Learning in a time of cholera: Imagining a future for public education

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Abstract
This article considers some theoretical resources for resistance to neoliberalised schooling and develops principles for reimagining the common school. Whilst relevant internationally, it is situated in the particular context of England, as a global epicentre of school reform – a marketised and largely privatised system where the net of surveillance and control is tightly woven from assessment data, inspections and performance pay, and where the curriculum has been systematically divorced from young people's life experience and concerns. To clarify the meaning of this crisis, the paper draws on some key ideas from the Marxist tradition, particularly class and alienation, situating neoliberal policy within the crises of late capitalism. The paper looks in two directions for resources to help overcome the current impasse. Firstly, it highlights the strengths of more creative and emancipatory pedagogies in earlier decades of English curriculum development, including the value of learners' experience, vernacular language, dialogic teaching and play. Secondly it examines the northern European paradigm of curriculum construction focused on more holistic human development (Bildung), focusing particularly on the work of Wolfgang Klafki. The value of this theorisation of curriculum and pedagogy is highlighted through contrasts with the current drive towards a 'knowledge-based curriculum'.

Keywords
Neoliberalism, common school, class, alienated learning, Enlightenment pedagogy, Klafki, exemplary learning

Introduction
This paper was first conceived before COVID-19 became part of our everyday vocabulary. Within months the world was in the middle of an unprecedented political / medical / economic crisis, which in the UK followed a collapse of hope for alternative social and educational policy after the Brexit-dominated general election. Looking further afield, the pandemic added an extra layer of
pain to the millions of people across the world who were already suffering the multiple overlapping crises of global neoliberal capitalism through hunger, homelessness, war, migration and climate change (Davis, 2006; Foster, 2002; Malm, 2016).

The focus of this special edition is to consider ways of overcoming the educational problems resulting from neoliberal policy. This involves far more than organisational change: the central question is how young people can gain an understanding of the world which will make their lives healthy, satisfying and sustainable. It requires a perspective which is simultaneously about individuals, humanity as a whole, and the planet we inhabit. Educators have no reason to be optimistic but a great need for hope.

This is not the moment for grand designs or detailed plans for a new type of public education system or common school (see, for example, the special issue of Forum, 2019 for more detailed discussion). It is nonetheless essential to shine a clear light through the present gloom. (I am conscious of using metaphors which resonate with Enlightenment, a theme to be explored later.)

Theory is essential to understand the structures and forces at work below surface phenomena (Bhaskar, 1978). The first half of this paper attempts to engage with concepts which are key to understanding the structures and forces defining the present situation, in order to clarify how a new ‘common school’ might relate to society as a whole. In this situation, without wishing to lose the stimulation of ideas from cultural postmodernism and its offshoots, I return increasingly to the rich Marxist tradition which has sought to make coherent sense of diverse fields of social existence. Without it, I suggest we are like the six blind men in the Indian fable, each reaching out for a particular surface of the elephant without any idea of what they are dealing with (Saxe, 1872). I begin by contextualising the educational crisis in terms of capitalism, class and alienation. I will argue that the neoliberalisation of education can only be understood adequately if its relationship to capitalism is made visible, which takes us well beyond complaints about datafied accountability.

This paper then looks in two directions for resources with which to think beyond the current impasse in English education. Firstly, it looks to the period (roughly the 1960s- to 1980s) before the neoliberal / neoconservative attacks on progressive and emancipatory practices – a period frequently misrepresented but notable for its attempts to build a curriculum for the newly established comprehensive schools. The determining values of the period were that knowledge should be made accessible to all pupils; that young people’s life experience should be respected and broadened; that pedagogic relations should become more dialogic; and that young minds should be opened up to alternative thinking and imaginaries through play, critical literacy and the creative arts. (As many readers will recognise, this summary dissents substantially from Michael Young’s view, see Wrigley, 2017; Wrigley, 2018b.)

Secondly (starting with the section Pedagogy and Enlightenment) it draws on German educational theory, and particularly Wolfgang’s Klafki’s revitalisation of Enlightenment pedagogical thinking. This may appear surprising, given the frequent disparagement of the Enlightenment in social and cultural theory since the 1970s. (See Davidson, 2006 for a critical appraisal of this trend, and Reed, 2015 for a positive re-evaluation of the German Enlightenment.) Historically however, it should not be surprising that a movement to overturn the residual epistemologies of feudalism, with its reliance on ‘dogmas and traditions, authoritarian churches and despotic states’ (Krüger, 1990: 7), should have some resonance with our current struggles against a repressive political configuration. Rather than discarding the Enlightenment, Klafki builds creatively on its pedagogical thinking to defend a collective, collaborative and socially responsible vision of education, an emancipatory vision of human growth and social progress, and the urgent need to address the ‘big problems’ of our age. Klafki’s renewed Enlightenment pedagogy, we should note, runs counter to the leading concepts of postmodern theory (the death of the subject, the end of history, the impossibility of grand narratives) but in any case, these are concepts which sit
uneasily with a vision of public education oriented to human development (Krüger, 1990: 8; see also Best and Kellner, 1991).

England is a major epicentre of what Sahlberg (2011) calls the Global Education Reform Movement or GERM – a virus which has spread, to different degrees, across the world, marked by nets of surveillance and control woven from assessment data and other techniques of top-down accountability; and operating within an educational economy characterised by market competition and privatisation. Whilst claiming to protect even the most vulnerable and ‘close the gap’, the English system shows strong exclusionary effects. In a thoroughly datafied system (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2018), official accountability calculations fail to weigh the extent of suffering, disadvantage and social despair of many young people, and consequently punish schools in challenged neighbourhoods (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017). Very little progress has been made in closing the attainment gap (Andrews et al., 2017), which is not particularly surprising given the degree of economic polarisation. It is a cruel irony that pressures from a punitive accountability regime have led to many schools excluding low-scoring students by devious means so that they don’t damage the school statistics (Weale, 2019), or using a zero tolerance approach to school discipline to drive such students away (Titheradge, 2018). Public education has been hollowed out through datafication and dislocated from local neighbourhoods and democratic control. The system is far from providing an equitable or child-friendly environment, let alone preparing students for the social and environmental challenges they will face.

Crude forms of accountability, curriculum reduced to ‘basics’, knowledge as inert facts, pedagogies of repetition and memorisation, and punitive disciplinary regimes are not exactly new. These phenomena belong to other phases of capitalism, not neoliberalism alone, although they have certainly taken on new forms. Nearly 15 years ago, I presented the following argument in the introduction to a short book optimistically called Another School is Possible:

Capitalism has always had a problem with education. Since the Industrial Revolution and the early days of mass schooling for working class children, the ruling class needed to increase the skills of future workers but was terrified that they might become articulate, knowledgeable and independent-minded . . .

Times have changed, but the basic principle remains: capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what’s really going on. (Wrigley, 2006: 7-8)

This is as true in a supposedly post-industrial ‘knowledge society’ as it was in the iron and steam age, and critical policy analysis in this context needs clarity on the political-economic roots of current problems. Our response also has to be pedagogically oriented to holistic human development, both individual and collective, not simply the production of human capital (Becker, 1975).

**Neoliberal capitalism, class and alienated learning**

**What is neoliberalism?**

It is commonplace, and appropriate, to ascribe the current crisis of public education to neoliberalism but that is not without problems. The purpose of this section is to explore the diverse manifestations and effects of neoliberalism, in order to relate some apparently contradictory school reforms to the economics of capitalism in a state of crisis (Peters, 2011). Schools are affected directly or indirectly by a nexus of policy moves including privatisation of public assets, contraction and centralisation of democratic institutions, reductions in progressive taxation, restrictions on labour organisation, labour market deregulation, and active encouragement of competitive and entrepreneurial modes of
relation across the public and commercial sectors. There are apparent contradictions between centralisation and localisation, which reflect a wider confusion about the role of the neoliberal state.

On a superficial reading, the originators of neoliberalism in their call for public welfare spending to shrink, appeared to be explicitly anti-state, yet it soon became clear that a strong state was needed to establish markets, as well as a traditional policing function nationally and globally (see Peters, 2011; Harvey, 2005). Indeed, the first realisation of neoliberalism was Pinochet’s coup in Chile, which created an experimental testbed for Chicago neoliberalists such as Friedman. David Harvey is able to reconcile apparent contradictions between the expansion and shrinking of the state by recognising that, in depth, the neoliberal project is about capitalism increasing its strength:

I’ve always treated neoliberalism as a political project carried out by the corporate capitalist class as they felt intensely threatened both politically and economically towards the end of the 1960s into the 1970s. They desperately wanted to launch a political project that would curb the power of labour. (Harvey, 2016)

The drive to maximise profits can involve both a shrinkage of state spending and control and an increase in state powers to deregulate labour markets, repress trade unions and privatise public assets. Neoliberalism faces both ways with regard to the state, including school structures: in England, the centrifugal drive towards school ‘autonomy’ (financial, managerial) has fused seamlessly with the drive to centralise and standardise the curriculum and school inspection.

The diffuse forms of power which Foucault analysed are not ‘post-Fordist’, if that suggests the replacement of tight external control by self-regulation: England’s teachers are both monitored and self-regulate in a Taylorist panopticon lubricated by biopower. Foucault’s otherwise illuminating accounts of diffuse power (discipline, biopower, self-regulation, etc.) risk distracting us from the intensification of top-down domination and economic power.

Foucault’s account made the overall framework of bourgeois domination and the repressive armour of ideological practices disappear into thin air . . . Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ thus loses its critical edge on both sides: as it obfuscates capitalist domination, it also severs the aspect of self-conduct and self-techniques from the perspective of collective agency and struggles for social justice, and narrows them down to a neoliberal ‘do-it-yourself’ of ideology. (Rehmann, 2016: 144)

A focus on governmentality alone does not explain all facets of the current assault on education, which should be seen as part of a strategic class offensive by capital (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism is a project designed to free capitalism from the class compromises of the postwar period (after 1945) and return to the (mythical) purity of an earlier (19th century) stage before trade unions and public welfare. (See also critiques of Foucault’s politics in Zamora and Behrent, 2016; Olssen, 2004.)

Capitalism’s transformation of schooling, as evidenced by the thoroughly neoliberalised English school system, is multifaceted, involving a number of complementary moves of transferring ownership and control, imitation of business methods, and reorientation of purpose. These include:

1) privatisation of institutions, albeit funded by taxation (academies and ‘free schools’), including covert forms of private profit
2) management practices drawn from private sector companies (‘New Public Management’)
3) state-promoted governance by competition, through artificial markets of parental choice stimulated by spurious quality measures (publication of test and inspection results)
4) deprofessionalisation, so that teachers become ‘deliverers’ of curriculum and child management
5) the inculcation of a relentless work ethic among learners as they strive towards improving their chances in the job market
6) exclusion of less productive / compliant students, and perhaps most important,
7) curriculum design which dedicates teaching and learning overwhelmingly to the production of human capital. (Ball, 2008: 11-12)

The first six factors make it difficult to move beyond the curricular and pedagogical limits of the seventh, and create a formidable challenge for educators wishing to imagine a school which serves the common interest, a place where knowledge can be developed and shared for tackling urgent social and environmental challenges. The challenge is even more difficult because educational degradation is ideologically disguised as ‘raising standards’, and increased state control is justified in terms of enabling social mobility.

The meaning of education policy changes can only be revealed by relating them to macro-level political economy. For example, there is substantial concern at present about the plan to test four-year-olds in English schools, but its significance cannot be understood simply at the surface level of an extension of the accountability system. Indeed, ‘human capital’ arguments are even used to justify the expansion of nursery schools, and well established early education pedagogies are undermined (Moss, 2020). These changes in early education have been properly described as ‘schoolification’ and ‘datafication’ (Bradbury, 2018; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2018) but in politico-economic terms they can also be explained in terms of the colonisation of childhood, a form of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2005: 159–165): children and young people are being dispossessed of non-economic activity and subjectivities. It is symbolic that campaigns in both the USA and England run under the slogan that children are ‘more than a score’ (Hagopian, 2014; More Than A Score, n.d.).

Structural changes are necessary, including the return of local democratic control of schools, the removal of incentives to inter-school competition and exclusion of hard-to-teach students, and the restoration of teachers’ professional authority. The final aim, however, is to create space for ethics of human flourishing and an enlightened view of education as human development beyond the parameters of capitalism.

Class, politics and education

No discussion of public education or the ‘common school’ can do without the word ‘class’, since deep divisions in society intrinsically put at risk the commonality of educational institutions. The ‘class’ word needs untangling, however, given its various meanings and some problematic usages in sociology and beyond.

Firstly, the capitalist class does not often figure in the discourse of educational sociology, which is fixated on the distinction between ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’, a binary marked chiefly by types of employment (manual vs non-manual). Secondly, much of our sensitivity as educators has been devoted to the injustices of recognition surrounding racism, disability, gender and sexuality, often disconnected from class and poverty (Fraser, 2019). Finally, in political theory during the past 50 years, the labour movement does not often figure as agentive, and political theorists have preferred to look for other possible political subjects or sources of agency: Hardt and Negri’s ‘multitude’ (2004); Rancière’s ‘those who have no part’ (1999); Mouffe’s ‘people’ (2019), for example. Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2019) appear to ascribe agency to arbitrary associations of those whose discontents can be discursively directed at the ‘oligarchy’ (Sotiris, 2019). McNay (2014) argues that, even among those ‘agonist’ political theorists who hold on to the hope of revolt, there is a
failure to think through the process of politicisation – of becoming agentive. Zamora (2016) and Amselle (2016) trace this predicament back to the post-1968 despair of French intellectuals.

Eagleton ascribes the diverse exotic intellectual and cultural shoots of postmodernism to a deep political despair:

Imagine a radical movement which had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime, if even then . . . What would be the likely reaction of the political left to such a defeat? (Eagleton, 1996)

He remarks on ‘an upsurge of interest in the margins and crevices of the system’ and a ‘celebration of the marginal and minority as positive in themselves’, judging these as indicative of a fear of any comprehensive theory of the world. The result, however, is a failure to connect cultural phenomena with the broader politico-economic forces at work in our contemporary world:

Not looking for totality is just code for not looking at capitalism. (Eagleton, 1996: 2-11)

The assumed disappearance of the working class as a political force has major consequences for educational practice and thinking, as well as politics, as I will argue later. It becomes difficult to conceive of a ‘new public school’ without a sense of hope or agency for its pupils. To imagine that the working class has degraded into what Standing (2011) calls ‘the precariat’ is tantamount to colluding with Conservative images of dysfunctional families and media ‘chav’ stereotypes (Jones, 2011); indeed, even the most hardened Conservatives continue to promote the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) of individual ‘social mobility’ (Littler, 2018) and ‘aspiration’.

Much of the confusion, both in academic circles and the wider population, derives from an equation of ‘working class’ with manual workers, and sometimes less skilled manual workers. Mistaking the appearance with the deep meaning of class became problematic from the 1960s onwards when technological development meant a greater need for non-manual workers and university-educated professional employees. The growing complexity of production has led to an increase in workers who are not directly or visibly productive but collectively work to generate profit (see Meiksins, 1981; Wood, 1998: 34-43). It is seriously misleading to think in terms of most white-collar employees and professionals such as teachers constituting a ‘new middle class’ (Burris, 1986).

We may – to some extent – live in a ‘knowledge society’ but this does not mean capitalism is over and done with. Eagleton puts his finger on the problem:

Marxism has not been put out of business because Etonians have started to drop their aitches . . . There is a telling contrast between the dressed-down matiness of the modern office and a global system in which distinctions of wealth and power yawn wider than ever . . . While the chief executive smooths his jeans over his sneakers, over one billion on the planet go hungry every day. (Eagleton, 2011: 162)

As he points out, even in the 19th century the largest group of employees were domestic servants, mainly female, rather than industrial workers:

The working class, then, is not always male, brawny and handy with a sledgehammer. (Eagleton, 2011: 169)

Many economic and cultural changes have occurred in the transition from industrial to ‘late’ or ‘postmodern’ capitalism, but the essential nature of capitalist relations of production remains. Capitalism extracted profits from workers who painted flowers on crockery in the 19th century, and
now exploits those who produce images on computer screens in the 21st. Capitalism is promiscuous in the ways it can extract profit – in the production of solid objects, surfaces, energy or ideas. Drucker (1994: 64) made a basic category error in concluding that knowledge had replaced both labour and capital and that the ‘knowledge society’ is ‘post-capitalist’. Even in terms of working conditions and managerial control, Taylorism has been reinvented for white-collar and professional workplaces.

This has various implications for understanding schooling. Although it is true that manual workers’ children tend to gain lower qualifications than others, this is not a demarcation of class, in a Marxist sense: there is no fundamental difference of interest between employees whether they work with hands or brain (in any case, a dubious distinction). Despite the efforts of individual teachers and some schools, almost all children in state-funded schools are largely subjected to an education which is not in their class interests: schools, for the most part, teach uncritical obedience and fail to prepare for active citizenship. This is a major obstacle to be overcome.

Educators have a serious responsibility to address the consequences of child poverty, inasmuch as that is possible – a challenge which is better conceived in terms of empowerment rather than remediation. (See Smyth and Wrigley, 2013 for an analysis of deficit beliefs and their consequences.) Teachers also have a duty to counter racial and gender prejudice in its many forms. A Marxist understanding of class leads to the understanding that this is solidarity, not charity – activity by one section of the working class for another, not ‘sympathy for the unfortunate’. Furthermore, this solidarity extends to educating young people to resist the social and environmental damage arising from developed (neoliberal / global) capitalism.

**Alienated labour, alienated learning**

Preparation for adult work has always been an important function of education systems, albeit with different degrees of specificity and urgency. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any future society which does not equip its young people for contributing to their own and society’s sustenance – economic life in its broadest sense. What characterises our present situation is the extent to which the production of ‘human capital’ (Becker, 1975) has eclipsed all other aims of education (Ball, 2008: 11-12). This has impacted the school curriculum in terms of which knowledge and skills are privileged and which are marginalised (see also Wrigley, 2014). In the English context, it has also resulted in pedagogical regression to obsolete forms of alienated learning.

I will attempt to use the word *alienation* with some precision. Alienation does not simply mean feeling ill at ease; more precisely it concerns a material as well as psychological displacement and disempowerment. The use of the word in English can be traced back to the 15th century in various senses (estrangement from God, isolation from state or community) but including the economic sense of transferable ownership of property (Williams, 1983). This last sense became particularly salient with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, when common land and church property became ‘alienable’, i.e. transferable to private ownership through gift or sale. The result was enclosures and clearances, an historic turning point since ‘the separation of the peasantry from nonmarket access to land’ was ‘the fundamental condition of proletarianization’ (Moore, 2016: 86). It resulted in peasant farmers migrating to cities and overseas, and has created a ‘planet of slums’ (Davis, 2006) in our own day. Marx’s use of the concept, in various synonyms (*Entfremdung, Trennung, Absonderung, veräußern*, etc., see Mészáros, 1970: 73) depends on this economic meaning but stretches across a range of human action and experience. In his *Economic and Philosopihc Manuscripts* (1844) we find four main aspects: the alienation of human beings from (1) nature, (2) their own productive activity, (3) their ‘species being’, as members of humanity, and (4) each other. (For detailed exploration, see Mészaros, 1970.)
A key meaning relates to conditions of work under capitalism, exacerbated in factory conditions marked by division and intensification of labour. According to Marx, workers have a diminished sense of purpose because they are selling their labour power and have no direction over the products of their work. Thus work – the word is seen positively by Marx, as a defining characteristic of humanity – loses its significance for the worker. The alienating loss of control over the work process in Fordist/Taylorist mass production, from the early 20th century, now extends to many white collar jobs and, as far as is possible and tolerated, to professions such as teaching. It is in this sense particularly that I wish to analyse normative patterns of school learning.

Some years ago I raised a concern about the alienated nature of much school learning in these words:

Too much traditional school learning has been a form of alienated labour, like working in a factory:

- You’re told what to do
- You’re told how long to do it for
- You hand over the product, not to a real user or audience but to the teacher
- In exchange, the teacher gives back a mark - a kind of surrogate wage. (Wrigley, 2006: 105)

Borrowing the terminology of Marxist economics, learning is seen to have an exchange value, never a use value. The extrinsic rewards (stickers, merit certificates) are increasingly meaningless to you as you grow older – neither the stickers nor merit certificates will buy the things you want.

This emphasis on extrinsic rewards as an incentive to improving results needs to be supplemented, if not replaced, by a transformation of school work so that it becomes intrinsically rewarding, with students writing for a real audience – even if this is just the rest of the class – or for publication, or presenting ideas on a real problem to those who are genuinely looking for an answer. (Wrigley, 2006:105)

The problem, needless to say, is exacerbated when learning is explicitly driven by the need to satisfy data requirements by maximising the school’s pass rate on standardised tests and examinations. Under such conditions, both teachers and pupils dis/engage in alienated labour.

**Bringing the learner back in**

This may be the default tradition of school learning but it is not inevitable. In my first book, *The Power to Learn* (Wrigley, 2000), based on case studies of ten successful multilingual urban schools in areas of poverty, I identified a recurrent pattern of students being asked to present their ideas, in diverse genres and media, to other students and the wider community. The sense of product, presentation or performance marks a substantial step in overcoming patterns of alienated learning in schools.

Many pedagogical practices have been developed to give learners a greater sense of voice and agency. In *Another School is Possible* (Wrigley, 2006: 105-9), I pointed to several ‘open architectures’ which both sustain a learning community and enhance students’ autonomy, specifically project method, storyline and challenges. The list can be extended to include various drama-based pedagogies such as ‘Mantle of the Expert’ (Taylor, 2016); live and digital simulation games; design and technology projects where students work collectively on fulfilling genuine social needs (e.g. designing and making play equipment for a kindergarten); and various kinds of authentic writing. The emphasis is not on removing the teacher but on a shift of energy from direct instruction to initial preparation (establishing the situation, introducing a problem, assembling resources),
dialogue and feedback. These pedagogical forms are emancipatory not because the teacher’s role is diminished (cf. Biesta’s discussion of Freire and Rancière, 2017) but because the learner’s activity is enhanced.

In particular, the creative arts provide frequent opportunities for collaborative and creative activity leading to presentation or performance. This is true whether artistic expression is taught as discrete school subjects or used as techniques (e.g. drama, media production) in other curriculum areas. It is no accident that both kinds of creative involvement have been squeezed out by the accountability measures designed by Michael Gove (Reclaiming Schools, 2019).

The arts also embody a spirit of play, not as simple imitation but creating fictional spaces to alter reality. Play, in this sense of imagined worlds, is valuable at all stages of education, and provides the possibility of open exploration of possibilities, trying out options for change. Sahlberg and Doyle (2019: 312) evaluate play in terms of use of self-directedness, intrinsic motivation, positive emotions, process orientation and use of imagination. Wartofsky (1973: 208-209) wrote about rich forms of modelling such as drama, novels and simulations which have a particular power for learning. Despite their apparent realism, he recognised the significance of them being ‘off-line’, i.e. a free space separate from the real world, without the constraints of economic reality. Because they are not reality itself, these activities provide opportunities for experimentation, for playing out a range of possibilities not directly encountered within the constraints of real life. This matches well the idea of play presented by Vygotsky (1978: 92-104).

This is not to discount the importance of conceptual or abstract knowledge, but to argue for a dialectic between (real-world or vicarious) experiences and abstract concepts. We can contrast this with the dessicated scraps of ‘knowledge’ privileged by followers of Hirsch (e.g. Core Knowledge Foundation, 2013) or, indeed Michael Young’s insistence on a rigorous divorce between academic knowledge and vernacular experience:

If education is to be emancipatory . . . it has to be based on a break with experience . . . The curriculum should exclude the everyday knowledge of students. (Young et al., 2014: 88, 97; see also the extended discussion in Wrigley, 2017 or 2018b)

Young’s insistence on this separation simply reinforces the exclusion and misrecognition of working-class and indigenous cultures, and reinforces the barriers conceptualised by Bourdieu as ‘cultural capital’.

Emancipatory learning must be both rooted in popular experience and give access to high-status knowledge which can itself be liberating. Young people’s development is richer and more authentic when cognitive development is grounded in experience and activity and when disciplinary knowledge is used to illuminate reality:

Such environments produce high-quality cognitive development, education for citizenship, and authentic engagement and motivation – knowledge that is more than a drizzle of inert facts and mind-numbing worksheets. They produce learning which is simultaneously grounded and critical. (Wrigley et al., 2012: 197)

The above argument aligns with Freire’s (1972) challenge to the spirit of capitalism and his metaphor of a ‘banking’ model of teaching – teaching viewed as a depositing of ready-made packages of knowledge into the heads of passive learners. His own literacy teaching practices are marked by respectful dialogic relationships, connecting with learners’ experience, raising problems, and problematising taken-for-granted aspects of learners’ lives. It was central to Freire’s pedagogy to identify words which resonated most in the everyday lives of his adult literacy students, words which
encapsulate ‘generative themes’ and which formed the basis of dialogic discussion (Freire, 1974). The importance of dialogic classroom communications has been a live issue since the 1970s, most recently articulated in Alexander (2020). This works against the grain of government policy in England; children’s spoken language is barely mentioned in the national curriculum for primary schools, and no longer recognised in examinations for 16-year-olds attending state-funded secondary schools.

Related to this is the teacher’s attitude towards the vernacular language of students and their families, an issue which was strongly theorised by teachers in England and elsewhere in the 1960s and 70s. (For a rich source, see the collected edition of Harold Rosen’s writings, which relate pedagogical to political perspectives, Richmond, 2017). Rosen and his colleagues rebelled against the assumption that speech other than Standard English (local dialects, creoles, etc.) should be ‘cured, cleansed, purged of deformities rather than extended, enriched, developed’ (Rosen, 1981: 75). English as a school subject became, for a while, a curricular space where the lives of all working-class students, their families and communities, were allowed to enter, but although the curriculum began in the local streets, it didn’t end as a naive celebration of the here and now: English became a curriculum subject where students’ critical and creative capacities were strongly developed. There was no contradiction in those pedagogical practices between a sense of place and opening new horizons.

The above argument has focused on the avoidance of alienation in terms of pedagogic practice – the classroom equivalent of alienated labour as understood by Marx. To hold on to the breadth of Marx’s analysis, as explained by Mészáros (1970), human beings have become alienated from (1) nature, (2) their own productive activity, (3) their ‘species being’, as members of humanity, and (4) each other. Place-based education (see, for example, Gruenewald and Smith, 2008) has a vital role in helping overcome the first, with acute urgency given the pace of global warming and environmental degradation. With regard to (3) and (4), it is time, as Ravitch (2010) remarks, to restore the meaning of schools as communities, as well as building threads of solidarity with people beyond our immediate acquaintance. This is not, as Mouffe (2019) seems to suggest, an arbitrary process of gathering ‘chains of equivalence’ between the demands of different social groups; it is the recognition of the material impact which global / neoliberal capitalism is having on all our lives.

Curriculum, Enlightenment and Wolfgang Klafki: Insights from the German Didaktik tradition

Pedagogy and Enlightenment

A recurrent theme in this paper has been the right of young people to authentic participation and presence in their own education. This is hindered by an accountability system which reduces learners to test data, and is regarded as unimportant by a teachers’ initiative (ResearchED) closely allied to government. Learners are reduced to passivity by the strong emphasis on ‘direct teaching’ and the emphasis on memorisation.

It is unfortunate that some progressive-leaning academics have sought to transform the school curriculum towards a focus on ‘knowledge’ divorced from learners’ lives. For different reasons, both Hirsch (1988) and Young (2013) seek to furnish less privileged young people with a reified ‘knowledge’ detached from their lifeworld; it is by no means clear how this ‘powerful knowledge’ will empower (see extended critique in Wrigley, 2017). What is at stake is a view of knowledge which divorces matters of fact from matters of concern and care, producing (as Arendt, 1964, recognised in Eichmann) a cultivated thoughtlessness in which the world does not matter. As Deng (2015) proposes:
I argue that if the central aim of education is the development of intellectual and moral powers or capacities of students, then disciplinary knowledge should not be viewed as an end in itself or something for delivery and acquisition but an important resource for achieving such an aim. Furthermore, it needs a theory of content that concerns how knowledge is selected and transformed into curriculum content, what educational potential content has, and how such potential can be disclosed or unlocked.

Deng points to the German tradition of Didaktik, centred in the Enlightenment concept of Bildung (human formation, all-round intellectual and moral development) for resolving these difficulties. Similarly, Friesen (2018) argues that knowledge in itself is insufficient for building a meaningful curriculum: we need to work out how knowledge might be ‘mobilized educationally’ (729) which necessarily includes consideration of students’ subjective relation to the knowledge. For these reasons, educators must consider that ‘Social media’ or ‘climate change’. . . may possess a rather different ‘contemporaneity’ for young students than they might for their teachers or parents. In grappling with these and other perhaps more mundane topics, students and children bring their own value and can even be said to understand these in their own way. It is students and student subjectivity, in short, that plays a significant role in realizing the utility of any given content as resource for intellectual and moral development. (Friesen, 2018: 731)

Friesen adds (distancing himself from Deng):

I believe that overcoming any crisis in curriculum studies does not mean leaving behind questions such as race, ethnicity or sexuality in our increasingly diverse classrooms, but in understanding what such diversity can bring. (731)

Friesen looks to the German tradition of Bildung-centred Didaktik for these reasons, for reconnecting knowledge with students and teachers as culturally situated human beings (see also Ryen, 2020), and for looking into the detail of knowledge selection. For similar reasons, I engage here with the work of Wolfgang Klafki (perhaps Germany’s best known curriculum scholar but almost unknown in the English research literature) as a resource for imagining a future ‘common school’. (See Westbury et al., 2000 for a rich collection of sources.)

There are good reasons to question the Enlightenment for a tendency to be overoptimistic about human progress, to overemphasise the power of reason, to have too general a sense of ‘man’ which neglects subaltern (female, Black, colonial) experiences and interests. However, I wish to argue in this section that there are dangers of throwing out babies with bathwater (McLaren, 1991: 144-151). It is certainly an error, encountered among some social and education theorists, to condemn the Enlightenment out of hand, even without much detailed knowledge of its major thinkers. This section aims to propose a more positive evaluation of Enlightenment thinking and its relationship to the educational process. Particular reference is made to Germany (Reed, 2015), and the relationship between pedagogy and Bildung in the work of Wolfgang Klafki. I would like to include this among key resources for resistance against the dominant ‘common sense’ of neoliberal functionalism in public education.

There is an ongoing danger of regarding Enlightenment as a monolithic body of thought, despite the scholarship of Jonathan Israel (2001, 2010). The close relationship between calls for social reform, independent thinking and a humane education has scarcely been examined in the English education research; even in terms of British educational history, there is too little awareness of the connections between progressive educational reform (particularly the ‘dissenting academies’), science and support for radical political reform (Oelkers, 2010; Roe, 1997; Rössner, 1988). It has been all too easy, since the late 1970s, to assume a direct continuity between rationality or science
or the belief in progress and the horrors of the Holocaust, Gulag or Hiroshima (Christofferson, 2016). Of course, there are aspects of 18th century Enlightenment thought which have transmuted or been drawn upon by 20th century authoritarians (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002), but that is quite a different argument from the assumption of some kind of discursive determinism. At the very least, we need to recognise that enlightened ideas were not carried forward in a vacuum, but selectively developed in a society structured by exploitation and oppression.

Though some key thinkers were compromised in their thinking and had close links with monarchy, the more progressive and democratic ideas of the Enlightenment developed in the late 18th century into a radical campaign for liberating humanity from the power of aristocracy and church (see Israel, 2010). Even thinkers of the ‘moderate Enlightenment’ were closely concerned with pedagogical thinking. Exceeding his university’s requirement to give at least one series of lectures on education, Kant gave numerous series, advocating for public funding of education, against corporal punishment, for a kind of secular morality, and above all that the child must learn actively to think (Reed, 2015: 141). In his famous essay of 1784, ‘What is Enlightenment’, he wrote: ‘Dare to know: have the courage to use your own understanding.’ In other words, dare to think for yourself. This would require courage, freedom and . . . education, a new kind of education which encouraged independence of thought. This was closely connected with a hope for progress. Kant held that:

> Human beings can only become through education. They are nothing but what their upbringing makes of them . . . . It is exciting to reflect that human nature will be improved through education. (Kant, 1968: 697, cited Krüger, 1990: 7)

Such arguments were commonly articulated by educators and philosophers in terms of Bildung (human formation). Education is about human development: development of the individual and of human society as a whole. Human life, with its fullness of experiences, is itself educational. The educational pioneers of that time argued that human beings cannot be educated ‘by commands, instructions, warnings or punishments . . . this requires creativity, challenges, advice and support’ (Basedow, quoted by Schmitt 2003: 120-121). Basedow’s school, established in 1774, became the inspiration for progressive schools across Germany, with an influence on educational pioneers such as Froebel and Robert Owen throughout the following century. Not surprisingly, these progressive schools were ridiculed by opponents who claimed they just taught children to be lazy and have fun: ‘They take the kids on walks, look at the plants and catch a few butterflies’ (cited Schmitt, 2003: 138). Such accusations sound all too familiar today.

**Klafki’s model of curriculum renewal**

Wolfgang Klafki’s development of Enlightenment pedagogical thought is highly relevant to imagining the ‘common school’ and transcending the restricted norms and assumptions of a neoliberal school system. Arguably Germany’s greatest educational thinker of recent decades, he has defended Enlightenment ideals, reflecting on their educational implications for our times. His thinking on education starts from Kant’s argument that reason involves ethical responsibility, not simply mental activity. Like Kant, Klafki insists on the close connection between individual and social learning. He sees education as an active and engaged connection between three capabilities:

- the capacity of individuals to make sense of their own lives, including social, occupational, ethical and religious aspects
- the capacity to work with others, because everybody has responsibility for the shaping of our common cultural, social and political relationships
the capacity for solidarity, in that a person’s claim for self-determination and the right to participate with others can only be justified if we recognise, indeed actively engage ourselves, for the rights of others. We cannot truly flourish if others are underprivileged or oppressed. (Klafki, 1990: 93-94) [This, and some of the other translations from Klafki’s chapter, are slightly abbreviated for greater clarity.]

Klafki argues that education must be common (universal, general – allgemein in German) in several senses:

a) It must be education for all – available to all, as a democratic civil right and the condition for self-determination.

b) It must be education through the medium of what we all share – it can only develop collaboration and solidarity if it has a focus on what our lives have in common. It must engage with common problems and challenges of the present and potential futures. The horizon can no longer be national, we need a global perspective.

c) It must involve the development of all our capacities: cognitive, manual/technical, social, aesthetic/creative, ethical/political. (94)

He expands (a) by arguing for the removal of structural hierarchies and divisions (selective schools, divisions by ability, early tracking into ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ curricula). For example, adult education should involve both vocational / specialist and general / political aspects.

Crucially, (b) requires a focus on the key issues for our time – issues that concern our present lives and, as far as we can understand, our common future. Writing in 1990, he highlights peace; the environment; abolishing inequalities of class, gender, disability, un/employment, and national citizenship; a critical understanding of new technologies; relating to others (Klafki, 1990: 95-98). My reading of ‘medium’ here is a sense that issues of concern help shape the production of knowledge.

The curriculum must centre on these common issues, in ways which genuinely engage young people.

Learners must develop a personal responsibility for grappling with such problems, in a genuine dialogue with their teachers. This involves certain basic attitudes and capacities:

- criticality, including self questioning.
- being prepared to argue and reach shared understandings
- empathy – the ability to see things from another’s perspective
- joined up thinking. (98-99)

Education has to be many sided, involving the development of cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, social, and practical / technical abilities. Individuals should be able to pursue chosen cultural interests. Klafki adds to this list the possibility of orientating your life according to a particular set of ethical or religious meanings.

Finally Klafki discusses key skills such as speaking, writing, calculating, exact observation, technical skills, as well as virtues such as concentration and perseverance. He expresses an important concern: these skills and qualities are not the final aim of education – they can be used for good or bad purposes, for domination as well as peace. The social aims of education are most important, whilst involving skills as a necessary set of tools for human development (102).
Klafki is equally well known for his engagement with the practicalities of classroom teaching and lesson planning, based on teachers’ professional responsibility for selecting what is most important. Planning and teaching should never involve a rush to ‘cover the curriculum’. There has to be a process of selection, so (following Wagenschein, 1965) he speaks of ‘exemplary learning’, which involves judging:

1) what wider significance do the selected examples have – what fundamental principle, ‘law, criterion, problem, technique or attitude’ can be grasped through this example?
2) what significance do they have for children, based on their existing knowledge and experience?
3) what is the topic’s significance for the children’s future?
4) what is the ‘minimum knowledge’ that you wish every child to take away, and how can you bring this to life for every child? ‘What pictures, hints, situations, observations, stories, experiments, models’ will have ‘symbolic significance’? (Klafki, 2000: 151-152)

This all depends on considering the broad aims of education in our times, and thinking about the challenges of an uncertain future. Teaching methods must further the pedagogical aims outlined earlier, for example criticality, preparedness to debate, empathy and coherence (Klafki, 1990: 98-99). They must also promote young people’s social capability to find their place in the world:

- the capacity of individuals to make sense of their own lives
- the capacity to work with others
- the capacity for solidarity. (93-94)

This is a world away from the present state of education and policy in England. Too much has been written about this to repeat here (Ball, 2008; Waters, 2013; Thomson, 2020 and many more), but let us consider briefly the consequence of following a Hirschian model of ‘knowledge-based curriculum’. Among the thousands of discrete facts to be transmitted, as recommended by the US-based Core Knowledge Foundation (2013), we find the following items:

- Slavery (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica)
- Conquistadors: Cortés and Pizzaro (advantage of Spanish weapons; diseases devastate nature and peoples)

This strips the European conquest and devastation of the Americas to a listing of neutral events. This drizzle of dead facts is but the shadow of knowledge: crumbs falling off the high table of culture (see also Wrigley, 2018a). Socially powerful knowledge requires both connectedness to everyday life and an ability to draw on historically formed cultural / psychological tools in order to mediate and organise experience (Vygotsky, 1986; Kozulin, 1998) and grasp the structures underlying that reality.

**Imagining the common school**

In this article, I have attempted to draw on Marxist theory, pre-neoliberal curriculum development in England and a revitalised Enlightenment pedagogy, in order to address a range of issues which distinguish the schools we have now from those we need to develop. I regard these ideas as an important resource for resistance, particularly in situations such as England where a totalized neoliberal policy and education system creates a ‘dictatorship of no alternatives’ (Unger, 2005).
At an early stage, I argued the need to go beyond a surface critique of neoliberalism to understand the dynamics at work in public education within capitalism. The neoliberal school ‘reform’ has entailed a range of interlocking transformations each of which strengthens the ties between education and capitalism. Briefly, they involve:

- direct privatisation, albeit funded by taxation, accompanied by attacks on local democratic control (academies, charter schools, ‘free’ schools)
- adoption of business methods in management and ‘quality control’ (new public management, datafication)
- reorientation of curriculum towards human capital production.

Due to the ongoing need to control workers and maintain hegemony, the latter is often interwoven with elements of (neo)conservative practice and ideology (Apple, 2000; Vinão, 2016; Wrigley, 2018a regarding USA, Spain and England respectively).

It should be clear that a renewed struggle for public education requires not only reversing privatisation and a return to local democratic control, but also a reassertion of teacher professionalism and a reconnection of schools to communities. For this to succeed, a vigorous public debate and social movement will be needed.

Secondly, clarity will be needed in reversing the neoliberal / neoconservative orientation of curriculum. Young people, in any conceivable future society, will need to be prepared for a contribution to economic and social life, though avoiding any early tracking into preparation for specific kinds of work which would undermine the entitlement to a broad general education. (I am using ‘economic’ here in a broader sense than employability, to refer to all the activity which sustains our material and cultural existence.)

At the same time, students need to be prepared for active citizenship in dealing with the urgent problems presented by capitalist development, including global warming, poverty, war and public health. This cannot occur through teaching methods which impose a passive role on learners, avoid controversial issues or shy away from practical involvement in the wider world. A thin version of ‘knowledge’ would be an evasion of educational responsibility. Restructuring the school system is pointless without pedagogical transformation.

Fundamental to Enlightenment pedagogy is a sense of hope. This is not a naive optimism (Israel, 2010: 3) but a faith that, aided by education, humanity can get better. This is particularly crucial in our age of concurrent crises. Since hunger, global warming, war and pandemics are caused or accelerated by capitalism in its neoliberalised and globalised form (Davis, 2020; Malm, 2020), the pedagogical challenge is at the same time a political one. Klafki has made a major contribution in showing how the two are related at the level of curriculum formation and implementation; his work deserves to be better known in English-speaking countries.

Educators need to understand themselves as intellectual activists who can engage with community initiatives and social movements, as well as building their trade unions for collective defence. Whilst schools provide an essential space for debate and reflection and study, the tacit assumption that young people’s learning must not emerge into action must be questioned. As the current pandemic, and the international climate change campaign, have shown, young people are not merely citizens-in-waiting, they already have a direct stake in the way their world is changing.

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