book, *My Lockdown Life Story Poems*, I have used acrostics, word banks, story structures, rap rhythms/ musical vibes etc.

I am a member of Lapidus, which is a poetry writing group. In normal times we meet every other month, but now only via Zoom. During this time the leaders host creative writing sessions and we have the chance to write/respond and share. This does make you more confident.

Many members are part of a strong writing tradition – eg the MA in writing/creative writing at Sussex University. Other Universities include Liverpool.
Barbara Roy-Macauley

*ISBN 9798551971061

The Case of Julian Assange

A courageous shiner of light into dark places from which the powers that be would dearly like to have us turn away. Roger Waters of Pink Floyd.

Julian Assange did what all journalists and news outlets ought to do, tell the truth and protect whistle-blowers. He acted on behalf of anyone who believes citizens have the right to know what their government is doing with the money they pay in taxes.

The court ruling on January 4th prevented Assange's extradition to the United States - for now. The judge ruled that his mental state is so concerning that he might kill himself if incarcerated in an American prison. Ironically, this should have been a reason for granting him bail. While welcome, the judge's ruling has not invalidated the American case against Assange and an appeal has been lodged. One extremely worrying issue is that, if a UK court is assured of Assange's humane treatment in the US, his extradition could be allowed at an appeal.

Charges against Assange

Julian Assange has been confined in Belmarsh since April 2019 when he was forcibly removed from the Ecuadorian Embassy by our police. All charges relating to a rape allegation in Sweden were dropped in 2019. He is wanted in the United States to face an 18-count indictment, mainly under the Espionage Act. He is alleged to have plotted to hack computers and conspired to obtain and disclose national defence information.

He could face a jail sentence of 175 years. In 2010 and 2011 Wikileaks publications included numerous leaked documents concerning the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Previous publications covered Guantanamo, messages sent on 9/11, then the State Department cables, 'Cablegate', and in 2016 Democratic National Committee emails. The best-known leak is the notorious video of the shocking and brutal firing on civilians in Baghdad from an Apache helicopter, showing soldiers laughing and joking about the victims, including two Reuters journalists. The firing continued and was subsequently aimed at a vehicle that had arrived to offer assistance.

Prison Conditions

There are serious concerns about Assange's incarceration in Belmarsh. This is a maximum -security prison, with a particularly harsh regime and it is rarely used for prisoners on remand. He is at risk from COVID-19, especially as he suffers from a chronic lung condition. He has dental and shoulder problems and



Julian Assange

his mental health has been severely affected by his ordeal. On 17th February last year 117 doctors and psychologists published a letter in 'The Lancet' calling for an end to the 'psychological torture and medical neglect of Julian Assange'.

His cell is freezing and he uses clothes and books to try to stem the flow of cold air through his draughty cell. He is denied visitors for the most part and spends much of his life in isolation, sometimes enduring 22 hours a day in solitary confinement.

Max Blumenthal has called this case 'the most important press freedom case in the world'. For reasons of humanity and for the continued right of the press to speak freely, it is vital that we support the campaign to release Julian Assange.

Further Information

Numerous people have had the courage to speak out in support of Julian Assange, although until recently almost all articles in the mainstream press have been extremely unfavourable. A search for Julian Assange on YouTube and in several other news outlets, such as Novara Media, Double Down News and the Canary will reveal a considerable amount of information. A particularly stirring webinar was one of Miko Peled's when he was joined by Roger Waters, John Pilger and Ray McGovern:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=yWvdhrZSm8c>.

Others who have championed Julian Assange include Craig Murray, <https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/> and Jonathan Cook <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/>. Searches on Twitter reveal more information and one of Assange's supporters well worth looking at is Dr Deepa Govindarajan Driver @deepa_driver

Jo Buchanan (All London Retired Teachers)

Deprivation, Covid-19 and education for vulnerable children

Among all the other burning issues engaging the minds of our retired members, a recent focus has been on the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on existing poverty and deprivation. We wondered about the extent to which that combination has exacerbated the educational and safeguarding issues encountered by vulnerable children during this disastrous year.

To help answer some of our questions, in December 2020 I talked to a young Essex-based social worker, E, experiencing a grim start to her career and confronting these problems at first hand. Since I began writing, circumstances have changed for the worse, and news reports and a succession of articles have further documented the catastrophic effect of this emergency on children and young people. What follows attempts to offer a working context for the issues more recent reporting has highlighted: sub-standard housing, lack of access to the internet and appropriate technology, and – focusing on E's work – safeguarding.

Housing

We spoke first about housing: the appalling conditions and unsuitable accommodation in which some children and their families live have an inevitable impact on educational achievement as well as on physical, psychological and emotional development. The confinement of home life and the isolation of the months of lockdown have challenged these children.

There has been a limited amount of publicity given to the fact that families from the poorest sections of the population - families who are often from ethnic backgrounds, possess uncertain residence status, are jobless and on benefits - have been "temporarily" housed in converted office blocks. These blocks – sometimes dubbed "rabbit hutches" – frequently consist of the bare minimum of facilities and are often located at a distance from support communities, shops and green spaces.

Although one particularly notorious office conversion, Terminus House in Harlow, is apparently no longer used by London councils, other agencies continue to place families there and in similar conversions. The Government's failure to continue to protect tenants from eviction, when they no longer have the ability to pay rent because their source of



Liz Dolan

income has been removed by lockdown closures, increases the risk of them becoming homeless. It has been reported that there has been a 75% increase in the number of children in temporary accommodation since 2010 and in January 2020 this amounted to 128,200 children in unsuitable accommodation and without space for quiet study.

Temporary housing and office block conversions were already a big problem before we had even heard of Covid-19. The number of homeless families has increased to an almost unmanageable amount - a further 70,000 since March 2020 - so now the pressure for housing is even greater. Having worked closely with local authority housing departments I have seen how few properties are available for families, yet how many parents have lost their job and ultimately their home. This is causing many more to be put into temporary one room flats, that are very rarely temporary. I worked with a family who was 'temporarily' housed in one room for two years and with another family of five, who were living in a one room office block conversion. It was four miles away from the centre of town, and three miles away from any school or shop. With no public transport nearby,



“The appalling conditions and unsuitable accommodation in which some children and their families live have an inevitable impact on educational achievement as well as on physical, psychological and emotional development.”

the family were isolated from local communities, making day to day living difficult.

One of the consequences of this situation is that children are bussed to more distant schools, often in a different authority and travelling considerable rush-hour distances, compounding the isolation from all that makes a child’s network of shared experiences and companionship outside school so valuable. The easy street culture with schoolmates and friends is absent and children become targets for gangs and drug pushers.

Technology and remote learning

Alongside housings, we considered the lack of appropriate technology and its impact on remote learning. E agreed with me that the interaction of deprivation and the pandemic has created an unprecedented chasm between the haves and the have-nots.

We know, for example, that children at private schools and many of those in academies and maintained schools who live in more affluent environments, have not gone short of computers or mobile phones.

They can stay connected to friends and access online school-work, they have space at home to work relatively undisturbed and more often experi-

ence active parental support. This is rarely the case for the disadvantaged pupil.

Although that chasm has always been present, school does create more of a level playing field. Learning from home has widened that gap between children who can and cannot access the internet. It was not until August that the Government’s scheme for providing laptops to all children with a social worker was rolled out, and by then it was the summer holidays and four months of learning had been missed.

And in the event, the number of laptops was still insufficient. We asked each other whether this loss of learning-experience could ever be fully recovered. There have been valiant efforts to plug the access gap by schools themselves, in spite of finite financial resources, and wi-fi providers have come up with a variety of initiatives to enable wider access. In January and the start of another (the third) lockdown, there is a move to allowing children with no computer or internet access at home to come into school to work, nicely socially distanced from each other, at online lessons provided by teachers, giving those lessons in other secure parts of the same building. Could one ever have imagined such a bizarre distortion of all that schools are about? Or

the incompetence of a Government that allowed such a thing to develop so alarmingly quickly and with so little time to prepare?

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is the core element of E's work with children and families. Social worker involvement, when concerns about a child are raised, is facilitated through a series of meetings and interventions designed to provide support to the pupil and the family. E's experience is that every aspect of that intervention has been made more complex and yet more necessary.

She acknowledges

a considerable increase in safeguarding issues both during and after the first lockdown. School is quite often a safe space for children who have difficulties at home and social workers rely on being able to speak to children in school away from the home environment. Building effective relationships with teachers and learning support staff is incredibly valuable for all children. Without having trusted adults and safe places, lots of safeguarding concerns are missed. Access to children both in and out of the home is an essential part of our work with families, yet both have been difficult this year.

During the first lockdown, the more vulnerable children were allowed to come into school. Unfortunately, these tend to be children who already have poor school attendance. Many parents did not opt to send their children into school, which makes supporting them extremely difficult for both teachers and social workers.

(Now in January schools are again reporting that there is a low take-up of places from disadvantaged children, while at the same time a much-increased demand from the children of keyworkers, in itself now a more widely defined category, and the gap continues to widen.) E makes the point that *having had very little education or engagement with learning, and few positive interactions with peers and trusted adults, many vulnerable children are now finding it hard to return to school.*

This is also true for children who were previously not considered vulnerable, but whose lack of inner resilience has intensified their fears and consequently made them reluctant to go out into the world again.

Creative solutions

Frequent absence, low self-esteem and poor concentration in school are a consequence and may trigger flashpoints in family relationships. After a second, long period out of school, this can only get worse.

We then talked about some of the problems for a social worker in continuing to interact with vulnerable children and the creative solutions that have become necessary to overcome them.

Now [mid-December] that children are back at school, these problems have not entirely disappeared. With frequent periods of self-isolation due to whole classes being sent home, children then cannot be seen at school or at home. Door-step or video call visits happen instead, but it can be a struggle to ensure those types of visit are meaningful. In addition, although we are grateful for PPE, having difficult conversations with families while wearing a mask, can make it feel impersonal and clinical.

Many new referrals came through during lockdown, making getting to know those families a rather more complex process. Effective social work is based on relationship-building and trust. It is almost impossible to build a trusting relationship purely over a video call, so we have had to get a bit creative – front garden visits, going on walks, talking through open windows etc. I once got to know an eight year old, by playing an adapted version of Pictionary over a video call, which seemed to work quite well!

By January, all visits and interventions have returned to virtual encounters only.

Support services and cutbacks

Further obstacles to providing essential support intensify the impact of pre-Covid-19 cutbacks in funding.

As well as the difficulties it has presented to social care in actively meeting with children and families, Covid-19 has meant that many, if not most, of the services we rely on have stopped. Counselling, mentoring, mental health intervention, parenting groups, drug and alcohol rehabilitation support, sports and other group activities for young people, youth clubs and community transport are just a few of the services to which we have no longer been able to make referrals.

Although in December things were gradually improving as places reopened, E pointed out that many services were yet to return to face-to-face work. Now in January, we can see that that was a false dawn. Children and families continue to be isolated not only from friends, the extended family network, and ethnic or faith communities, but also the services around them that provide essential support and intervention. Our view is that that intervention may now be coming too late for the most vulnerable children.

Liz Dolan

Facebook posts by

Michael Rosen

(Reproduced with the kind permission of the author)

"King Boris is informed that a new and dangerous army is on the borders and approaching. This army uses a gas that attacks everyone. They've been using it in other countries on civilians.

He takes advice.

Some (plan A) tell him that every single one of the people must be given gas masks and given the means to equip their dwellings with gas proofing. Some (plan B) tell him that the gas only kills old people and people with underlying health conditions so the best way to deal with this army is not equip everyone but to lure the army in as it attacks, yes the old and sick will die, but the gas 'dies' of its own accord, leaving this foreign army isolated and defenceless.

Meanwhile in the Red Lion, some people are discussing the threat. Some say that it's a hoax. There is no army. It's just a trick invented by King Boris to get control over the people. Some say that they've heard that there are different plans afoot and the best thing to do is put pressure on King Boris to equip everyone.

Meanwhile in the offices of Daily Boris, top journalists are writing articles echoing (mostly) King Boris's Plan B: the old, sick and disabled are a worthy and necessary sacrifice.

Back at the court, King Boris has disappeared. It turns out that he is seeing a 'friend'.

The army arrives on the borders. Throws gas about. The first civilian deaths (mostly old and disabled and sick) occur.

Back at the Red Lion, people say that it's a hoax: they died of schizophrenia. Or asperger's. Or mixamotosis. Or watermelons.

Chaos at the court with the Plan A vs the Plan B people arguing. King Boris is still away. A message comes from him saying that he's going with Plan B. And that's it.

The army is prepared and more troops recruited.

Back at the Red Lion, people prepare to resist being recruited for what, they say, is a hoax.

The enemy troops invade further in to the country. More and more people are being gassed.

The Daily Boris says things are going well ... "

"Quentin Blake's 'Clown' and Covid.

What does a picture book with no words tell us about Covid? The story is of a toy clown who is discarded along with some other old toys. However, this 'toy' has a life, and so wakes up out of the bin (trash can). He has a scary time avoiding dangers but in the end arrives in the room of a girl struggling to keep a baby happy. The clown is able to entertain the baby, help the girl clean and tidy the room. The mother of the girl and the baby comes back and all is well.

This wonderful book - which I recommend to anyone and everyone of any age is in its own way a morality fable. Why is the clown discarded? Is he too old, or is he too much connected with someone's childhood. Originally I interpreted it (my reading) was that Quentin was saying something about the dangers of discarding our childhoods (which the clown represents). Or perhaps why neglect the arts (which the clown could represent)?

In the light of Covid, and as an example of how interpretations can change over time, how the arts can apply in different ways in different conditions, the clown now represents for me, the dangers of throwing away experience - old age if you like. This is precisely what was done when a group of scientists, journalists and politicians flirted with 'herd immunity' without vaccination in the first weeks of 2020. They were prepared to sacrifice the old, sick, vulnerable and high risk on the grounds that the 'rest' would be saved as - supposedly - immunity through exposure would spread through the rest of the population. This was a theory that had been shown to be either false or lethal for millions, on countless occasions through history e.g. the Black Death, Dutch Elm Disease, the rabbit disease - myxomatosis and so on. But back to 'Clown': I see the 'old' Clown showing us that he is still 'useful', he shouldn't have been discarded, and that through his kindness, fun and solidarity with the other discarded toys that he has a social conscience that we can't afford to lose. Of course he also shows that kindness in what he does for the girl and the baby.

I always loved the book. I now love it even more. I think Quentin Blake is a great artist in both senses of the word; someone who draws and paints, but also as a great creator of the arts. The book is now my Covid morality fable.

Thank you Quentin."

Teaching 'Fake News'

I taught the topic of 'fake news' to a Brit School Media Year 13 class and offer these reflections upon the sessions. I'll begin with an overview of the origins of the term, then look at the way the topic is handled in schools today (mainly in PSHE) and offer a different way of addressing this most urgent of issues – a way which places it in the wider contexts of society and arms young people with the critical insight needed to make important decisions in our democracy.

Some background

One of Trump's (and Boris Johnson's) tactics is: attack is the best form of defence, for which he employs projection – accusing the opposition loudly of faults his side undoubtedly possesses. The guiltier the charge, the greater the volume is of the cry of 'fake news'. Given the microphone of social media and more crucially, according to media pundit/ journalist Jeff Jarvis, Fox News, misinformation with a distinct alt right/conservative/ bias and intent can become *alternative facts*ⁱ. Think of Kellyanne Conway famously defending Trump's claim of huge attendance at his far from full inauguration. This fusillade of distortion has shattered journalistic practice (As Doc Searls describes in detail – see link belowⁱⁱ).

Problems

The term 'fake news' implies there exists somewhere pure/authentic/undiluted news, which sets up a false dichotomy/opposition. It also provides a useful scapegoat for society's ills, as social media/Big Tech – including Facebook/Twitter/YouTube – is blamed for providing the platform (shoot the Messengers). This tendency ties into a long history of blaming media/new technology for perceived declines in standards – often from an earlier Golden Age – for example, Penny Dreadful Victorian comics/ Rock and Roll music/ Film/TV/ Video nasties/Videogames.

Over-reliance on the opposition between 'fake' and 'true' news also means that all of the energy goes into combating mistruths by the metric/now imperial ton, which possibly deflects our criticism of Trump/Johnson away from the incredibly damaging policies – education most pertinently for us – they enact. Instead, we focus on their success in weaponizing the last night of the Proms and statues, demonizing teachers, and promoting a culture war in which the right-wing armoury of TV/Press far outguns all others. The BBC news output continues to be gamed by the (Far?) Right's demand to be heard in the name of the concept of 'balance'. (I once heard a Flat-Earther interviewed on Radio 5 Drive). Although there are



President Trump's press spokeswoman Kellyanne Conway often left liberal journalists nearly speechless: 'fusillade of distortions'

moves towards new guidelines, particularly around climate change scepticism, Rupert Murdoch's media empire remains a powerful advocate of such views.

Jeff Jarvis claims the web has brought more gains than losses – I agree, as I do about most of the other media referred to above – the only videogame I was any good at was Asteroids. He argues that #Metoo and #Blacklivesmatter would not have received anything like the same coverage in broadcast media and the press, as these institutions remain largely in control of the male, pale and stale.

Educational implications

So, news production raises important issues. Every age group in school has access to news on the TV thanks to the excellent Newsround and can recognise factual programming as different from fiction – the cues are in the way the text to the audience (mode of address is the technical term). Many primary schools have their students producing wonderful newsletters with a mix of very local and national stories, so they understand how news is made.

A proposal

As we move through the years, a teaching approach might be to critique power relations/structures within the news industry, including the BBC. It is far more important for students to learn how to analyse/evaluate news as complex texts, which are as much mediated/produced as fictional ones through the selection of sources of news and the distillation/reduction of problematic areas into simplistic narratives of good versus bad. Otherwise, we end up with simply 'fact checking', which prompts the question – whose facts? Who fact checks the fact-checkers?

Trump alleges widespread electoral fraud and voter suppression. A simple fact-check would say he is

(ctd. on p.10)

(‘Fake News’ ctd. from p. 9)

wrong, yet Greg Palast’s work demonstrates the latter is endemic in the US, albeit aimed at potential Democratic voters, particularly People of Colour.

Furthermore, the truism that Trump/Brexit was driven by disaffected working-class voters, which never gets fact-checked, is undermined by Danny Dorling’s research, which shows clearly that the main supporters of both were whiter, older and wealthier.

Good guy Twitter permanently bans bad guy Trump – of course that was fair on the night – but, permanently? Should they have the power to silence? I am reminded of Tony Benn’s five questions-

What power have you got?

Where did you get it from?

In whose interests do you use it?

To whom are you accountable?

How do we get rid of you?

So, we can teach fake -news, like much else, by teaching critical thinking, defined by David Buckingham as: *about how we analyse, synthesise and evaluate knowledge*. As citizens and educators, it is a process ... *in which we constantly have to question our own preconceptions, interpretations and conclusions. It means avoiding the rush to judgement, and recognising the limitations of the claims we can make about what we know, and hence about how certain we can really be ...*ⁱⁱⁱ

It is in this spirit that I offer this proposal.

Brian Mulligan
Croydon NEU

ⁱ jeffjarvis@jeffjarvis

ⁱⁱ Website Doc Searls Weblog article Where Journalism Fails: <https://blogs.harvard.edu/doc/2019/07/23/where-journalism-fails-going-critical>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Buckingham
<https://davidbuckingham.net/2018/07/18/going-critical/>

News from the District

Liz Dolan’s round-up of activities in Redbridge District, NEU

As part of the fight against poverty and in support of our most disadvantaged children, several Redbridge initiatives were outlined at January’s NEU District committee meeting. The focus is on strategies to mitigate the effects of low income on children working online at home during lockdown school closures.

We discussed, and voted to support financially from District funds:

- The provision by Redbridge NEU (in line with the national approach) of equipment packs of items such as pens, pencils, paper and exercise books, that are often beyond a tight family budget to buy. This has already seen a significant number of packs distributed and is an ongoing project. (£2000)

- A Redbridge Council drive to provide laptops – both new and reconditioned – to begin to plug the gap of 7000 Redbridge pupils without an individual device. (£1000)

- Redbridge4Education, a parents-led charity project for the same purpose. (£500)

A working teacher writes:

We’ve lost the most rewarding part of our jobs right now. All the admin, planning, marking is still there but I don’t get to teach face to face anymore and it’s heart-breaking.

Life is so exhausting at the moment. Planning remote learning is monotonous, time consuming work and you don’t get to see the outcome of children learning and growing so it all feels a bit draining.

Vicky Lockhart

Get in Touch!

Redbridge Retired Teachers are keen to make links and work with other organisations which share a similar approach to education. One such organisation is the charity *National Drama*, which provides support for drama teachers and theatre educators in a variety of ways. Run by volunteers, they have been especially busy during lockdown through offering online advice, networking and curriculum plans and resources. Here is a link to their latest collection of material – <https://ndresources.co.uk>.

If you are a member of an organisation that you think might benefit from making a connection with the Redbridge NEU’s Retired Teachers Association and its termly Newsletter, please get in touch with us by emailing Mike Peters at mike321peters@gmail.com

The Socialist Education Association

The Socialist Education Association originated in the 1920s as the National Association of Labour Teachers and was renamed as the SEA in 1959, when it widened its remit and membership.

It promotes equality and quality in education and values true lifelong learning as an opening of minds and life-enriching opportunities rather than seeing education simply as preparing young people to take their place in the competitive world of work.

The SEA and the Labour Party

It is the only organisation with this approach affiliated to the Labour Party, on which it can have a direct influence. Although you do not have to be a Labour Party member to join you must be eligible, i.e. not a member of another political party. Many members are serving or retired teachers, often NEU members, but anyone with an interest in education issues can join, which gives a wider perspective to the topics discussed. The termly Newsletter, *Education Politics*, is always of high quality and covers many thought provoking issues. It is well worth the membership fee alone.

During the year or so before the last election, the SEA was instrumental in formulating Labour Party

Education Policy. This was a truly democratic and thorough piece of work, resulting in a very well-thought-out policy to bring education back into a collaborative local infrastructure and valuing teachers and their ability to lead in matters of curriculum content and assessment. The SEA continues to work to influence Labour Party Education policy and sends delegates to the Labour Party conference each year.

Membership

I first became a member about forty years ago and am one of the original members of the local, East London, branch, which was formed four years ago and meets monthly.

We were one of the first local branches to organise and set a trend because now all national members are also members of a local branch. The meetings are lively and relevant to local as well as national issues.

If you are interested in finding out more and hopefully becoming a member, please look at the website - socialisteducationassociation.org. Together we can work to keep the organisation true to its roots and core values.

Betty Hales

The Ills of Lockdown(s)

We all had a bit of a warning of the first lockdown (and the current one!) but even so I found the first few days, with reports of thousands of deaths, quite traumatic. Out on an exercise walk, with silent streets and empty parks, I was thrown back in time to the bleak post-apocalyptic films of the 1960s.

In spite of several warnings and simulations, our Government had not prepared for what was actually, within the last few years, deemed an inevitability. On the ground the NHS was being underfunded, ready for continuing privatisation.

Fatal failings

Shockingly, and very sadly, many deaths have been amongst vulnerable older people and also health care and public sector workers; and it became clear quite early on that the Government had lied when it stated that it would protect these people. PPE was non-existent or useless, and even now, in January (after promises at the end of last year) tests for care-home inspectors before they enter premises are finally 'being rolled out. Over the summer, when the situation eased for a while, there was a failure

to build up stocks of oxygen and PPE, and to make schools and universities safe for the coming winter. A glance at the history of the 1918 pandemic would have indicated that a second (and possibly third) wave was coming!

Testing, in general, still remains totally inadequate despite millions being thrown at Serco (Group CEO Rupert Soames, whose father and brother are ex Tory MPs). By association, the NHS has been tarnished with Serco's failings. Other examples emerged of the Tories pushing millions of pounds of taxpayers' money into firms with no prior experience, or capability, and without proper tendering.

We were also given scant advice on how to prepare personally: wash hands mainly, and later, wear masks and socially distance. In early summer Youtube took down some of the videos, which explained the advantages of vitamin D and other supplements for the immune system: 'not in the Community Interest'! By July, Public Health England finally recommended taking supplemental D3 although it is well known that most of the popula-

tion, especially people from BAME backgrounds, is deficient in this vitamin, especially in the winter at our latitude. There was, and still is, no concerted effort to boost the immune systems of the population. Remember (some of us!) how after the war (and during it actually) all children had daily orange juice, cod liver oil and milk?

I found myself riveted to daily online bulletins as the pandemic struck in country after country. At the same time reports came in of hospitals that had trialled various treatments.

Very early on, the doctors at the East Virginia Medical School practically screamed from the rooftops that there were two quite different stages of the disease and how this meant there would need to be totally different treatments as it progressed. Governments, and the W.H.O. have been slow to adopt their recommendations.

Dealing with the crisis

If you are a political activist, as many readers almost certainly are, you are looking (not necessarily in the mainstream places) for solutions to a crisis. The many official bodies who should have been giving sound advice - government, World Health Organisation, Center for Disease Control etc - were clearly making expedient statements that didn't at all address what really needed to be done.

Many sections of many populations have paid the price with poverty emerging as the main co-morbidity (overcrowded living and working conditions, poor nutrition, and lack of access to medical facilities) though few media mention this.

Science responds

There was a lot of early official denial that the virus is mainly transmitted person-to-person. This effectively postponed the lockdowns and enabled a blind eye to be turned to conditions in schools and colleges. Mass teacher action has finally forced the closure of schools. But lockdowns are hard on children and once again the Government has reneged on its promises to provide laptops and broadband, so all students can access the online curriculum.

At first, we were not allowed to know who was on Sage, the scientific body advising the Government. It later turned out that there were initially no front-line medical staff on it - 'more PhDs than MDs'. What transpired – and still continues to transpire - is that many countries have shot themselves in the foot by continuing to place 'economic interests' above containment of the virus: the 1918 pandemic replayed over and over again.

Big Pharma waded in early with their chosen drug Remdesivir (cost to manufacture each dose



Pauline Gorman

\$10, cost to hospitals \$2300) which has not been proven to save lives. Meanwhile possible cheaper, repurposed and safe alternatives were being demonised with fake trials.

It has taken several months for Ivermectin to be taken off the banned list. Big pharma is currently poised to make billions from vaccines, so don't expect a 'cure' soon!

The global picture

Internationally some countries are reported to have coped well so far, but with sixty-four (one third) of the world's countries spending more on repaying debt than on their own health services, the outlook still looks bleak. There has been no sign of a full-scale international rescue attempt - sending medical staff, oxygen, and equipment, to areas that don't have sufficient. Deaths have, and will, ensue.

This the tragedy of our times – seriously under-reported in mainstream media. When you see what could, and should, have been done, and realise that death, poverty, homelessness and unemployment will be the future for millions, here and abroad, it's hard sometimes to maintain a cheerful outlook.

On a more 'mundane' level, I have grown lettuce and sprouted shoots for the first time and am looking forward to eventually doing a bit of studying, probably through a MOOC – Massive Open Online Course. Most of the thousands of MOOCs online are free.

'May you live in interesting times'. Maybe...

Pauline Gorman

BREXIT MAY BE DONE ... BUT WHAT ABOUT THE WORKERS?

Well, eventually, they got Brexit done but, so far at least, the now 'sovereign' UK does not appear to have entered the promised land.

In fact, with a new thicket of extremely costly bureaucracy and regulatory barriers imposed on companies engaging in trade with the EU, and a strangulation of cross-Channel and cross-Irish Sea trade, the problems of Brexit are already looking more and more like the result of an act of significant, long-term self-harm - rather than as a temporary set of 'teething' difficulties.

Impact of Brexit on Workers' Rights

So, how is all this likely to affect UK workers? Well, apart from the issues mentioned, which the much-derided 'experts', such as the Bank of England, predict will lead to a significantly lower GDP than would otherwise have been the case, and therefore higher unemployment, the Government, now free from the 'shackles of EU regulatory policy', have chosen this moment, in the midst of a fatally mismanaged pandemic, to conduct a review into established rights to paid holidays, rest breaks at work and the working time directive, which stipulates a maximum of 48 hours work per week.

So, where is all this likely to lead? The Shadow Business Secretary, Ed Milliband, not a man generally renowned for his extremist views or wild exaggeration, has recently predicted a forthcoming 'bonfire of workers' rights', while Kwasi Kwarteng, the Tory Business Secretary, had this to say: 'We are not going to lower the standards of workers' rights. We want to protect and enhance workers' rights going forward, not row back on them'.

Tory Attitudes

So, who to believe? Well, it may well be that the answer to this question lies in a little-known, so-called free market tract entitled *Britannia Unchained*. The book was co-authored in 2012 by several Tory MPs, all subsequently chosen for the present cabinet by Boris Johnson, including Priti Patel, Dominic Raab, Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng himself. The central message of this book is well-illustrated by its denunciation of the UK's 'bloated state, high taxes and excessive regulation' and its characterization of British workers as 'among the worst idlers in the world.' And just to emphasise this group's commitment to the neo-liberal agenda, Priti Patel, now Home Secretary, was to later stress that: 'If we could only halve the burdens of the EU social



and employment legislation, we could deliver a £4.3bn boost to our economy and 60,000 new jobs.'

Although this book was not written specifically as a pro-Brexit treatise, it's clear that for Tory MPs of the *Britannia Unchained* ilk, and there are plenty of them, removal of worker protections and freedom to deregulate, privatise and further flog off the NHS as part of any dodgy new trade deal were **the** key drivers of Brexit, although they've all been a little reticent about admitting this.

So, what then to make of Kwarteng's seemingly new-found commitment to workers' rights and Johnson's characteristically clever-clever, but totally vacuous, claim that 'the UK won't immediately send children up chimneys or pour raw sewage on its beaches'? Well, leopards and spots and pinches of salt come to mind - while the message for all of us in the trade union movement would seem to be crystal clear: be prepared for a battle and to fight the enemy every inch of the way!

Henry Tiller.

Editorial note:

On 27 January 2021, the Business Secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, announced the following:

'The review into the Working Time Directive is no longer happening.'

Only the previous week he had confirmed that it would be going ahead. The above article was written before 27 January. Thus, the 'battle' referred to will obviously not be going ahead for the time being, although it's the belief of the editorial team that Kwarteng's retreat is tactical and the result of initial resistance that has taken place in the form of hundreds of thousands of people emailing him and signing petitions opposing any worsening of workers' rights. We're certainly not expecting this to be the end of the story and, as noted in the *Observer* (31 Jan 2021), "When it comes to preserving workers' rights, this is a skirmish in a longer war."

Assessment Confusion in a Pandemic

You'd be forgiven for thinking, following the *débat* last year around GCSE and A-level exams and the government's U-turn, that the arrangements for assessment in 2021 would have been finalised earlier on in the process - in time at least for teachers to plan lessons for their Year 11 and Year 13 classes and for students to be secure in knowing how their assessments would be carried out, whether by exams or teacher assessment, or a mixture of both.

However, in the spirit of dither and delay, which has been a feature of this government, on 15th January they launched a consultation on how GCSEs, AS and A level grades should be awarded in summer 2021. The consultation has now closed but the findings are still to be published.

Given that the consultation proposed that there should be teacher assessment, with some limited examinations, we can expect this is what will finally be announced. But the devil will be in the detail, and which elements of which subjects will be teacher-assessed or examined is anyone's guess.

A parallel consultation is being carried out for Vocational and Technical Qualifications (there are 12,500 of them!). Here, it is proposed that practical exams will be taken, where they can be done safely, and where not, they will be delayed.

The Loss of Formative Assessment

The Pandemic has given us an unexpected opportunity to re-examine our excessive and high-stakes testing and assessment system. Our current GCSEs and A-levels are based mainly on summative assessments, rather than formative ones but, some-

what ironically, given the pro-exam stance of the Conservative party, in the midst of a Pandemic this has created enormous problems for the government and Ofqual in awarding grades to students, - a process which would have been more straightforward had formative assessments been in place.

When I first became a teacher in the early 1990s, formative assessment, or coursework, was common for GCSEs. In my subject, MFL, for example, there were GCSEs that were 100% coursework. But with a changing political and economic climate, amidst claims of 'cheating' or the system making it too 'easy' for students to get the top grades, coursework and controlled assessments have largely been phased out for academic subjects.

Change the Way We Assess

However, the real problem that has to be addressed in the longer term is that our assessment system is designed to fail children. Of course, it is also designed to rank them and to make sure that a select few achieve the giddy heights of academic success afforded by attendance at a Russell Group university. But at its core, the system is based on failure, because it is norm-referenced and comprises standardised tests that are designed to compare and rank test-takers in relation to one another. Professor Becky Francis, Director of the Institute of Education, put it in a nutshell in a pre-Pandemic debate on assessment at the IoE when she said, "I'm always amazed by these pronouncements that 45% of Kids aren't literate or can't pass at English ...of course 45% can't pass if they're not allowed to!"

Liz Floyd



The traditional picture: government consultation documents suggested there should be some limited use of examinations for assessment in Summer 2021.

Evald V. Ilyenkov as educator:

Old new thinking about teaching and learning

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140419025050/http://spinoza.xclan.ru/evischool.pdf>

Are you driven to despair by a state-imposed testing regime that puts school children into a straitjacket from their very first moments in school?

Are you horrified by the 'knowledge curriculum' which values rote learning above the development of the students' own critical faculties?

Do you believe that learning to think creatively involves more than learning various sets of formulae off by heart and then willy-nilly 'applying' them to whatever circumstances arise? That it involves learning how to use one's own judgement accurately to derive a deeper understanding of the world?

The Soviet philosopher, Evald Vasilievitch Ilyenkov, died in 1979, but the essays published in English translation in the *The Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, (vol.45, no 4, July-August 2007 - available at the link above) are devoted to arguing through these very current issues.

Ilyenkov 'was not just a narrow specialist – his creative interests ranged from logic to pedagogy, aesthetics and psychology. He was reacting to the problems of Soviet education and psychology, but his critical thoughts are fresh and relevant in education in the Western world as well' (*Journal* editor, Pentti Hakkarainen, p.3).

A fervent supporter of comprehensive mixed-ability education, Ilyenkov was very opposed to the idea that 'ability' is some biologically fixed and immutable property'. He says in the article *Our Schools Must Teach How to Think*:

'Intelligence is not a 'natural' gift. It is society's gift to a person. It is, incidentally, a gift that he will later repay a hundredfold'.

But Ilyenkov warns:

'The organ of thinking is much more easily crippled than any other organ of the human body ...one of the most reliable methods of such crippling of the brain and intellect is the *formal memorization of knowledge*'.

Himself steeped in the history of philosophy and philosophers from the ancient Greeks onwards, Ilyenkov was a determined opponent of all dogmatism and lazy, bureaucratic thinking. This bedrock of his thought was embodied in his approach to designing the learning process:

'The entire art of the pedagogue must, from the very start, focus not on inculcating set rules regarded as tools or instruments of action, but on

organising the external, objective conditions under which learning is to take place. In other words, the pedagogue must concern himself, first of all, with creating a system of conditions of action that impose on the student such and such a method of action. And when the action is accomplished, the pedagogue can and must bring to light the schema to which this action was forced to comply. Then this rule can and must be given expression in words and signs. Then – and not before – the rule can be brought into verbalized consciousness.' (From *A Contribution on the Question of the Concept of 'Activity' and its Significance for Pedagogy*).

Since around 1979, the pedagogy promulgated by our governments has favoured precisely the inculcation of 'set rules regarded as tools or instruments of action' (not to mention the rote-learning of vast slabs of barely-treated data).

The approach outlined in the paragraph quoted above, therefore, might appear to be in stark contradiction to the type of activity imposed on us educators by the powers-that-be.

Ilyenkov was convinced that willingness to confront contradiction without panicking is an essential part of the learning process. Those who have been trained to abhor contradictions and avoid them wherever possible, will lose their composure and retire hurt when they are inevitably faced with a serious intellectual challenge to the current state of their knowledge.

In the paragraph quoted above, Ilyenkov is proposing that the best educators are the ones who work with the natural course of the learners' intellectual growth (which is the process of confronting and overcoming inadequacies in their knowledge and understanding) and support it appropriately and in a timely fashion from the stock of knowledge that the educator possesses as part of society.

For the conscientious educator, it is refreshing to encounter a different and more human approach to the whole undertaking of education, although we can see that this sets up contradictions with some assumptions and practices currently imposed on educators in state schools in the UK. We retired teachers are eager to keep abreast of the debate on educational issues. Contributions on any of these issues will be welcomed in our Newsletter.

Bob Archer



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