Coronavirus in the UK: A poor schools' pandemic

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Since schools, universities and the economy began reopening in the UK, the coronavirus began spreading again exponentially. The "herd immunity" policy of Boris Johnson's Conservative government has led to a catastrophic doubling of cases per week, with the number of hospital admissions rising.

Liverpool Mayor Joe Anderson announced that 8,000 schoolchildren and 350 staff are self-isolating. The region is one of a growing number in the "red zone".

The coronavirus, described as a "poor man's virus," disproportionately hits the working class. This inequality persists in its impact on schools, hitting the state sector much harder than private schools.

No sooner did state schools open their gates for the autumn term—backed by the education unions and the Labour Party—than many closed due to confirmed COVID cases. There have been around 2,023 schools reporting staff or pupils testing positive, though it is difficult to get a national picture as schools are gagged. Under conditions where social distancing is impossible, this will rise.

The situation in some schools is desperate, with reports of classes doubling up due to staff sick or self-isolating.

Schools are not "COVID-safe" as the government claims, but open to provide herding pens so parents can get back to work and begin the business of profit making. Regardless of government denials—Johnson declared with the blessing of opposition Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer that masks in school were not necessary—schools are perfect vectors for community transmission and children carry the same viral load as adults, or higher.

Many parents, terrified for the safety of their children and families, are choosing to deregister and home school, rather than face possible fines if they keep their children at home.

One headteacher wrote in the *Guardian*, "Three weeks into the autumn term and we are all wrecked. I look around at my leadership team in our Monday morning meeting at 7.45am. Everyone is drained from poor sleep, working over the weekend and managing colleagues' worries."

After deep cuts to the education budget since 2008, schools can ill afford the extra expenses incurred due to the pandemic. "It is costing us a fortune in additional PPE [personal protective equipment] and extra cleaning," the Head continues. "We've had to use the supply teacher budget and it is not sustainable."

A contributor on the National Education Union [NEU]—Unofficial Facebook wrote, "Can anyone tell me if I've missed anything about how the union is supporting us at the moment?... Schools are… in a state of crisis, senior leaders are overwhelmed by managing covid related issues, staff are exhausted and scared, and proper teaching is taking a back seat over necessary safety precautions…classrooms are going to become freezing environments where it's too cold to be healthy, vulnerable staff are not protected, and it's… only getting worse by the day..."

Compare this to the serenity in the top private schools, where children of the rich and privileged are educated.

Cocooned in his well-resourced bubble, headmaster Mark Laudar of Strathallan, an independent boarding school in Perthshire, Scotland, explains "cheerfully" to the *Economist* how the school provides a COVID-safe environment so the education of pupils can proceed without interruption, whatever the mayhem outside its sprawling 153-acre grounds.

Of the 560 nine to 18-year-old pupils, most have their own bedrooms, and staff live on the spacious campus—No chance of spreading the killer virus to Granny. This school has ample space to enable social distancing and money for essentials—the school upgraded its Wi-Fi to ensure enough bandwidth for online teaching. Lessons are socially distanced in small-sized classes, on laptops to minimise contagion and to include anyone isolating.

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State schools are starved of the necessary resources and space to provide safe, face to face or online learning. Since 2008/9, spending on state education fell by eight percent. Around £4,700 is spent per pupil at primary school and £6,200 per pupil at secondary school.

Schoolsweek estimated private schools, attended by seven percent of UK children, spend on average three times more per pupil than the state sector. Some, like Eton College (for 13-18 year olds), spend more. Eton—annual fees £42,501, staff pupil ratio 1:8, boasting among its alumni Boris Johnson and his predecessor David Cameron—is very wealthy. It owns 200 properties with investments plus endowments in excess of £400 million.

Having charitable status, like half the private schools, Eton benefits from generous state handouts. The government subsidises private education by £200 million for fees plus tax savings worth £2.5 billion.

Not many families earn £160,000 a year to afford to send their children to private school. Before the pandemic struck, there were 14 million people living in poverty in the UK, including four million children. These figures are expected to rise sharply by the year's end.

Successive governments that presided over this growing impoverishment feign concern for disadvantaged children. Used as an excuse for the precipitous reopening of schools, this did not translate into the promised provision of laptops for all children during the pandemic. Schools were at their wits end at the failure of the government's £100 million scheme announced in April to provide disadvantaged Year 10 (14-15) and vulnerable pupils laptops. Many schools reported their allocation fell short by a fifth, as only 220,000 out of 540,000 were delivered.

A new study by the Data Evaluation and Learning for Viral Epidemics group revealed the achievement gap at crucial Year 3 (7-8) widened by 52 percent after lockdown. Professor Anna Vignoles from the University of Cambridge explained, "Shutting down schools has impacted all children, but the worst effects will be felt by those from lower socio-economic groups and with other vulnerabilities... Children from low income households… are more likely to lack the resources (space, equipment, home support) to engage fully with remote schooling."

The Association of School and College Leaders warned the "catch-up funding" dedicated for support measures post-lockdown would be "wiped-out" by the expense of hiring supply teachers to cover for absences.

Staff shortages due to sickness or quarantining is compounded by failures in the government's testing and contact tracing—rationed as capacity only meets a third of demand. The headteachers' unions wrote a joint letter to Johnson "imploring" him to take control.

The National Association of Head Teachers found 45 percent of schools have teachers at home awaiting delayed test results. By winter there could be a shortage of supply teachers.

The *Guardian* reported a North London science teacher taught "back-to-back triple lessons to a class of 60 children in his school hall last week after a colleague called in sick with a temperature."

At Southend High School for Boys, Headteacher Robin Bevan said he feared that if "10 or more teachers" were in isolation, "Sustaining high-quality education… becomes almost impossible. Supply teachers are hard to find, and our… budget for cover would disappear in weeks."

Private schools have no such worries about the resources for supply cover or getting pupils and staff tested for the virus.

Eton College privately tested all staff and students at the beginning of term. Kent boarding school Benenden went a step further, purchasing the Samba II diagnostic device for £35,000 plus VAT, for rapid COVID-19 testing. With a school nurse available, everyone in school can be tested and diagnosed in 90 minutes.

Headteacher Jules White, the founder of school-funding campaign Worth Less?, said "While fee-paying schools enjoy the luxury of private testing to keep their staff and students safe… the rest of us are being let down by a wholly inadequate test-trace system."

The Socialist Equality Party launched the educators rank-and-file safety committee to provide an alternative means of struggle, independent of the unions. The committee demands the immediate closure of schools until the virus is suppressed, with resources provided for online learning.

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