

## ***Philosophy of Education in a New Key: a 'Covid Collective' of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB)***

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### **Introduction**

This article is a collective writing experiment undertaken by philosophers of education affiliated with the PESGB (Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain). When asked to reflect on questions concerning the Philosophy of Education in a New Key in May 2020, all found 'inspiration' in COVID-19, first identified formally in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation in March 2020 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic)). At the time of writing (in August 2020), more than 21.9 million cases had been reported worldwide, in more than 188 countries and territories. While the pandemic opens up important philosophical and educational questions, we are acutely aware too that it is, first and foremost, a human tragedy. With nearly a million deaths reported worldwide to date, and with some of us connected directly to individuals who have died from Covid-related illnesses, there is a degree of discomfort, and a responsibility to be sensitive, in reflecting and writing about it academically.

Unsurprisingly, as the PESGB is an international learned society, the philosophical perspectives reflected in the 'Covid Collective' come from different parts of the world, although perspectives from Great Britain and Ireland are well represented. We see academic practice reflecting the "greater integration of global research communities than at any time in the past" (Peters et al, 2016: 1403),

especially since the digital revolution in academic publishing. Furthermore, many of the authors included in the collective raise concerns related to but beyond Covid-19, reflecting the impact of neo-liberalism [and other political developments] on these geopolitics. Like other contributions to the developing Collective Writing library, this is a response to the 'iron cage' of academic discourses introduced and imposed by these market forces, which count and rank all research and teaching activities in individualist and competitive terms (Peters et al 2016). At the same time, not all contributors are as bothered by these concerns as others. Collective writing is an endeavour that explores both synergies and dissonances when bringing together multiple philosophical views and opinions (Peters et al 2020).

In editing such a piece, I was immediately troubled by whom to choose, who not to offend by omission, given the rich seams of articulate and perceptive philosophy available within the PESGB. As a philosopher schooled in the analytic tradition at the Institute of Education, University of London on a project concerned with democratic leadership in education, I was concerned that the process we adopted to recruit writers should be inclusive, transparent and fair. Focusing on the organisation, rather than individuals, and respectful of its systems, I sought advice from fellow members of the PESGB's Development Committee. There being no reasonable or relevant reason to exclude anyone (Benn and Peters and 1959) on the membership list, expressions of interest were sought openly, via email. An article by Peters et al, 2020 was shared, alongside the founding paper on collective writing outlining the problem and methodology of collective writing (Peters et al, 2016) and a list of other collective writings as exemplars.

Enough positive responses were received to author two collective pieces and overwhelmingly contributions were made by individuals, although one paired piece contribution was also submitted. As editor I sought not to be too directive but rather to allow others' voices to emerge, and I included the collective as a whole in pulling the threads of argument together. I was struck by a strong sense of obligation to others in their interactions, including a noticeably high level of courtesy and consideration for the efforts of others, and appreciation for being included in the endeavour.

Our reflections begin, and end, with Camus' retelling of the legend of Sisyphus, who defied the gods and put Death in chains, with the intention that no human thereafter should need to die. Death is liberated; yet when Sisyphus reaches the appointed time of his own death, he further escapes from the underworld by devious means. Finally, recaptured, the gods decree that Sisyphus' punishment will last for all eternity and he will be required to push a rock up a mountain which, upon reaching the top, will roll down to the bottom, leaving Sisyphus to start once again... and again.... and again....

## **The Pause of Sisyphus**

**Philip Gaydon**

*"It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me."* (Camus, 2005: 117)

On the 20<sup>th</sup> March, the final day of an open school site, the year 13 ethics students and I sat discussing how they felt about their education now that their exams had evaporated and their fate had been unceremoniously removed from their grasp. The discussion already had a whiff of the absurd about it, as most of the students were in fancy dress – an homage to a leavers' ritual that should have happened weeks later – and it didn't take long for us to turn to existentialism. Some reflected that perhaps they should have taken Sartre's decree to live without hope more seriously, others that they were, like Camus' Sisyphus, pausing to look down the mountain before descending through the dust to collect their escaped boulder and continue their toil once more.

I wondered: When they reach the foot of the mountain, will they reach for the familiar stone or will they deem a new boulder valuable enough to set their shoulder to? What role, if any, have the school and I played in how they see this return and the choice they make? And what about me? Am I heading back down to pick up the right rock?

That class, and the ensuing need to dig deep for the passion and energy to reimagine and transfer my teaching online, led me to reflect on my practice and question why I had committed to education in the first place. In many respects, the lesson plans and Google Classrooms that lay before me bore no likeness to those things I had said I would uphold. Where were the challenging emancipatory models of Jacques Rancière and bell hooks? Where was the sustained reflection on the good life or the virtue-led approach being advocated by philosophers such as Jason Baehr? Where was the boulder I had always imagined I would carry?

My pause continues, but it is fast coming to an end.

If one was ever going to ask what it is to live through a reflective moment on the meaning and value of education, I do not think you will find many better opportunities. For it is in this sudden and unexpected walk back down the mountain that many are awakening to their experience of education in new and powerful ways. We must actively capture what we can, seek out classroom stories and dive into what they tell us. What is it that children, teachers, parents and politicians missed (or didn't) about school sites? What is being valued and who is expressing what need? Who is thriving and who is suffering, and by what standard is that being measured?

We must find out what this moment, this breath, this pause is revealing, and use it to strike a new key in philosophy; in education.

We must find out what this moment, this breath, this pause is revealing, and we must use it to strike a new key in philosophy and education, before well-worn boulders continue to be selected for no better reason than they were the ones previously being rolled.

## **In Praise of Schools: Lessons from the Lockdown**

### **Kevin Williams**

The necessity for teaching to be conducted on-line during the Covid-19 emergency has prompted consideration of whether philosophy of education should be conducted in a new key. Yet current circumstances have foregrounded a very traditional aspect of teaching and learning. This is the significance of personal contact between teacher and learner and the humanizing influence that this contact can have on both parties. The absence of real face-to-face interaction may entail a loss at the level of pedagogy, but it certainly inhibits the nurturing that features in much education.

As regards pedagogy, on-line interactions can make it difficult to read body language cues. They make it very challenging for teachers to bring alive knowledge vividly and dramatically. The emotional connection that often features in the mediation between teachers, learners, and a body of knowledge is harder to achieve.

A greater limitation of on-line instruction is that it inhibits the nurturing or pastoral support that teachers can offer to learners. The school is often perceived as an extension of the home in terms of providing personal support and overall care for young people. This support is common in the English-speaking world, where schools are usually conceived as nurturing environments grounded in a broad or thicker conception of children's welfare than that of mere academic achievement. They are

envisaged both as complementing the work of the home and extending the parents' remit of caring. On-line instructors cannot really act *in loco parentis*. In schools, young people can find a form of love that they may not experience elsewhere. There they may also find laughter, good humour, and banter and these are hard to capture on-line.

I have visited many schools and most seem happy, nurturing, and protective environments. They might well be called oases of humanity, where young people are enabled to enjoy a sense of security from the world outside the classroom. The notion of the hidden curriculum usually has negative connotations, but it also has a positive dimension. This is the informal, unprescribed curriculum of care and compassion or what in 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth describes as 'little, nameless, unremembered, acts/Of kindness and of love'. For educators, it is a privilege to be present to students when they are experiencing personal difficulties and to extend support and sympathy to them in times of loss, grief, and trauma. Sometimes all that is needed may be no more than a brief sympathetic word communicating awareness of the young person's situation, but judging the right moment is easier in face-to face encounters than on-line.

The effect that teachers can have on students can be considerable. Teachers may not be aware of their influence and it can often come as a surprise to them. When I left second level teaching in the 1980s, I was confronted by a very angry young man about to start Sixth Year who was a very creative and insightful writer. To my embarrassment, he berated me for abandoning him. 'I only came back here because of you'. This humbling and discomfiting remark reflected a relationship unlikely to be replicated in a distance learning context.

### **Is 'business as usual' really desirable?**

#### **Pip Bennett**

The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in dramatic changes to the daily lives of so many people on the planet. What were once taken-for-granted freedoms of movement and action have now been curtailed, in an effort to mitigate the disease's toll on humanity. The widespread closing of both commercial and public educational institutions has required a re-evaluation of everyday working and educational practices. Concurrently, previously expected distinctions have been re-appraised as once traditional boundaries of home/work and home/school have blurred in this context. Large numbers of people now face a so-called 'merged existence', with teachers giving lessons from their kitchens, or inserting sign-offs to their emails explaining that replies late at night are due to family caring commitments, rather than being an indicator of urgency. Rhetoric prevails about the 'new normal' that people will face as restrictions are gradually lifted. This 'new normal' is an opportunity for philosophy of education in a new key to make a significant contribution.

Responding to unchosen changes prompts reflection on the way things have been done to date; and which elements, if any, merit being retained. The global prevalence of neoliberal manifestations of performativity, accountability, managerialism and competition in education have been well-documented and discussed (Olssen and Peters 2005, Apple 2017). The distorting effects of national (Taylor 2016, Lum 2015) and international league tables, due to a focus on PISA rankings (Meyer and Zahedi 2014) have seen corruptive pressures affecting the social policies for which they were designed to take account (Campbell 1976 p. 49). Continuing to interrogate the purposes of education remains vital, as is recognising that these are fluid (Biesta 2009). Can the current changes support educational systems which allow for both the instrumental and intrinsic aspects to flourish?

Understandably, the immediate response to the pandemic saw efforts to maintain the status quo in education, to make the experience as close as possible to that which had already prevailed. Educational providers explored the opportunities for synchronous, asynchronous and blended courses. Once technological barriers were breached by connecting with Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom and so on, the educational landscape changed at a hitherto unknown pace. Now, suddenly a far wider range of educational opportunities become more accessible with people who had previously not even considered engaging with them, because of caring or financial commitments, now having many more from which to choose. While historically, online educational offerings have been of variable quality (Sun and Chen 2016), recent events have prompted institutions to appraise and overhaul them; hopefully this re-examination will lead to improved practice in both on- and off-line options.

The risk, of course, is that a predominantly instrumental approach to education continues to be reinforced; whereas, the 'new normal' has the potential to re-frame lifelong learning in meaningful ways. At times, this will be because a certain qualification is needed in order to advance in a particular job; at others, it will be because learning has the potential to allow us to relate to the world in new and exciting ways. The conceptual underpinnings of this tension will be need clarification, calling out for attention from philosophy of education in a new key.

### **Which educative stories should we tell of 2020?**

#### **Laura D'Olimpio**

When COVID-19 arrived in early 2020, everything came to a stand-still. Life as we knew it was interrupted. Students' formal education was halted and handed over to busy parents with *some* support. The amount received depended on the usual uneven distribution of resources according to socio-economic factors. This global crisis has left scars; psychological, emotional, financial and physical. In its aftermath, theorists are questioning which habits we should keep, which to discard.

I am interested in the story we shall tell of 2020. Which narratives might prove educationally useful? Which voices will dominate? Who might the audience be? Educators should also consider which stories they do not want to pass into history as a record of the truth.

The pandemic has brought loss and woundedness as well as other stories, mostly voiced through digital technology, that connects us globally. I want to call for optimism and hope as we seek shared narratives that inspire and unite us. Elsewhere I have also defended the use of drama and philosophy as educationally useful to work through traumatic events in the form of fictional stories with children in an effort to find new, constructive habits (gestures) and healing (D'Olimpio & Teschers, 2016; D'Olimpio, 2004).

By contrast, popular narratives are crafted by political players who increasingly manipulate the media and the prevalence of fake news, sensationalism and fearmongering is worrying. Lee McIntyre (2018: 62) identifies inherent cognitive biases making us "ripe for manipulation and exploitation by those who have an agenda to push, especially if they can discredit all other sources of information". There is no escape; a news silo is no defence against post-truth. We become reliant on certain sources of information and particularly vulnerable when these tell us exactly what we want to hear.

As we attempt to make meaning in the pandemic aftermath, we are fighting against 'post-truth' as technological platforms support non-transparent users, causing noise and confusion. I am more optimistic than McIntyre that education has a role to play in helping us combat cognitive biases and

epistemic vices but this is no easy task. We have seen the politicisation of the pandemic in various countries as responses differ according to governmental agendas.

Educationalists have a vital role to play in considering which stories are shared in the classroom and engaged with in a critical and compassionate manner that also allows for pupils' thoughts and experiences to be discussed (D'Olimpio & Peterson, 2018). As Susan Sontag lyrically describes in a 1979 interview, we are the creators of history: 'I know that what we do and think is a historical creation' (Cott, 2013: 34). This positions educationalists powerfully. However, if we are not conscious of this responsibility, seizing the opportunity to engage with this moment, those with other agendas will write the history.

As George Orwell warned us back in 1943:

'the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. ...those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history... for all practical purposes the lie will have become the truth' (Orwell, 1943: 4).

Educational theorists must resist this, defending critical engagement with post pandemic media, beginning by considering which narratives we choose to share with others.

## **Reconsidering Political Philosophy and Citizenship Education in the New Era**

### **Raşit Çelik**

During the pandemic, humankind has experienced once more the need for a more egalitarian social order to survive. Furthermore, after the tragic death of George Floyd, protests erupted across the USA and spread, to become a global concern, casting new light on racism as a longstanding problem. The recent rise of far-right politics, the growing tendency towards authoritarian leadership around the world, have only exacerbated these ongoing social and political issues, breeding discrimination, anti-humanitarianism, intolerance, inegalitarianism. Neoliberal perspectives continue to dominate educational policy making, with a particular view of the market economy dominating democratic states and their notions of a common good. The forms of civic participation and political practices framed by this economic paradigm are exclusivist (Giroux, 2017). Consequently, the power of liberal democracies to survive in these conditions has been undermined, inequalities have widened; political authoritarianism has burgeoned (Bloom, 2017; Brown, 2015).

Educational practices have also been shaped by those theories and their central values and principles, justifying inequalities as inevitable and functional; and undermining education as a common public good. Educational policies defer to market economy dynamics that focus principally on the analysis of benefit and cost. 'Quality' education becomes a good to be purchased, relative to one's wealth; social inequalities widen as a result. Replacing programmes for promoting democratic citizenship, entrepreneurship takes centre stage, leading students to conceptualize themselves as free consumers, stakeholders and entrepreneurs, rather than as free and equal democratic citizens (Lundahl & Olson, 2013). This surely weakens shared public understanding of what democracy entails in formal educational terms, and amongst the young, even though on an *ad hoc* basis the active engagement of informally educated young people in the most recent socio-political issues and reactions promises much.

In political terms, it is time to both theoretically and practically respond to the crisis created by neoliberal politics and undemocratic practices, which together present serious challenges facing contemporary societies in promoting just and democratic orders (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2017). In educational terms, we must return to the case for compulsory citizenship education across

jurisdictions and reconsider the place of political philosophy and philosophy of education on both the school and teacher education curriculum. In a liberal democracy, no one can justify imposing doctrines on the young without sound reasoning. Accordingly, education must return to providing those skills that enable future citizens to rationally examine those doctrines and conceptions of the good; that is: present sound arguments, critically evaluate those arguments that other people develop on reasonable terms, to arrive at reasonable conclusions, through participation in democratic discussions aimed at reaching a consensus with others.

For example, one key consideration will be to promote reasoning on how it is possible to be both an individual and a citizen; another, how can all be both free and equal? These issues are fundamental to a just democratic order and therefore essential components of citizenship education. From this, critical thinking, reasoning, political and civic knowledge, active citizenship, and pluralistic democratic values follow, as the main substantive elements of citizenship education programmes. The development of such knowledge and skill are of crucial importance if contemporary societies are to become yet more democratic, and just (Bull, 2008; Çelik, 2016).

### **Toward Cultivating Human Virtuosity: The Person-in-Relation**

#### **Qasir Shah**

Consider the mundane example of a supermarket. Some people are loud, oblivious to their surroundings; a few let their trolleys bump into you, but most are aware of their environs, respectful of others, maintaining appropriate distance. This example illustrates the inter-subjective nature of our lives: how we can affect one another's lives through our behaviour. To be human, in any meaningful sense, is inextricably bound to being a person-in-manifold-relations: not only in close relationships as with parents, teachers and friends, but also with strangers in a supermarket – or the delivery driver. One need only imagine a life devoid of these relationships to realise how impoverished our lives would be. COVID-19 has revealed the inadequacy of the individual regnant as we find ourselves isolated, locked-in and alone – yearning for social contact.

The Confucian tradition's conceptualisation of what it is to be human is underpinned by the idea of the person-in-relation. This does not however mean that the Confucian dismisses the existence of the individual, it instead sees the individual 'produced' out of relations: self-cultivation occurs in social context. This requires honing social relations until one achieves a virtuosic level in each one. This is attained by developing one's moral character, such that the interaction of each relation embodies the Confucian virtues of rén 仁 (humanity) and lǐ 禮 (ritual propriety), ultimately to attain sublime harmony: not to be confused with sameness.

Rén recognises our intersubjective nature, as elucidated from its glyph 仁: the left side (亻) represents a person, the right (二) the number 'two', indicating more than one, the being-in-relation. To be rén requires loving one's fellow human (Lau, 12:22). Confucius says:

The man of rén, wishing to establish his own character, also seeks to establish the character of others. Wishing to succeed, he also seeks to help others succeed (Legge, 6:30).

This requires cultivating, not only oneself morally and materially, but also others, by sublimating selfish impulses. Such cultivation is expressed through the five human relationships: between husband and wife, parent and child, older and younger sibling, friend and friend, and ruler and subject. Reciprocity should underpin these relationships according to Confucian thought: relating 'to others in a meaningful way [...] in the spirit of filiality, brotherhood, or friendship [, which reflect] one's level of

self-cultivation' (Tu, 1972, p. 188), and sense of self. This requires putting oneself in others' shoes (shù) to ascertain their needs and then doing one's utmost (zhōng) to assist.

Rén is actualised through lǐ. Lǐ amounts to abiding by culturally established norms, but more than following formally prescribed rules of propriety; conforming to rén, lǐ avoids empty formalism or becoming staid. To attain sublime harmony in one's relations, the ethical cultivation of character needs aesthetic sensibility and artistic temperament. One's conduct, from 'the slightest gesture, the cut of one's clothes, the cadence of one's stride, one's posture and facial expression, one's tone of voice, even the rhythm of one's breathing' (Ames, 2002, p. 146), should exhibit grace, and beauty, raising the most mundane interactions to a sacred plane by striving for excellence.

Humanity needs a philosophy of education in a new key that takes this Confucian perspective into account, fostering relations which fuse the aesthetic and the ethical, adhering to norms of lǐ, moved by rén, to elevate human relations beyond matters of contract and negotiation to sublime harmony – the 'beau idéal of humanity. The point is *not* just that our non-Confucian relationships are conventional or matters of decorum: but that they are contingently entertained, with a view to furthering individual or shared projects, not as being the very substance from which those projects and that individuality comes. Returning to our example in the supermarket, rén would dictate that we are actively concerned for the well-being of those around us, and our behaviour (lǐ) would display a softness of speech and friendliness of manner.

### **The Crisis as Chance: A post-Covid imagination of education**

#### **Christoph Neusiedl<sup>1</sup>**

Looking back at the Coronavirus pandemic, we may come to understand it as part of a larger crisis of separation. First, the hierarchical and dualistic separation between humans and nature – and the resulting, consequent domination of the former over the latter – has led to the inexorable transformation of natural habitats into anthropogenic land. Coupled with an unchecked wildlife trade, this has allowed the spread of the disease from animals to humans. Second, the separation introduced between human beings themselves and the ever-widening inequalities which have ensued, then pre-determined who would be worst affected by the virus.

Yet the Corona pandemic is only one of many expressions of a global system with separation issues and far more than preventing further pandemics, to make the world a more livable place for everyone – humans and non-humans alike – we need to overcome this bifurcation. For this is not a natural, objectively existing phenomenon; rather, a narrow, subjective worldview that has achieved hegemony over other possible worldviews and therefore 'ways of worlding.'

A key factor in the success of the *Story of Separation* has been how we educate our children.

Schools separate. Those 'who know' (teachers) may be distinguished sharply from those who allegedly don't (students). Schools separate peers from other age groups and privileged students from less privileged ones. Interrelated topics become separate 'school subjects', which classify 'superior' and 'inferior' knowledge and separate acquiring information in those subjects from its real-life application. Hence, schools separate learning from life and learning for a (promised, yet to come) future from learning for the here and now. They separate children from nature, their local surroundings, and their families, taking control of education away from communities altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> A part of this article is based on Neusiedl (forthcoming).



However, schooling is only one of many other possible ‘modes of study’ that are each linked to different ‘world-making practices’ (see Meyerhoff, 2019). It has achieved such widespread hegemony that all other modes of study have become invisible. Yet, the current crisis of separation therefore offers another chance to re-discover existing and co-create new modes of study.

This second chance entails, above all, relational instead of separated modes of study: learning for and with life; identifying learning opportunities everywhere around us. Everyone (and everything) possesses ‘knowledge’; thus, learning must be facilitated across age and social boundaries. The artificial separation which isolates schools from wider society, reducing learning to a sterile, classroom-based activity, must be broken down, acknowledging the situatedness of all knowledge.

Such possibilities may be seen in ‘self-directed learning’ (SDL), and it is no coincidence that ‘unschoolers’ and others who have practiced SDL for many years have continued to learn during the Corona pandemic, unlike their school-based counterparts (see for example Desmarais, 2020). SDL enables individuals, families and communities to co-create their own learning journeys following their context-based needs and interests. Suspending the separation of students and teachers and ignoring the allegedly ‘common-sense’ hierarchy of knowledge, SDL weaves a rich, transgenerational (across humans and across species), transcultural, and transdisciplinary web of learning.

Through existing and new *relations* of thinking-knowing-feeling-being, SDL transcends the artificially created divisions inherent in the schooling mode of study. Other world-making practices follow, based on a more grounded understanding of our situatedness in the world; not as superior, detached rulers of a passive world, awaiting to be measured, explained and conquered; but as active participants always engaged with others (humans and non-humans) in various ways of worlding (see Springer, 2016). What, if not this, might overcome the crisis of separation?

## **The politics of education in a post-Covid imagination**

### **Judith Suissa**

Radical critics of state schooling reject top-down systems and instrumental views of learning and propose forms of education in which learning is part of the social fabric and in which schools are not separate places where children are cut off from the daily life of adults in communities.

The current Covid crisis has, by superficially and temporarily dissolving some of the “normal” separations between the school and the home, opened up an opportunity for reconsidering some radical alternatives to institutional schooling. Yet rather than challenging the dominant conflation between “education” and “schooling”, this new reality has, in many ways, simply reinforced it. While school closures around the world mean that millions of parents find themselves offering a form of home education, this is not driven by, or underpinned by, a pedagogical or political argument for self-directed learning. Rather, concerns about children “missing out on their education” while schools remain closed reflect this familiar conflation, and add to the pressure on parents to replicate the logic and discipline of the state school system in their living rooms; taking on the role of teacher as a distinct and additional role to that of parent or carer.

Contemporary concerns about the effects of lock-down on children’s social and emotional development remind us not just of the important role schools play beyond that of certification and imparting knowledge and skills, but of the possibilities of reimagining a different conception of education; one in which learning is not just something that goes on in designated places cut off from the lives of adults and communities, and in which schools, as one of the many sites in which education

can take place, become, in Dewey's words, "a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons" (Dewey, 1907, p. 27).

At the same time, the effects of school closures, and the very articulation of concerns about their closure, have shone a spotlight on the way in which state schooling systems reflect and reinforce existing inequalities. Dismantling the education system, in contemporary conditions, will not in itself address these inequalities and may exacerbate them. Yet rather than cleaving to the liberal promise of the state schooling system as the best defence against massive socio-economic inequality, I suggest starting from the radical position of anarchist prefigurative politics and the associated pragmatist ethics (see Franks 2006; Goodman, 1952). This requires us to see state schools as sites of pedagogical spaces for both critiquing the present and imagining a different future.

Children and teachers in such spaces face the difficult task of enacting more relational, democratic practices while addressing head-on the existing economic and racial injustices in our societies. Thus the collective project of imagining radical political alternatives in which learning can be more connected to families and their communities is a project that, at the same time, must attend to the political structures that need to be in place to ensure that communities do not become islands of privilege or deprivation, or create new hierarchies of their own.

### **A Sense of a Pause Ending**

#### **Janet Orchard**

"I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again." (Camus, 2005: 119)

Sisyphus's ceaseless toil offers a metaphor for a life bound up in ultimately pointless activity, with the potential tragedy of this situation only becoming apparent in rare moments of enlightenment. Is this extraordinary time one in which, briefly, a pause pervades the planet, as Gaydon has suggested?

Whether, or not, as individuals we identify with the existentialist position, and irrespective of our differences, the Myth of Sisyphus has helpfully bookended our writing collectively. The questions it provokes are open, the conversations it has stimulated around philosophy of education in a new key ongoing. Authors have risen to the challenge of thinking otherwise about the familiar in ways that have proved highly creative and stimulating.

For myself, I cannot share the pessimism of those who see their lives as being bound up in entirely ultimately pointless affairs. As a tenured academic at a prestigious university, I am privileged relative to those for whom such a condition is a reality and free, relative to them to engage in multiple personally enriching and socially valuable activities. In my own pandemic-driven pause, I have come to recognise how far my personal treadmill comprises *too much* opportunity for the fruitful and worthwhile, and that under lockdown, in frankly optimal conditions, I cannot achieve everything.

If - with Sisyphus - I recognise that to finish that list in itself is an absurd and futile dream, perhaps I can learn to abandon that martyrdom to such an undeserving and dispiriting cause. That said, I understand Arndt's (Peters et al 2020) concern to dissolve binaries, position ourselves 'in this together' and recognise many of Neusiedl's concerns about separation. None of us can yet know the impact of the pandemic on those wider structures within which we all operate, and which determine the extent of our possibility of agency. Will I feel as optimistic in six months, a year, going forwards?

Shah's call to use this time of potential realignment to attend to self-cultivation once again seems prescient. Mindful of caution that 'western' academics in the neo-Aristotelian tradition understand that Confucian thought may not be the 'same', nonetheless I have been thinking recently how poesis

is neglected in my own writing about practical wisdom and the flourishing professional life. Now seems a good time to reconsider the relationship of the aesthetic with the ethical.

Foregrounding the aesthetic in the experience of collectively writing this piece, I have found stitching the pieces together a hugely satisfying and ‘self-ful’ (Higgins, 2010) task, with titles which individual authors composed acting like stepping stones from one cluster of thoughts to another. Their eclecticism reminded me of Blake’s notion of “without contraries, no progression” that I have carried from my own exposure to poetry at school. Those stories we choose to tell under and about lockdown, as D’Olimpio makes clear, need to be attended to carefully as they will contribute to the history of philosophy of education during this period on to the next series of iterations.

Education as a burden has been carried, albeit imperfectly, throughout the pandemic in various ways across the world. That imperfection too is inescapable. Yet creativity has been seen in the ways in which many people have risen to the challenges presented by our mutual confinement with demonstrable resourcefulness and persistence. Parents and children have devised ingenious ways to keep fit in tiny indoor spaces and shared short films of themselves to entertain and educate others. Older people have engaged with technology perhaps for the first time; neighbours have engaged in new levels of neighbourliness. How might these green shoots of hope and possibility of collective endeavour be channelled positively to reform education in the ‘new’ and continually evolving normal, as Bennett postulates?

Foregrounding the ethical, life in lockdown has made me acutely conscious of my position of (considerable) white privilege. I am emerging fitter, healthier, further advantaged. I have no need to juggle home-schooling with paid work and am set up already to work easily and comfortably from home, with easy access to generous amounts of space and a large, and productive garden. Others cannot choose to do as I do. Others are hunched over laptops (if they have access to one) at the end of their bed or squeezed in besides a washing machine at a kitchen table or worktop. Burdens; wretchedness; neither have come in equal measure. As Çelik argues, citizenship education has been neglected, marginalised in conventional schooling. Future citizens need to be able to examine these inequalities rationally, evaluate arguments that either challenge or defend them.

The potential power of political equality can be seen here in how differently each member of the ‘Covid Collective’ has responded to the same brief! There can be no sense that this article has produced ‘group think’ (Peters et al, 2016). On one hand, Williams’ reflections are focused on potential loss: of teachers and schools as ‘oases of humanity’; and the power of education to provide access to happy, nurturing, and protective environments. On the other, Suissa reminds us that critics see problems and limitations with schools and proposes, with Neusiedl, a sense of a radical alternative with future promise through the imaginaries they share of a new order, post-Covid. The global crisis invites varying responses: revolution, conservation or evolution and reform. Certainly, across the collective, as far as education is concerned, we do not agree the best path to take.

Deliberately choosing to recruit authors through a system, rather than relying on existing relationships, entailed a calculated risk intended to “de-elevate” hierarchical academic relationships across what I have playfully chosen to call the ‘Covid Collective’ as a team identity for an otherwise quite disparate group of philosophers of education. New academic friendships have emerged from this shared endeavour and generosity of spirit has dominated the correspondence. In the end, ‘collegiality’, at its best implies care, respect, and a willingness to listen to and learn from others, as Roberts suggests (Peters et al, 2020). These qualities have provided, in Roberts’s words, the *ethical heart* of our collective writing project.

## **The Covid Collective': A Review**

**Michael A Peters**

What impressed me about this collection of essays is that all authors indicated a stronger relevance and greater (rather than lesser) role for philosophy of education in the time of coronavirus: a set of reflections on the nature of the collective dimension of human behaviour, the need for solidarity, and the collective basis for institutions including the centrality of schooling and democracy. Camus's Sisyphus haunts the collection – the absurd condition based on the contradiction of human reason in an unreasonable world tries in vain to impose meaning and order on existence. Does a philosophical response to Covid-19 mean that we should accept and try to live in a world devoid of meaning or purpose? This might constitute a sympathetic analysis of contemporary nihilism accentuated in a time of coronavirus to emphasise the fundamental existential issues in ethical and political terms -- to seize the moment to reflect on the meaning and value of education (Philip Gaydon). For Kevin Williams the crisis has led to questioning of online teaching; for Pip Bennett the onset of the virus prompted deliberation over what neoliberalism has taught us to see as 'normal'; for Laura D'Olimpio it is a hopeful narrative analysis of the pandemic aftermath in terms of the stories we invent about ourselves while combating the circulation of conspiracies; and for Raşit Çelik that moment offers a possible renewal of political philosophy and citizenship education; for Qasir Shah, it is the ethics of self-cultivation based on a relational concept of the person based on a Confucian perspective. Christoph Neusiedl invites us to consider 'a post-Covid imagination of education' as an expression of a hugely unequal global system, again, to emphasise a new relational mode of 'thinking-knowing-feeling-being'. Judith Suissa also poses the question of a post-Covid imagination to analyse and understand the emotional and pedagogical lock-down effects of the virus and radical political alternatives. Janet Orchard who organised the collection, returns to the myth of Sisyphus to suggest that the 'burden of education' may be usefully approached through a creative response that reconsiders 'the relationship of the aesthetic with the ethical' reflected in the very act of writing together that 'at its best implies care, respect, and a willingness to listen to and learn from others.'

## **A Covid Collective of PESGB (Open Review)**

**Marek Tesar**

There is much to learn from this Covid Collective, which contributes significantly to the growing field of Philosophy of Education in a New Key papers (Hung et al, 2020; Jackson et al 2020; Jandric et al. 2020; Waghid et al. 2020; Kato et al. 2020; Papastephanou et al. 2020). This is a very special contribution to philosophy of education scholarship. It revolves around the PESGB society, and the collective writing is grounded both where the paper begins and where it ends: with Camus' retelling of the legend of Sisyphus. There is something powerful about this collective, in which Orchard argues 'We must find out what this moment, this breath, this pause is revealing, and use it to strike a new key in philosophy; in education'. Williams ponders whether 'The necessity for teaching to be conducted on-line during the Covid-19 emergency has prompted consideration of whether philosophy of education should be conducted in a new key' and outlines the possibilities in which in-person becomes powerful non-replacable pedagogies. Bennett reminds us that 'this 'new normal' is an opportunity for philosophy of education in a new key to make a significant contribution' and argues how this 'new normal' can be transformative for education and learning. D'Olimpio argues that 'educationalists have a vital role to play in considering which stories are shared in the classroom and engaged with in a critical and compassionate manner that also allows for pupils' thoughts and experiences to be discussed' as we will have to continue trying to make meaning in this local and global pandemic. I have really enjoyed Çelik's thinking, where he sees 'one key consideration will be to

promote reasoning on how it is possible to be both an individual and a citizen; another, how can all be both free and equal'. Shah, in the time of Covid, calls for the 'the Confucian tradition's conceptualisation of what it is to be human is underpinned by the idea of the person-in-relation' – a recurring theme in these Philosophy of a New Key writings that relate to calling for considering wider aspects than just Western notions of philosophy. Suissa urges us 'to see state schools as sites of pedagogical spaces for both critiquing the present and imagining a different future'. Perhaps this is one the most powerful messages of this fascinating collective; the invitation to imagine, to re-think, to become a different future, something that is so meaningful when writing with the legend of Sisyphus.

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