

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Post-Covid Schooling - Future Alternatives to the Global Normal**

**By Clive Harber**

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According to the accepted (and indeed acceptable) narrative, education and schooling has been one of the biggest casualties of the systematic policy of lockdown implemented by governments across the world in response to the spread of coronavirus. Whether from those sceptics opposed to such measures from the start—and I am bound to declare my own allegiance to this camp—or else those only now coming belatedly to assess the wider damage, the closing of classrooms, the move, where possible, to online learning and the curtailing of assessments throughout much of 2020 and into 2021, has caused much consternation and anger. Even those, usually scientists, who clamoured persistently for restrictive measures are admitting now that schools should have been left alone. Nor are such expressions of *mea culpa* unfounded; within the United Kingdom for instance the government inspectorate OFSTED have alluded to the problem of “ghost children”—defined as those who have “fallen off the radar during the pandemic” (The Independent, December 7, 2021)—whilst a recent policy paper by academics at University College London (UCL) has spoken of the “considerable harms to CYP (children and young people) health and wellbeing” (Viner et al, 2021). At a global level, UNESCO (nd) have warned similarly that “School closures carry high social and economic costs for people across communities,” especially those from the most impoverished backgrounds.

Whilst such concerns are undoubtedly motivated by good intentions, it is the contention of this book that they are nevertheless predicated upon an assumption that, “the current unchanged model of schooling is still seen as unquestionably, automatically *the* only way to carry out education despite widespread, but ignored, evidence that it is also harmful” (Harber,

2021, p. 224, emphasis in original). Harber's ideological position then is clear from the outset, nor does he make any attempt to hide his leanings: "day-to-day schooling is at odds with a democratic, equitable and peaceful society through its role as an institution of social control, its role in reproducing inequality and its role in perpetuating and perpetrating violence" (Harber, 2021, p. 31). These three themes (control, inequality, violence) therefore run as narratives throughout the work and are interwoven within a number of sequential chapters each of which deals with a particular aspect of mainstream education including uniform, examinations, buildings, and modes of discipline.

In one sense, there is little here that will be new or unfamiliar to readers; no original data has been acquired by the author, nor is the thrust of the argument put forward novel in its formulation. Indeed, the language of "violence" and "reproduction" stems from that line of French sociological dissent running back through Foucault (referenced throughout) and Bourdieu, both now almost *de rigeur* name-checks for educational social scientists. Whether we therefore accept the case presented will depend on the extent to which we subscribe to the notion of schools as nefarious institutions of routinised authoritarianism whose aim is to create docile, compliant bodies. For readers beyond the pages of this journal, this will surely be the major point of contention. Nevertheless, what should not be denied is the way in which Harber has pulled together a huge range of studies and cases, both the well-cited and the more obscure, from across the globe to substantiate the main thrust of his argument. Students in particular, whether undergraduate or post-graduate, will find this appraisal useful and the author is to be commended on the breadth of his reading and desire to optimistically put old wine back into new bottles.

At times however I did feel that in its desire to be universal and wide-ranging (global in both senses of the word) the book comes across as somewhat fragmentary and disconnected. In part this is stylistic and there are many short paragraphs here interspersed with large chunks of secondary source quotation. As one example, the chapter relating to "examinations and testing" (chapter 5) consists in the main of short vignettes of eight national case-studies. Not only are these very brief but little, aside from historical colonial relationships, would seem immediately to connect the UK with modern-day Kenya or, most surprisingly of all, Bhutan. What are we to ultimately make of the dangers of examinations on the basis of individual pieces of research from Bhutan and Egypt? Herein lies one of the difficulties when taking a generalized sweep. Robin Alexander (2000) may well have been "struck by the pervasive sense of control" (Alexander, 2000, p. 72) across those schooling systems he so brilliantly described over two decades ago, but even he was prepared to concede that it is difficult to disentangle a country's educational policy from its history and heritage. Countries such as India for instance are constrained by their population size in which didactic teaching becomes an obvious—and maybe the only—solution to large class sizes. For many students in these countries, rote learning to pass examinations is a passport to distinguished careers in, for example, the military and the civil service. Who has access to these qualifications is of course an important question to ask but we should be wary of throwing out babies with bath water.

Similar differences in context apply to the chapter concerned with the “Journey to and from School”; whilst unpleasant conditions on buses in rural Scotland are unfortunate and improvements would be welcome, they jar when juxtaposed with places (in this case Falluja) in which, “To get to school, pupils have to walk along a dirt road lined with signs pointing out the danger of landmines” (Harber, 2021, p. 178). Short of abandoning traditional notions of schooling altogether—and, admittedly, this does seem to be Harber’s position—it is hard to see how, in the United Kingdom at least, the volume of traffic on roads and the noise which it generates could be legislated for. The same difficulties apply when seeking to tackle the high prevalence of under-16 knife crime taking place on the journeys home from school. Are schools and the ideological assumptions which underpin them culpable in this, or is the solution to be found within wider social networks and pressures?

That these questions emerge from the book is testament to its polemical nature and desire to ask pertinent and, at times, awkward questions. The final chapter, which needed to be longer, finds the author echoing his call to overhaul the current system by embracing more progressive alternatives whether they be Montessori, Steiner, democratic, forest, or home-based schools. That there is mounting evidence for their success, for example within the recent work of Angeline Lillard (2007) in relation to Montessori education, only adds weight to the case made here. Although other parts of society may be embracing a “new normal” Harber is right to posit that education remains untouched by this notion and, if anything, is afflicted with a more stringent desire to return to “as we were.” In light of that, his conclusion that real opportunity lies in, “small-scale practical change at the level of the individual pupil, teacher, classroom and school...to make schooling more human and responsive to the needs of those involved” (Harber, 2021, p. 226) seems not only manageable but a promising platform for spreading alternative practices. A rallying call to arms that deserves to be engaged with.

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