

Covid-19 & schooling for uncertainty

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Covid-19 reveals an urgent need to focus on an area of worldwide educational significance: the importance for schools of engaging with uncertainty as a key facet of education.¹ In recent decades, a technical education model emphasising certainty has largely superseded progressive education, raising challenges for how to embrace diversity and enhance children's capacity to navigate uncertainty. The pandemic is the most recent global societal challenge (alongside climate change and recession, for example) to demand creative, critical and resilient civil societies. Unesco (2016), the OECD (2018) and the European Union (2015) call for education (in its broadest sense) to respond to challenges where solutions are as yet unknown or require constant rethinking.

Without abandoning a knowledge-based curriculum rooted in epistemological certainty, in a historical moment of heightened flux *and* inequality it has never been more vital to reinvigorate what is meant by transformative education in ways that acknowledge and attend to the diversity of uncertainties experienced by children. Adults (teachers, parents, scientists, politicians) do not know answers in advance, or where things might lead, given changing pandemic (and post-pandemic) contexts. Giving children opportunities to make sense of Covid-19 in their lives addresses World Health Organisation (2020) education and behaviour priorities: to promote engagement with 'public health measures' and 'ethics', and 'address drivers of fear, anxieties, rumours, stigma' (p. 9).

¹ Original blog post, published 29 June 2020: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/covid-19-and-schooling-for-uncertainty>

Children living with everyday precarity and vulnerabilities due to social and economic inequalities are the worst affected by the pandemic: failing to engage with lived uncertainties means stopping short of addressing educational inequalities. Systemic and structural inequalities also shape families' ability to scaffold children's engagement with Covid-19 queries and feelings with regard to, for example, issues such as time-poverty, heightened economic insecurities and access to home-schooling computer technology. Focusing on attainment and socialisation can be productive in terms of social mobility, but meritocracy disguises deep-rooted divisions (Markovits, 2019). Covid-19 signals the imperative for supporting the expression of vulnerabilities and uncertainties within state-funded education, so that children have the capabilities to live with, act on and hope through them (while not distracting from 'certain' technical approaches), and participate in creating more just and equitable worlds.

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Where ‘knowing’ is understood as ‘the transformation of disturbed and unsettled situations into those more controlled and more significant’ (Dewey, 1929), embracing complexity and uncertainty becomes a way of ‘not-knowing’ too quickly or narrowly when deciding how to respond responsibly. The challenge is to engage children with uncertainty: those for whom it is not a choice but a feature of unequal life-chances, and who have unequal access to the ‘competitive advantages’ of embracing not-knowing (D’Souza & Renner, 2014, p. 156) (as recognised by business, for example – see Belsky, 2011).

Such engagement requires naming (not erasing) intersecting Covid-19, structural and everyday lived (ontological) uncertainties, and asking probing questions. It means opening up the possibilities to engage in diverse pedagogies – inquiry, creativity and deliberation – that are themselves uncertain (pedagogical uncertainty), in which not-knowing is valued for requiring ongoing thinking and imagination (epistemological uncertainty).

The current emphasis in schools on children’s conformity through attainment and socialisation is important, but technical knowledge alone is insufficient for children from diverse backgrounds to make meaning of uncertainties with no clear solutions in interconnected but unequal global lives. Having additional opportunities to ‘not-know’ becomes a mode of being open, attentive and prepared to respond, and offers possibilities for children to shift into ‘being’ participants rather than simply recipients of adult-generated knowledge.

Teachers need encouragement to experiment with how to support children’s engagement with the lived uncertainties of Covid-19 and other issues. This includes using diverse pedagogies to support different ‘registers’ of not-knowing.

- **Knowledge:** going beyond the assumed certainty of scientific fact/technocratic solutions to engage multiple knowledges, including modelling, interdisciplinarity and local knowledge. Children need to puzzle-over information, ask ‘Why this knowledge, not that?’, and consider its relevance to their current and future lives.
- **Affect and embodiment:** the world is felt, imagined and thought about through sensory engagement and movement; attention to feeling can identify children’s concerns and desires, including the worlds they would like to help create together.
- **Spirituality and ethics:** the spiritual is integral to schooling and embedded in many children’s backgrounds. Some may have access to spiritual

guidance on ‘accepting uncertainty’, but all children require opportunities to attend to difficult questions that are inherently uncertain.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can teachers be enabled to make space for ‘not knowing’ in their classrooms? (Given that teachers are themselves schooled in, and held to account for, their own subject knowledge.)
2. What types of activities offer opportunities for pedagogical uncertainty across different phases of education and subject disciplines?
3. What inclusive school policies and practices might best support pupils to shift between conforming and uncertain pedagogies? (Given that pupils are so well attuned to producing ‘right answers’.)