

What might the Covid Pandemic mean for the SERA Theory and Philosophy of Education Network?

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Some prominent theorists and philosophers of education recently offered their reflections on the ongoing crisis by way of a collective project which begins with the provocative words of Arundhati Roy: “[o]ur minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to ‘normality’”... “[n]othing could be worse than a return to normality” (Peters et. al. 2020, 1). Whether or not one is persuaded, Roy is surely right that this rupture offers us a glimpse of something different if we are “ready to imagine another world” (Roy 2020). Roy points to the “brutal, structural, social and economic inequality” of India and elsewhere that the pandemic has illuminated. That it takes a pandemic to face some basic social problems may be disheartening, but it suggests that, in an era of such fundamental uncertainty, we may be able to meaningfully open up basic questions of the nature and purpose of education, questions that are otherwise taken for granted. Thus, the theoretical and philosophical basis of our educational work comes into sharper focus.

In this short piece, we want to address structural inequality in the Scottish context: the oft-decried attainment gap. Promises to deliver educational equity in Scotland by closing the attainment gap have seldom looked as hollow as they do in the wake of the pandemic. While the very possibility of school for many children in Scotland seems to be hanging in the balance, the results of an extended period of school closure have shown that school *can* resist the forces of inequality (Scottish Government 2020). It is because lockdown appears to negatively affect better-off children less than their poorer counterparts (Armitage and Nellums 2020), that it seems reasonable to suppose that schools are providing some resistance to the social forces of inequity.

Some educational theorists and philosophers argue that school offers a ‘space of equality’ (Masschelein and Simons 2013), a temporary deliverance from the structural injustices that impose themselves on contemporary life. This is because school is understood as a place which can temporarily suspend economic, social, cultural, religious or political aspects of one’s identity as well as any obligations that exist in relation to them. From this point of view, school can be

understood as a space of freedom from necessity; the necessities of work as well as identity. If school can achieve this, then it is plausible to imagine that it has some influence on the educational effects of social and economic inequality.

But there is a significant distinction between resisting and overcoming the effects of inequality. The suspension of identity does not mean that schools are equipped to *overcome* social and economic injustices in general. Indeed, the pandemic draws attention in quite precise ways to the scope of influence over the attainment gap that schools do have: schooling may stall the widening of the attainment gap, but that is not the same as overcoming it. It seems that suspension only has a negative relation to the gap: it can at best prevent further widening, but cannot fundamentally solve it.

This brings theory to the fore: why are politicians asking educationalists to solve social problems? One might argue that this reflects a one-dimensional political culture in which educational interference is one of the few levers available to politicians. We wish to make the perhaps controversial argument that schools ought to be allowed to focus on education (Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019). Such a controversial claim might seem irrelevant or unacceptable in normal times. But then, do we really want to return to 'normal'?

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