

## Class of COVID-19 – what next for education?

By Professor Margaret M Clark

**O**n 18 July a session at the Virtual Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival was devoted to education. The theme of the hour-long session was that ‘Classrooms will not be the same after COVID’. Five speakers discussed their concerns and aspirations for the future of education. Each speaker was given an opportunity to speak briefly to open the session, to respond to questions submitted by participants and to make a short closing statement.

Unfortunately, there was time for only a few of the many questions submitted. One of the questions concerned the idea of ‘bubbles’ which speakers felt to be a flawed concept. Hannah Packham of the National Education Union was in the chair and three of the speakers were from other unions: Patrick Roach of NASUWT, Mary Boustead of NEU and Jo Grady of UCU.

Jo expressed concern for the underfunding of post 16 education in universities and further education, and the uncertain future for students and staff. The other two speakers were Kate Green and Gemma Haley. Gemma Haley, a parent, speaking as a member of More than a Score, an association of parents and professionals campaigning against the current testing and accountability regime in England. Gemma, as a parent of two children, a younger child and an older autistic child, expressed her concern at what will face young children when they return to school in September. She was relieved that the government had succumbed to pressure and was postponing until 2021 the introduction of baseline assessment of reception class children, but was disturbed at the requirement that year 2 children sit the Phonics Screening Check during the Autumn term which had to be cancelled in 2020.

Patrick Roach and others stressed the need for a plan that ensures children and staff will be safe when they return to school and one that wins parents to reconnect. The other speaker Kate Green, the recently appointed Shadow Education Minister, stressed the need for emotional support for the children and staff.

All the speakers expressed concern at the lack of clarity in the government’s plans only released on 2 July, missed opportunities to use empty buildings, not enough concern for the safety of the children and staff. Kate Green commented on the missed opportunity over the summer, an ideal time to prepare parents and children to return to school in September through activities. The already widened disparity between the more and less advantaged children following home schooling disturbed the speakers, who were, however, concerned at the stress mainly on ‘Catch Up’ expressed by the Secretary of State for Education.

The emphasis in schools on testing, accountability and rote learning in England left children susceptible to fake news and unable to synthesize new knowledge, it was claimed. Lockdown and home schooling, while it had disturbing effects for some children, had, it was claimed, led to a greater respect for teachers and creative learning experiences for some children. It was hoped that lessons would be learnt and schools remain or become centres for their community.

The speakers did highlight that during the pandemic it was realised that schools are at the centre of the community. It was felt that opportunities had been missed to utilise empty buildings and that recently released government plans for reopening schools in September were vague and unrealistic. The speakers expressed the hope that with collaboration between the different agencies and insight from academics a richer more creative education could be developed post COVID. While accepting the need to close the increasing attainment gap they argued that this should not be at the cost of wellbeing. There would be the need for a different labour market, and education would need to change and move away from the current obsession with testing and examinations. The crisis they felt, gives an opportunity to consider what we teach and what is needed. These speakers questioned whether indeed the government does have a coherent plan.

BBC Radio Four on *The Moral Maze* recently also featured education with the title ‘How and why we educate’.