A year (and a bit) of living dangerously

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It is now 18 months since most of the world became aware of COVID-19 and 15 months since the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. How, when or whether we will emerge from the ongoing cycle of lockdowns and partial reopenings which have disrupted education around the world is still unclear and will probably be so for some time. Vaccine nationalism has seen some of the world's wealthiest countries make enormous strides in pushing back the virus, with governments happy to pay a premium to assure supplies and consolidate a wobbling political base at home. However, as these countries are finding out, the unevenness in vaccine distribution – 85% of vaccine shots have been given in high- and upper-middle-income countries, and only 0.3% in low income countries¹ – is likely in the end only to prolong the pandemic, which is no respecter either of national boundaries or triumphant populism. Many millions of people have been left behind by the vaccine roll-out, which is both replicating and deepening entrenched global inequalities. For poorer countries, a return to something resembling normality is still a distant prospect, and is likely to remain so without a concerted effort globally to get needles into arms in the developing world. Similar trends are also evident at national level, with existing inequalities growing worse, and poorer villages, towns, cities and regions disproportionately affected, not only in terms of infection rates, but socially and economically too. While the evident lesson of the pandemic is that we are all in it together (and can only get out of it together), it is a lesson we are stubbornly reluctant to learn.

In education, the situation has been exceedingly variable, as our recent two double special issues have demonstrated,² with some countries managing to maintain an educational offer, albeit on reduced terms and on a far from equal basis, and others,

¹ New York Times (2021). Tracking coronavirus vaccinations around the world [continuously updated webpage]. *New York Times* online. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html> [accessed 30 June 2021].

² “Education in the age of COVID-19: Understanding the consequences” (*IRE* 66:5–6, Oct/Dec 2020; <https://link.springer.com/journal/11159/volumes-and-issues/66-5>) and its companion, “Education in the age of COVID-19: Implications for the future” (*IRE* 67:1–2, Feb/Apr 2021; <https://link.springer.com/journal/11159/volumes-and-issues/67-1>).

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largely those lacking the required technological infrastructure, struggling to ensure continuity of learning in any form for their children and young people. Again, even within countries, the already privileged have tended to fare better educationally than their less well-off peers, benefiting from superior resources, deeper pockets and smaller class sizes. Adult education, which attracts a large proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, has struggled more than other sub-sectors to maintain a learning offer, partly due to a lack of resources, partly due to the nature of its student base. Many institutions and learners were ill-equipped to deal with the sudden shift to online distance learning,³ though adult educators in some settings were able to develop “inventive and dynamic pedagogies oriented to social solidarity and to taking up intersectional oppressions” (Smythe et al. 2021, p. 9).⁴ Adult students, for whom face-to-face contact is particularly important,⁵ have had to cope with the twin challenge of supporting their families, often on a reduced income, while also managing homeschooling and other domestic and work challenges (including, in many cases, the need to take on more work to pay the bills). As better-off countries look to resume business as usual, it is worth considering just what we are returning to. In very many cases, it is to a profoundly unequal and unfair system of education in which opportunity is disproportionately stacked in favour of the wealthy and the privileged. COVID-19 has made these inequities more visible – and hopefully more questionable. Do we want to drag the old orthodoxies responsible for them with us into the post-pandemic future, or leave them behind, in search of something better, fairer and more sustainable?

As Cecilia Bjursell argues, there is a danger that, in a context of fear, the “dis-juncture” – a state of “disharmony” that compels us to seek new knowledge and new ways of doing things – we are experiencing as a result of the pandemic will lead to “a narrowing of mindsets”, making us more closed-minded and more resistant to change, and “collective efforts”, more resigned and less hopeful (Bjursell 2020, pp. 673 and 675).⁶ Pessimism is infectious too. Many millions of people in our grimly unequal world have got used to living with little or no hope. The pandemic has deepened the precariousness of their lives, making them more isolated, more impoverished, more excluded, more anxious and exhausted. In such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine something better or even different – hanging on to what we have is the priority. Such is the reality of lives lived in permanent crisis. COVID-19 has only exacerbated and heightened it. And while the pandemic has exposed the

³ Stanistreet, P., Elfert, M., & Atchoarena, D. (2020). Education in the age of COVID-19: Understanding the consequences. *International Review of Education*, 66(5–6), 627–633. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09880-9>.

⁴ Smythe, S., Wilbur, A., & Hunter, E. (2021). Inventive pedagogies and social solidarity: The work of community-based adult educators during COVID-19 in British Columbia, Canada. *International Review of Education*, 67(1–2), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09882-1>.

⁵ Zukowski, I., Parker, Z., Shetterly, D., & Valle, K. (2021). Public health crises compounded: A high school equivalency context in the time of a pandemic. *International Review of Education*, 67(1–2), 31–52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09889-8>.

⁶ Bjursell, C. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic as disjuncture: Lifelong learning in a context of fear. *International Review of Education*, 66(5–6), 673–689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09863-w>

fragility of the social contract and highlighted the failings of the educational settlement in most countries, it is a conglomerate of uncertainty, fear and precarity that prevents us from challenging the norms and values that keep the wheels of change spinning just above ground.

This is the discomfiting reality in which we now find ourselves. Business as usual is not an option we can responsibly pursue. And yet, given the challenges posed by technological development and the transformation of the world of work, social and economic inequality, demographic change, the democratic deficit and the spread of populism, and, above all, the climate crisis,⁷ it is almost impossible to imagine anything better or different. What does lend some hope, though this may seem an odd choice of term in the circumstances, is the irresistible necessity of change, the end-in-sight conclusion of an epoch marked by a belief in remorseless economic growth and unsustainable levels of consumption. We simply have to live differently, we have to be open to other learnings from other places, if we are to survive.

This means recognising that poverty, inequality, climate change and so on are the result of human choices. They are the accumulation of political actions that could have been avoided or done differently. They still can. Radical change does happen, often emerging from a social and cultural climate in which it seemed unlikely or impossible, and in many cases against the background of the kind of disjuncture Bjursell (2020) describes. World War I, for example, gave many women an opportunity to define themselves differently, as the equals of men, and made their continued treatment as second-class citizens, who were denied suffrage and other rights, unsustainable and, ultimately, unthinkable. It was a moment in which what people thought they knew and the reality with which they were confronted were in inescapable conflict. We are in such a moment now. What is different is that our perspective is so fragmented, our antagonists are so hard to see and the confounding voices of outrage and irrationality are so loud and pervasive in our post-factual world.

In education, the space for critical thinking and challenge is perhaps wider than it has been for some time, yet the same tired narratives get played out, over and over again. It is important that we contest them. Not much good can be done if we do not. One of the strongest narratives in thinking about education in past decades, particularly in North America and Europe, has been the commitment to high-stakes testing, ranking and accountability in education associated with neo-liberalism. This approach has helped create a climate of competition, performance management, marketisation and audit in institutions, loading pressure and anxiety on staff,⁸ in many cases resulting in an ugly culture of fear and surveillance justified by a narrative of performance improvement.⁹ Although this is evident across all levels of

⁷ Scott, D. (2021). I didn't think it was possible ... [Twitter thread, 30 June]. <https://twitter.com/ScottDuncanWX/status/1410097020912742404> [accessed 30 June 2021].

⁸ Morrish, L. (2017). Why the audit culture made me quit. *Times Higher Education*, 2 March [online article]. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/why-audit-culture-made-me-quit> [accessed 30 June 2021].

⁹ Hall, R., & Bowles, K. (2016). Re-engineering higher education: The subsumption of academic labour and the exploitation of anxiety. *Workplace*, 28, 30–47. <https://ices.library.ubc.ca/index.php/workplace/article/view/186211> [accessed 30 June 2021].

education, it has been particularly observed in higher education, where resistance has also been strongest. Academics have identified a growing authoritarianism in their institutions, a “hostile environment” for academic freedom and an increase in mental health issues reported by staff (Morrish 2017). The trend is mirrored in the increased costs of university education (and attendant debts) for students in some countries, their treatment as consumers, the growth in marketisation in higher education, and the funding incentivisation of courses that have demonstrable economic or market value, to the neglect of other kinds of value. Higher education has come to be seen as a transaction with chiefly private, monetary benefits.¹⁰

One dimension of the audit culture in higher education has been the ranking of institutions in national and international league tables. These league tables, as Michelle Stack argued in our last issue, drive funding allocation and “reinforce transnational global networks of power” (Stack 2021, p. 129),¹¹ which “conflate economic, social and cultural capital with contributions to a better world” (ibid., pp. 130–131). In the first article of this issue, “Levelling the playing field: The effect of including widening participation in university league tables”, *Katharine Hubbard, Michael O'Neill and Stuart Nattrass* address the problem. Although such league tables are often understood as objective measures of research and teaching excellence, the expression of simple and uncontested common sense, the authors point out that the compilation of university league tables (ULTs) is “an inherently political act, with the choice and weighting of metrics resulting in particular characteristics of individual institutions being rewarded or penalised”. This choice excludes other metrics and reinforces a particular view of what is valuable about higher education – and, of course, what isn't.

One aspect that is not considered by league tables, the authors write, is “the diversity of the student intake, and the extent to which an institution has been successful in widening participation in higher education”. Their article explores how current ULT metrics for universities in the United Kingdom relate to widening participation (WP). They find that over 75% of UK league table metrics are negatively related to WP. This, they say, has the effect of making institutions with a diverse student body significantly more likely to be lower down in the league tables. The worst relationship with WP is for entry standards, they explain. Universities that recruit high-performing students are actively rewarded in the league tables; yet this fails to recognise that students with high entry grades are more likely to come from privileged backgrounds. Developing a WP-adjusted league table to enable fairer comparison, the authors conclude that ULT compilers have an urgent ethical duty to improve their definition of a “good” university so that universities with a commitment to widening participation can be duly recognised and rewarded.

¹⁰ See, for example: Clark, A., & Butcher, B. (2021). Revealed: Britain's highest paying degrees, according to graduate salaries. *Times Higher Education*, 30 June [online article]. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/highest-paying-degrees-uk-2021-graduate-salaries-revealed-jobs/> [accessed 30 June 2021].

¹¹ Stack, M. (2021). Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic: University rankings or co-operatives as a strategy for developing an equitable and resilient post-secondary education sector? *International Review of Education*, 67(1–2), 127–144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09891-0>.

One of the areas in education most affected by the focus on testing and ranking is leadership. Overbearing systems of accountability and performance monitoring can make leaders introspective and controlling, creating conditions inimical to open, collaborative and inclusive leadership that tend to lower morale and reduce job satisfaction among staff. In the second article in this issue, “The effect of servant leadership on *ad hoc* schoolteachers’ affective commitment and psychological well-being: The mediating role of psychological capital”, *Mukti Clarence, Viju Painadath Devassy, Lalatendu Kesari Jena and Tony Sam George* consider the impact of a particular leadership style on teacher commitment and well-being. They focus on servant leadership, a style “based on a leadership philosophy that promotes working for the growth of the subordinates by serving them (in terms of providing support, encouragement, appreciation, help), easing their efforts to face the challenges of work, and behaving in an ethically correct manner and focusing on the success and well-being of the employees”.

The authors conducted a survey of *ad hoc* teachers (also referred to as *para* teachers) in rural India to find out the extent to which being led by principals who practise this leadership style has a positive impact on respondents’ affective commitment and psychological well-being. The results revealed that there is an indirect effect of servant leadership on affective commitment and psychological well-being through a set of three elements, namely hope, efficacy and resilience, which together amount to a *para* teacher’s personal resource of psychological capital. Relying on the findings of their research, the authors urge the implementation of interventional teacher training programmes that nurture servant leadership among school principals and educational officers, linking this to progress on the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), which strives to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education” (UN 2015, p. 19).¹² They argue that this progress can only be made through teachers whose levels of job satisfaction and dedication to teaching are high.

Our third article also focuses on the achievement of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, this time in the context of higher education. In “Formation of a sustainable development ecosystem for Ghanaian universities”, *Yaw Owusu-Agyeman* contends that while a number of seminal research studies have focused on incorporating aspects of sustainable development (SD) in higher education institutions through curriculum development and partnerships, there are still challenges with regard to the uptake of SD practices by universities in Ghana, West Africa – the focus of the study presented in the article – as well as in many other developing countries. The author undertook a systematic review of the literature on sustainability research in the context of Ghana, particularly in relation to higher education. He found that a lack of understanding of education for sustainable development (ESD) among individuals and institutions was creating a gap in knowledge and practice within the higher education landscape.

¹² UN (United Nations) (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development*. New York: United Nations. Retrieved 2 July 2019 from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>.

To address this problem, the author proposes the adoption of an “ecosystem” that integrates (1) research networks; (2) national SD activities; (3) institutional structures and leadership; and (4) the ESD concept of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 SDGs into the curricula of Ghanaian universities. He suggests that such an ecosystem could encourage a collegial environment that supports the exchange of SD ideas and skills among staff and students. In addition, the SD ecosystem could provide “a framework for developing students’ knowledge and skills in line with global SD agendas, while also heightening research networks both locally and internationally, and ensuring that universities adopt research-informed SD practices”. The article proposes “a paradigm shift from universities’ traditional teaching, learning and research activities to engaging business organisations and other external stakeholders to support the SDGs” to enable researchers “to support their government to achieve its goals of educating its citizens to be responsive to civic activities, enhancing social justice, and supporting the development of communities through research and advocacy programmes”.

The next article also proposes a revision of traditional educational thinking, arguing that the national curriculum in Nigeria must be made more relevant and inclusive of different values in order to widen participation. In “A critical analysis of the national curriculum for nomadic primary schools in Nigeria”, *Ifeanyi Benedict Ohanu, Issa Ajibade Salawu and Emmanuel Okafor Ede* identify enrolment without attendance as a common problem among nomadic populations in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria. Their study examines the situation of children enrolled in nomadic primary schools in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Noting the persistent problem of low attendance and retention among the children of nomadic families, the authors undertook a survey to investigate the influence of curriculum, cultural diversity and the learning environment on their enrolment, complementing their survey with semi-structured interviews.

Analysing their collected data using mean, standard deviation and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), they found that a relevant curriculum, adequate learning facilities, a suitable language of instruction, diverse learning and teaching approaches, provision of grazing areas close to school and adequate workshops for teachers have significant positive implications for the enrolment of nomadic children in primary schools. The authors conclude with a number of recommendations towards making school attendance more attractive for nomadic children, with the potential effect of providing them with a more satisfying learning experience. These recommendations include the provision of adequate resources such as classroom furniture and textbooks, workshops on the development of instruction materials and guides for teachers to promote diverse learning, and a requirement to consider the native language of teachers before they are posted to a nomadic school in order to reduce the language barrier.

The fifth article in this issue, “An African contribution to the constitutional right to modern schooling 150 years ago”, takes a historical perspective on schooling in Africa. *Christel Adick* examines the stipulation of the provision of formal schooling in a regional constitution drafted in West Africa in 1871, 150 years ago. The constitution originated in Fanteland, a coastal region of the Gold Coast (modern-day southern Ghana), and was the main achievement of a

historical movement which sought to unite several smaller kingdoms and communities into a Fante Confederation (1868–1873). The author argues that the *Fante Constitution* represents a unique early African attempt to construct a modern nation-state based on a written constitution, and that the sections which stipulate and regulate formal schooling are central to its vision. She embeds the sections concerning education in an analysis of the specific historical situation of the Fante people in West Africa before the establishment of formal British colonial rule on the Gold Coast, developing two main theses: the constitution (a) is an “African” contribution to educational policymaking, which (b) accords “modern” schooling a crucial role in state-building, with an emphasis on social and economic development that was far ahead of its time. She presents these theses in the light of the historical record and competing interpretations in historical discourse, arguing that the constitution represents “a vibrant initiative on the part of Africans to speak for and by themselves before colonial rule was established”.

The final article of this issue, a research note entitled “Academic success from an individual perspective: A proposal for redefinition” by *Oz Guterman*, critically considers the use of grades as a measure of academic success and as the main criteria for admission to education programmes, nomination for honours, awards of scholarships, and so on. This, the author notes, has begun to be contested by scholars who have put forward several arguments against the use of grades as the sole or most important measure of academic success. He focuses on a specific aspect of this problem, namely the failure to consider learners’ personal perspective regarding their own achievements. Many approaches to evaluating achievements call for their examination in light of previously defined goals. However, each learner defines her or his aspirations and goals differently, while achievements are usually measured on a uniform scale. The author reviews this problem and considers alternative models (including both their advantages and their shortcomings) for defining academic success in terms of expectations and motivation. He furthermore proposes a measure to enable the evaluation of academic achievements in terms of an individual student’s goals and aspirations.

The note highlights the difficulties inherent in identifying measures of success that are inclusive and widely meaningful. A move towards greater inclusivity and recognition of the multifaced (and constantly evolving) nature of things, whether in measuring student success, designing curricula or devising league table metrics, is clearly positive, and constitutes a rebuke to the rigidity and intolerance that has overtaken and overrun policy think in the past decades. The blanket imposition of an economic view of the value and purpose of education may look like the result of an *entente cordiale* – an end-of-history moment – but that is to ignore the thousand minor conflicts, including those waged inside people, that make the lives of many of those working and learning in education difficult and demoralising. The future promised by such a view – one of endless economic growth, cheerful consumerism and liberal democracy with a human face – is no longer available. Yet there is no alternative in sight, despite the harsh light the pandemic has shone on the present. That, however, does not mean that a different future is not possible or achievable, that the new realism of environmentalism and sustainability will not prevail over the exhausted realism of excessive

consumption and market liberalisation. Whatever the odds – or however unpromising the circumstances – we have to try to invent a future that is just, equitable and democratic, and trust that, by challenging the old, discredited orthodoxies, we are laying stones on the road that leads there.

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