Community as resistance

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Over the last year we have all been affected by the pandemic at different levels. Some have had to hide themselves away and deal with the fact they have been deemed as vulnerable, others have had to ‘home-school’, some have had to go into work as ‘normal’, some of us have set up office on the dining table and of course many have had to balance several of these aspects at the same time. For many educators this last year has been a year that we will remember but not necessarily for good reasons. However, there also been an opportunity to take stock.

Along with some colleagues at York St John University, I carried out a research project, in the North of England, with education professionals in schools, colleges and universities during the first and second “lockdowns”. The original aim was to “unlock education”, recognising that the pandemic had provided an opportunity to rethink what education might mean and how it might be “done”. We had the same optimism as Julian Stern displays in his article in this newsletter. We carried out focus groups with different sectors during the first lockdown in June 2020; each group attended one meeting to explore the experiences, challenges and positives of education under lockdown and one meeting to explore a topic of their choice that arose from the first meeting. When England hit the second lock down in January 2021, we approached the original participants again to see how things were this time round, and met with the groups in the spring. We had one group of school and college educators, and two groups of university staff who all met three times in total.

As Julian Stern reflects in his article, the early days of the pandemic were not only full of fear but also of hope. As people stayed at home, there were far fewer flights and car journeys and the globe saw emissions drop significantly (University of East Anglia, 2020). Many people took on new hobbies –sourdough and banana bread baking were but two. Initially teachers were given kudos on social media as parents discovered that educating their children all day, everyday, was quite hard. Questions were raised about the possibility of a more holistic education system and some, like Julian, dared to

suggest that maybe our obsession with capitalism and, indeed, our yoke to neoliberalism might be about to end. Our research project was part of this hope-fuelled time.

We excitedly anticipated discussing the boons to education that the pandemic had afforded. We were told that educators had been given pause for thought and that new ways of teaching might be possible. Teachers and lecturers reflected on how they might carryout assessment in the future in the light of what they had learnt. All of the professionals said how they had enjoyed having to develop new ways of supporting their students and how proud they were to have managed this, despite the huge stresses that the pandemic was bringing. However, there were also stories of impossible expectations from management and parents, as well as tales of accusations (personal and by the media) that teachers and lecturers weren't working. There was a popular myth that schools were closed (in England we were open to vulnerable children and children of key workers) and Universities had stopped teaching. All of our participants were, in fact, working longer hours than ever before, supporting students, and trying to get them through to the end of their courses successfully. As researchers, we were taken aback by how exhausted educators were and how naïve we had been in our quest to change the world.

In the second meeting of all three groups, there was some reimagining of what teaching might look like in the future and how a more "blended" approach to learning might be beneficial to all. However, there were concerns about how this might be achieved without driving an even bigger gap between the poorest children and their contemporaries. Moreover, there was a notable amount of dissatisfaction at the growing expectations and demands from schools, parents and universities; that overworking was becoming a new, extreme level of overworking, and worse, becoming a new normal. Far from "teachers [being] recognised as 'society's professional adults'" (Stern, 2020) teachers were being undermined on social media, and at all hours, via email and virtual learning platforms. We had stories of parents using their children's logins to gain access to teachers late at night to express their dis-satisfaction with the lessons they had watched at home. Suddenly teachers were being inspected in their own homes by other people in their own homes; some participants reported parents joining the virtual lessons

and openly criticising the teaching methods. Furthermore, parents were praised for their efforts of home schooling whilst teachers were being criticised. “I think parents have had the praise of having to adapt and become teachers at home … they're not considering the staff with their own kids and their own families” (Maddy, school and college group).

Participants complained that little thought was given to the stress that educators were under during the pandemic – the risk that they might catch COVID and pass it on to family, they might also have children at home, combined with the general fallout of lockdown. In the second meeting (four months after the initial closure of schools) one teacher said, “[This is] the first time I’ve been asked how do I feel, what do you think about this, and I think that’s massive”. Participants reported anger at the common exhortations from the government, schools and universities to ensure they had a break over the summer but at the same time please could they do extra work, with one participant in the university group accusing management of having the “emotional intelligence of a jackhammer”. Whilst at the very start of the pandemic there was some excitement about the possible renewal or unlocking of education, it became clear that education and moreover educators were under more pressure than ever before and that there was very little dialogue occurring between management and staff in any institution.

By the third meeting for all groups in the Spring 2021, there were significant problems in the English education sector. GCSE and A Level exams had been cancelled again, but this time teachers were expected to provide Centre Assessed Grades based on work done through the year. Far from a more holistic approach, secondary school education became more test based then ever (Thomson 2021). The government told parents that they would be able to appeal the GCSE grades of their children, striking fear into secondary schools who foresaw a summer of complaints and thus tried to make as robust assessment process as possible, often including endless tests and exams. This led to an “exam shambles” (Thomson 2021). (As a parent I can attest that from February 2021 until 20th May 2021 my 16 year old sat a test or full exam almost every day.) Meanwhile, university staff were dealing with frustrated students who had been promised a year on campus by the

government but were largely confined to their rooms and learning online.

The most noticeable theme that ran through this year's focus groups, however, was how so much of the learning and expertise developed by educators over the last year—whether it was new ways of blended learning, or improved assessment strategies, holistic education—was being ignored if not actively side-lined by senior management of education institutions and the government. Far from renewal in schools, colleges and education, there has been a "creeping authoritarianism" (Hall, 1988:126) in an effort to get 'back to normal' but also to ensure catching up of 'lost learning' (whatever that might mean). Far from neoliberalism ending, it appears that having been stretched in extremis during 2020, it has snapped back with punity.

There was further alienation of educators by their superiors when new schemes or promises to students and other parties, came down from on high that were impossible for staff to implement on the ground, Alice from the university group said, "We've been really disturbed by things that are being promised from powers that be and it's as if they're sort of writing cheques that the academics can't really cash." It seemed that the era of optimism and creativity earlier on in the pandemic may have been one of naivety—the reality was educators were being allowed to create and rethink early in the pandemic because those in authority hadn't quite worked out what to do—an accident rather than by design. Indeed as the pandemic continued, it appears so did the control, as Cooper (2021) argues, there was "authoritarian contagion".

There is a clear disconnect between those at the top of institutions and those who are actually educating on the ground. Interestingly, in all groups the terms 'school' and 'university' were used to indicate the 'powers that be' at the highest level of an institution, something other to the practitioners in the groups. Moreover, those on the ground were not just disconnected from, but dictated to by those at the top, and they found this deeply problematic. Whilst pondering this apparent divide between staff and the university, I was left thinking about John Macmurray's work on community. My suspicion, fuelled by my own experience in education is that educators often see themselves as part of a

> “community of persons … a group of individuals united in a common life… its members are in communion with one another; they constitute a fellowship … a unity of persons as persons. It cannot be defined in functional terms, by relation to a common purpose. It is not organic in structure, and cannot be constituted or maintained by organization, but only by the motives which sustain the personal relations of its members. It is constituted and maintained by a mutual affection.” (Macmurray, 1961 [1991], p.157,158)

Whilst complaining about the diktats from on high, participants told us about the improved relationships with colleagues over the pandemic, describing efforts to find new ways to communicate under lockdown and intentional relationship building across departments and teams. Importantly, these more local relationships were leading to actions that whilst supporting their students were often against policy and involved working “under the radar” (Julia, university group 1). Macmurray (1950) points to the danger of confusing ‘community’ and ‘society’, the latter being united by specific functions—in the case of these education institutions ensuring healthy student numbers and results at all costs. Whilst one might argue that educators are united by the function of educating, I would argue educators often think there is a form of professional freedom in which they can choose how to educate. Increasingly such freedom has been eroded with professionalism becoming code for obedience (Frank, 2016). Professional freedom might have always been a fantasy, but it does seem that universities, colleges and schools are coming under increasing pressure to conform to neoliberal but also neoconservative ideology. (For further information see Clarke et al, 2021, Fleming 2021 and Hall 2021, as well as the recent government prohibitions on ‘cancel culture’ in universities and critical race theory in schools in the England and United States.)

Macmurray’s (1950: 75) concern regarding confusing community with society is that it leads to a society such as the State or indeed a university, being “endowed…with moral and spiritual qualities which imply its absoluteness, and contains the seeds of totalitarianism”. Arguably universities, colleges and schools that profess community, but actually enforce a specific neoliberal function which necessitates conforming to the performative culture are in danger of sowing such seeds of totalitarianism. Moreover, this can lead to the expectation that educators should give their

lives over to these organisations and aims. We can see this happening as educators describe working all hours, responding to parent complaints late at night and being watched and critiqued in their own homes.

Whilst this might sound somewhat bleak, I believe there is indeed hope residing within the fellowships within the society of the university, college or school. It is the friendships and actions that occur ‘under the radar’, that provide hope and resistance to the creeping authoritarianism of the institutions. As Hall (2021:195) advocates, maybe these under the radar conversations and ways of relating to each other, allow us to imagine another way and “the possibility of generating [a new world] by decomposing, rupturing and venturing beyond hopelessness, through transcendent assemblages of courage, faith and yearning.”

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