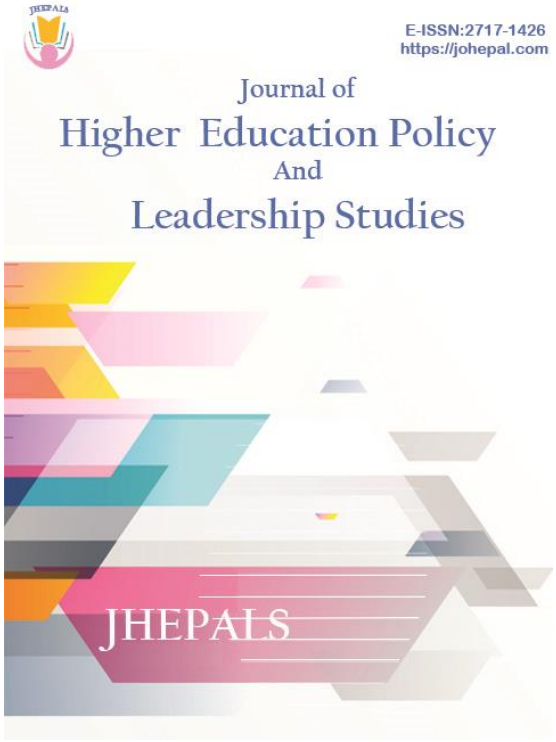
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Reflections on Education: What Is the Current Problem or Issue? - How the Past Informs the Present Is Vital for an Inclusive Education

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Abstract

In an inclusive society and across developed countries, higher education is seen as vitally important. It is positive for society, which needs advanced learning to develop economic productivity. The world requires a skilled workforce with excellent leadership and sustainable policies that can enhance individuals' knowledge and prepare them for success on a global scale. On a personal level, it is vital for the individual to reach their potential and contribute to society. It is evident that those having had an appropriate education are more satisfied with work and leisure time, with better health as well as less likely to be unemployed (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, 1943; The Spirit Level, 2009). The 19th century author, Charles Dickens, was concerned about equality and many of his novels attempted to show how class systems impact on the health and wealth of individuals. In Bleak House (1853), The Pickwick Papers (1836), Little Dorrit (1857), Great Expectations (1861) and Hard Times (1854) and A Christmas Carol (1843) he presents goodwill and revenge; suffering and death - issues irrespective of class, thus exacting justice of a different order. The article explores the past and present to reflect on the future, particularly in relation to education.

Keywords: Society; Social class; Wealth; Education; Social responsibility; Higher Education

Introduction: Social Class, Health, Education and Covid-19

In 2012, the UK celebrated the 200th birthday of Charles Dickens. The time which shaped him and catapulted him to greatness is so far behind us and, therefore, a matter of historical study for this generation and generations to come. We can regard Dickens from the stand-point of posterity - to consider his career, review his literary work and estimate his legacy in an age clearly distinguishable

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from our own, but having many comparisons for reflection. First, why did Dickens write his novels? Professor Michael Slater (2011), Dickens biographer, established the Dickens legacy

"as the image of him as not only a very great writer but also as a great and good man whose 'hard experiences in boyhood', as Forster called them, led him to care deeply for, and try to do something about, the terrible plight of the children of the poor in Victorian England. It was not until the 1930s and the coming to light of evidence concerning his relationship with Ellen Ternan that this perception of Dickens began to change and an altogether more complex figure began to emerge in the public consciousness".

That legacy lives on and Dickens' struggle for equality, good education, proper sanitation was important in the nineteenth century and it is for our time. For instance,

The modern public health movement began in the 19th century. It was built on earlier political, social and medical structures, but the form in which we relate to it emerged only two centuries ago. If the relationship between patients and doctors situates hospital medicine, public health is about the state and the individual. Dickens' London was plagued with abject poverty, child labourers, crime, prostitution, sickness and disease and one's social class determined whether you lived or died. Therefore, we ask: 'Did Dickens want better treatment for child labourers, the demise of workhouses, better schools and hospitals, along with a swifter, fairer justice system for all, cleaner cities, healthier houses and kinder prisons?' Did he want more dedicated, less dishonest politicians? Certainly, the failing institutions and abominable conditions needed better ethics to put them right. Dickens observed that many things were wrong with British society, which were published in his novels, speeches, letters, journals and newspaper articles. A central concern was social position and its effect on the poorer working class. He understood that there was a direct link between poverty and health and directed his interest to medical discourses. We know this from his well-documented personal acquaintance with a range of doctors, like John Connolly, Sir Charles Bell and Ernest Hart, whom he worked with to improve workhouse infirmaries. He possessed several signed copies of works by other surgeons and physicians; he owned a medical dictionary, one of practical surgery and was cited in curative works of his time. His description of Smike's "Hectic fever", in Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39) was reprinted verbatim in both Aitken's *Science and Practice of Medicine* (2019) and Miller's *Principles of Surgery* (2012).

This medical information clarified for Dickens that many disorders, sicknesses, diseases and ailments during his time were not easily cured. 19th century medicine was hardly the enlightened profession it is today. Medical practices were often barbaric, employing methods used for centuries, yielding limited results and often killing patients with a different affliction than the original ailment. UK medical training, research and education were low level and in some cases deplorable compared to other western European countries. As such, during the 1830s & 40s a number of deadly diseases including influenza, typhoid, smallpox and cholera swept through Britain, killing thousands of people. The worst affected were the poor, in towns and cities.

Resistance to change

Approximately, 200 years later, it would appear that families from deprived communities, irrespective of race, are the ones most affected by poor health and education. The financial times, May 1, 2020 (Giles and Wallis, 2020) reported that "Deprived areas hit hardest in UK by the pandemic":

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> "Inner London and deprived urban areas of England and Wales have suffered far higher death rates from the coronavirus than more prosperous and rural locations, according to the Office for National Statistics. The huge geographical differences were revealed in the first detailed analysis of those killed by Covid-19, which showed the pandemic exacerbating existing large health inequalities."

In some respects it seems as if the 21st century reflects past times, with a huge chasm between rich & poor. The poor were and still are deprived of a solid education so putting them at a disadvantage when applying for prestigious jobs or getting effective health care.

Dickens advocated social change, as seen in his novels, which he used as a springboard to alert society of the evils and moral decay caused by division between rich and poor. Therefore, a call for change, such as social inclusion, may alleviate some social problems that plague deprived communities. Inclusion requires substantive change. As an educator, I believe that changes we make should influence schools, homes and communities. According to McLeskey and Waldron (2000),

> change that influences every aspect of a school. Change that alters the daily professional activities of teachers and administrators. Changes that challenge traditional attitudes, beliefs and understandings regarding students with disabilities and other students who do not 'fit' into the typical classroom in a school. (p. 66)

Whilst social inclusion has merits, there are implications. For example, Britain is seriously affected by many economic, social and cultural problems. Unemployment, overcrowding of state schools, with teachers not fully equipped to manage the language barriers, along with low income amongst poor families, mean students are unable to fully take part and enjoy interesting social activities because they are usually expensive. In an inclusive context, education systems must play a major role in development by providing access to quality holistic education and training for all, at least to a basic level. Throughout the pandemic lockdown, the pupils most affected are those from poor social backgrounds, some with a disability. Whilst schools ensure that they were equipped with personal computers, they lack the full support of parents and teachers. This means that a bigger gap in their learning has been created and will take time to fill it with the knowledge and skills lost. This is a real problem and challenge that is currently facing our education system.

Sage (2007) in her book "Inclusion in Schools: Making a Difference" and Wilknson and Pickett (2009) in their work "The Spirit Level" argue that inequality between rich and poor groups drastically affects learning potential. Sage says that the phrase, 'education system', is contradictory

> as the aim of learning is to develop human powers and not fit them to some standard framework. Education reflects what politicians want it to do and change will only happen if the community supports this. Some believe that attempts to educate everyone must end in education of nobody. They assert that differences between us are so great and confusing that the dilution or dissolution of a common study programme is inevitable. There is truth in this and Cuba's Universal Policy has much to commend it. This respects the view that everyone should be educated, but in line with interests & ability and in accordance with society's needs for a skill range. Cubans observe that in the UK we have made an elite education, developed originally for those entering traditional professions, the destiny of all, when most of us have practical careers, dependent on a broader knowledge and skill base. (Sage, 2009, p.7)

Goldacre (2008, p. 321) supports this view, saying that obsession 'with taking the message to everyone, rarely offers stimulating content to the people who are already interested'.

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Reflections on Education: Past Informs Present

In Dickens' 1854 novel, Hard Times, he exposes inclusivity when he presents a range of different characters, for example, Sissy Jupe and Bitzer. By and large, Bitzer models our education system in that he follows exactly what he has been taught without applying self - analysis. He simply regurgitates what the teacher says: This is evident when he was asked to describe a horse. He responded with a complex description using sophisticated words like, "quadruped", "graminivorous", with no idea of what they meant. Sissy, on the other hand, has spent time in the circus, with photogenic equine memories, but is unable to define a horse in linguistic terms. To her, animals are to be loved and cared for; they are beautiful creatures and like human beings are important to her. Here we have two students, at the same school but from different backgrounds and interpretations of learning experiences. Therefore, Sage is correct when arguing that the 'education system' is a contradictory phrase.

Educational Issues (Social Class and FE)

Further Education colleges have particularly become synonymous with poor education and teaching quality, which is regimented and prescribes what students are taught, giving rise to a lack of imaginative skills. This is aptly presented in Dickens' Hard Times (1854). Despite training thousands of teachers in the necessary skills, FE still remains under threat and receives severe criticism, why?

The lockdown of FE Colleges has weakened student platforms for learning. A huge percentage of students rely on being in a real classroom and in close contact with teachers. If confidence is to be built, it is from the physical teacher-student relationship. Regaining that lost experience, is now a mammoth task. Some teachers have left the profession, or gone to other educational institutions. Most students find it difficult to make adjustments to new staff.

Before students settle into class, it is vital to note issues that affect learners. In deprived areas, the main motivating factor for students from lower classes to enter further education is improvement of job and career prospects to provide better security. However, most students enter with a lack of motivation and the necessary academic and personal competencies needed for courses. After four months of being at home, as a result of Covid-19, Department for Education (23 March 2020) states "For providers still forecasting negative growth (even after applying the 5% top-up to their forecast), their growth has been topped up to 0%". Many students will quit college in favour of seeking paid employment to support themselves and families. A long term effect is young people lacking requisite abilities.

Although colleges support inclusivity and widening participation, Dickens' view was that an all-rounded student should be taught facts and creativity. They must be able to think and apply knowledge practically, as in science subjects. As an English language and literature teacher, this was highlighted by Professor Salhberg who put forward the argument that one reason for Finland's educational success is, "*Sustainable leadership - Finnish education is not the result of any major national education reform per se. Instead, education development in Finland has been based on the continual adjustment of schooling to the changing needs of individuals and society*". There was audience consensus that inclusive education deepens the problem of inequality. The PISA Education Tables report: "School choice and competition are not related to improved performance" (p. 54, PISA IV) and that "Greater equity and autonomy over curricula and assessment seem to improve performance" (p.129, PISA IV). The more schools, colleges and universities compete in a 'one-size-fits-all' educational policy, the less likely society is able to produce a strong workforce. It makes

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logical sense to make necessary adjustments for students as the culture changes. Education must adapt to ensure all students benefit from changing mores.

Over the past 5-10 years, inclusive policies have operated in every school, college and university. Objectively, these policies fit well with Britain being a multicultural society. However, as with all policies there are drawbacks.

Dickens and the Pandemic: Intellectual Work Separate from Manual Work

The pandemic has narrowed job prospects and has given rise to the select few with celebrated knowledge and skills that reflect the changing requirements in workforces not just in Britain but in the world over. Businesses are changing, employers have re-set locations to accommodate new growth models, new techniques and processes which means that employees have had to upskill to secure their jobs and fit into this new model. The knowledge economy constantly redefines the skills it needs for the workforce. While we acknowledge skills such as problem-solving, leadership, IT, ability to innovate, management are quotient in people, the OECD (2006b Planning for the Direct Assessment of PIAAC: Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies , OECD, Paris, August.) has shown that the facility to learn new skills in itself is becoming a critical competence. This is quite troubling because it translates to allowing those who are talented, educated and have the capital to progress and take advantage of the market. There will be and is a division between the intellectuals and the manuals. This is clearly illustrated in Dickens, Hard Times (1854) where he presents the themes of power, education and ethics. The theme of education is critical to the pandemic because it presents a powerful case that memorising facts is not the way forward in society. According to Gradgrind, facts are all you need in life. Only that which can be measured is important:

> Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the mind of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.

Hence, when Bitzer was asked to define a horse he had no problem with articulating the facts about a horse:

> 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth".

'In contrast, when Sissy Jupe referred to as "girl number twenty" was asked if she knew what a horse is, she simply, " curtseyed again, and would have blushed deeper, if she could have blushed deeper than she had blushed all this time". Gradgrind wants Sissy Jupe to call a horse a quadruped, but instead she recognises the beauty of a horse and recognises the beauty of the soul and of love. Unfortunately, such things are banished to entertainment as in circus parades. Such things may lead to a path to love and Jesus and the redemption from a fallen world to be with God again. But memorising facts as required in assessment for learning and eligibility for university and money is never challenged. The system works by reducing the economic base.

According to accenture, Institute for High Performance Business, they observed the key factors in achieving high performance and how talent multiplication creates value:

> "A distinctive capability in talent multiplication creates extraordinary value by transforming individual talent into new human, relational and organizational resources. These resources include improvements in problem-solving ability, the ability to execute

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> strategy, know-how and knowledge sharing, and collaboration and communication networks. And the benefits of talent multiplication do not end there. A distinctive capability in talent multiplication also enables strategic change and expands value-creation opportunities for the organization".

The point here is that the working class are demonised because of lack of access to materialism, wealth and elitist connections. In schools, colleges and universities, subjects that deal with facts namely, Maths, science, chemistry, physics are hard core subjects that were highly studied and favoured recommended in the nineteenth century as it is with the twentieth century. Grandgrind opposed creativity and saw working in the circus as a job fit only for the working class. However, in the novel, Dickens is set against such philosophy because he sees the dangers in promoting the intellectuals and denigrating manual workers. Dickens uses the character of Sissy Jupe, of very low social status, being the daughter of a circus performer to show that her imaginative and creative skills are of the highest. She was not brainwashed by Grandgriend's education system but by her father whose education made a positive impact on her. The divide is ever more evident with the outbreak of Covid-19. Those who work with their brains will survive while manual labourers will deny access to gainful employment. The working class do not have the capital investments and all the other privileges that will afford them the opportunity to buy computers, upgrade their skills and competences for this new world order. Dickens crafted a frightful image of the life of the working poor. Suffice to say, this appalling image is the reality amidst thousands of working class families; moreover, the pandemic has made it almost impossible for those families to climb their way out of the doldrums. Sissy's working class background and her gender conspire against her performance in a capitalist society.

In the book entitled, "The Talent Powered Organisation: Strategies for Globalization, Talent Management and High Performance"; Thomas, and Craig (2008, p. 56) posit that performance anatomy is a set of mindsets that permeate an organisation and are observable in actions and decisions. Such are as follows:

Leadership - having market-making talent and ability to drive through execution

People development - a talent mindset and integrated capabilities that multiply talent

Technology - viewing IT as a strategic asset

Performance - measuring all the critical areas and having a selective scorecard

Agility and innovation - ability to renew continuously

All of the above require critical thinking skills and strategies so is it possible for working class people to achieve the same benefits as middle and upper class people?

This is also seen in Great Expectations (1860) where Miss Havasham cannot access the world not because she is working class; on the contrary she is upper middle class. Her barrier to accessing the world depends on her being married to someone of similar rank and file. In both Hard Times (1854) and Great Expectation (1860) a female's identity and economic base is dependent on a man and/or patriarchal society. In Hard Times (1854) the individuals who hold top positions are males, the student who presented the correct definition of a horse is male. According to an article in the Timeshighereducation.com, "Women in science are battling both Covid-19 and the patriarchy" stated that 35 female scientists expressed their frustration over sexist and racist inequalities: " The pandemic has worsened long standing sexist and racist inequalities in science many of them to say 'I'm done'." The article goes on to say,

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> "We have well-documented barriers throughout our lives: discouragement by teachers, family and society to pursue careers in STEM in stem fields, a lack of role models; hostile and sometimes abusive work environments; disproportionate domestic work and caring responsibilities; and biases against us in favour of men in every aspect of our professional lives - hiring, promotion, publishing, pay, service loads and grant allocation".

So, from the Victorian period right through to the twenty-first century, it becomes evident that the education system keeps the working class (and to a degree women) as slaves to the logic of the hierarchical Master if the immoral markets that perpetuate pain. Those bringing the truth to this do not appear to last long in the world e.g. Dr. Martin Luther King, the Kennedys'. Even the Research Excellence Framework (REF) appears to perpetuate the dis-embedded ivory tower that does not serve the people with knowledge for human evolution mapped to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015) aimed at transforming the world. One of the Research Excellence Frameworks (REF2021) revised objective, dated 31 July 2020 is:

> The UK's exercise for assessing research excellence in universities, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), recommences on 31 July 2020. This follows a four-month pause due to COVID-19. The re-commencement is accompanied by new guidance, describing revisions to the exercise made in view of the altered timetable and to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on universities' submissions.

Again, cash rich educated nations outsource manual labour to cash poor countries and do not see that poverty is not made uncomfortable and perpetuate an elitist framework which in a pandemic hits those in poverty. People living below the poverty line in the UK find it difficult to pay fees to go to university. This has placed a tremendous strain on London's public services: the worry and anxiety associated with lack of food, income, proper housing, good medical supplies means a downward spiral for the poor. As in Dickens time, one of the greatest challenges for government authorities is how to rescue the poor from a life of entrapment. The threat of Covid-19 with guidelines stipulating self-isolation, and minimal contact with human beings, how does this support low income families who are forced to live side by side, very often, in tower blocks, escape this lifestyle if they do not have decent jobs and substantial monetary savings? The Victorians who were at greatest risk to pandemic outbreaks such as tuberculosis, smallpox, cholera and typhoid were the poor. In like manner, the poor are battling with health, housing, education, and money crises. Perhaps, this is a critical time to reflect on Karl Marx's "Reflection of a Young Man" (1835):

> "If we have chosen the position in life in which we can most of all work for mankind, no burdens can bow us down, because they are sacrifices for the benefit of all; then we shall experience no petty, limited, selfish joy, but our happiness will belong to millions, our deeds will live on quietly but perpetually at work, and over our ashes will be shed the hot tears of noble people".

Dickens, Covid-19 and the Poor

In the Caribbean, Africa and Europe, many believe that diseases were caused by the wrath of God and sloth or the curses of witches. In Shakespeare's Macbeth (1606), Act 1 opens with the three witches, who possess devilish powers. In Romeo and Juliet (1597), he uses astrological signs in the prologue to reveal the principle characters. Despite the range of supernatural explanations on offer, the world struggled through periods of alternating education and ignorance. Disease diagnosis might

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involve prayer, interpreting animal entrails, or determining how the patient had digressed. The belief was that you did become sick because of a virus, but because you offended a spirit.

By the end of the late 18th century, for the first time religion started to lose grip on many people. While science was developing and saw the industrial revolution as a gift, the flip side was the fog and the miserable masses of child labour required to run factories. London was the centre, home and heart of the Victorian era and thousands died in terrible conditions brought about by factories and lack of knowledge or wisdom regarding public health.

In short, the Victorian era was a time of rapid change, advancement and experiment. It improved lives with inventions and new philosophies but the dark side was many oppressed people. Burgeoning populations meant that rows of poor quality terraced slums were erected around factories. In Bleak House (1853), Dickens describes the slum, Tom-all-Alone: "As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards".

With Covid-19, those most affected are the poor in deprived areas. The government has funded the worst hit areas in England and Wales to curtail the escalating death rate. The news media has bombarded the public with daily horrific news of families dying, from living in close quarters like tower blocks, or not having private health care to be seen quickly, or the financial means for medication. The plight of the poor runs parallel with previous centuries. Pidd, Barr, and Mohdin (2020) reported "55.1 deaths per 100,000 people in the most deprived places compared with 25.3 in the least deprived". "Members of ethnic minority groups were particularly badly affected by the virus, with those of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds over-presented in the toll by 27%". The King's Fund Health Think-tank has demanded the government focuses resources to reverse health inequalities as the crisis eases. The data is disturbing and shows that more should be done to protect vulnerable individuals and provide better housing. Engels (2009) saw Dickensian society as deplorable and humane. He presents an accurate and vivid image when he writes:

> "Living conditions amongst the poor were appalling and disease was rife, particularly water-borne disease such as cholera and typhoid. He gives a detailed description of Manchester as one of the many slums in England:
>
> "In one of these courts there stands directly at the entrance, at the end of the covered passage, a privy without a door, so dirty that the inhabitants can pass into and out of the court only by passing through foul pools of stagnant urine and excrement" (p. 49).

Dickens comments on the slums:

'The filthy and miserable appearance of this part of London can hardly be imagined by those... who have not witnessed it. Wretched houses have broken windows patched with rags and papers : every room let out to a different family, and in many instances to two or even three –fruit and "sweet stuff" manufacturers in the cellars, barbers and red-herring vendors in the front parlours, cobblers in the back, a bird -fancier in the first floor, three families on the second, starvation in the attics, Irishmen in the passage, a musician in the front kitchen, and a charwoman and five hungry children in the back one—filth everywhere –a gutter before the houses and a drain behind, clothes drying and slops emptying, from the windows; girls of fourteen or fifteen , with matted hair, walking about barefoot...; boys of all ages, in coats of all sizes and no coats at all; men and women, in every variety of scanty and dirty apparel, lounging, scolding, drinking, smoking, squabbling, fighting, and swearing...' (Boz on Slums)

His graphic descriptions of Victorian England give us a good idea of what life was really like, particularly for the poor and it is not surprising that he became extremely hostile to the 1834 Poor

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Law Amendment Act, and wrote several articles on the workhouse system, showing his concern with public health and the reform of the legal system. The Pickwick Papers (1837), Great Expectations (1861), Bleak House (1853) show a direct and indirect link between the working class and illnesses and diseases –many of his characters suffer from mental disorders such as depression, dementia, neuropsychiatric disorders, and illnesses such as fever, stroke, epilepsy , sleep disorders, smallpox and fever, tuberculosis, cholera, polio, diphtheria. In a crowded city like London, diseases are bound to spread. With limited medical treatment available to the poor, so it was with this social group that suffered the most.

Dickens, Brexit and Covid-19

The famous German poem by the Reverend Martin Niemöller reads:
First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.

Dickens was very outspoken when it came to the plight of the poor. In all his novels he made a distinct point about suffering, pain, crime, and its direct corollary to poverty. In "A Christmas Carol" (1843), Dickens highlights the theme of social responsibility by showing that the world would be a better place to live and work if the rich help the poor. Like the Reverend Martin Niemoller, there is a strong underlying statement that mankind needs to get involved with one another and take social responsibility very seriously so that there will always be someone available to speak for you. Dickens' message rings loud and clear to us when he uses the character of Scrooge, who at first is presented as miserable, uncharitable, consumed with greed, miserable, unkind and adopts a very cold-hearted approach to life. Scrooge has no intention of helping the poor. He expresses no love to Belle and Fred because Belle broke off her engagement to Scrooge because of his lust for wealth.

On close observation, one could argue that Scrooge is a microcosm of countries that are successfully wealthy and have exited their way out of the UN, in order to stand alone. Over the last few years, we encountered much Brixit debate on every news channel and before too long, Britain experienced a huge chasm between the Remainers and the Brixiters. Turning back the clock, Dickens did not hold back when he showed that collective responsibility will move individuals forward in their businesses, homes and relationships. We see that the choices we make have far reaching consequences than we can imagine. Will businesses survive if they pull out of the UN? Will other countries bail out the poor during a pandemic as with Covid-19? According to The Week (2020),

> "The truth is that pulling up the drawbridge and quitting the EU will not enhance our national sovereignty," said Labour's Hilary Benn, before the referendum. "All it would do is to weaken it by taking away our power to influence events in an ever more complex and interdependent world." Nor, said Remainers, would UK sovereignty be absolute outside the EU: the British government would still be bound by membership of Nato, the UN, the WTO and various treaties and agreements with other nations.

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Reflections on Education: Past Informs Present

Although Brexit would bring some clear-cut advantages, said The Economist, the UK might well find itself "a scratchy outsider with somewhat limited access to the single market, almost no influence and few friends".

In Dickens' Christmas Carol (1843) Scrooge pulled away from friends and family, and was left with no influence and almost no friends. Whilst Dickens uses the ghosts to show Scrooge the various aspects of his behaviour and its relationship to social responsibility, both on a personal level, as well as on a societal level, Covid-19 is showing the world how we must care for each other irrespective of race, genger, age, cultural background or religion. Isolating countries and isolating individuals has a negative impact on holistic growth. In Stave One, Scrooge is alone in his counting house (an image of having money, wealth). He is interrupted by "two portly gentlemen" whose purpose is to seek money to help the poor. Scrooge responds in a very uncouth manner presenting the idea that poverty is the fault of the person who is poor. Unfortunately, this is a widely held belief that has been perpetuated throughout the centuries and one that is very hard to penetrate. Therefore, that mindset has paved the way for many poor families to go through life in a continuous struggle. Scrooge asks two rhetorical questions: "Are there no workhouses? Are there no prisons?" This evidently pinpoints the notion that Dickens and his audience understands the power of the poor law and Scrooge is the vehicle used to uncover the way social responsibility was being passed on from one generation to another. It is true that today's government provides housing benefits, soup kitchens and child care support to poor families. However, poor families are still expected to work for meagre wages and still carry an invisible banner that spells "destitute and unfortunate". They are the ones who seem stuck in a rut, who can't have access to a good education, have the capital to start up a business,have good healthcare as a protection against pandemics. What Dickens and Brixit is bringing to the table is the fact that we should not look away and ignore some of the ills that arise when we ignore social responsibilities. Scrooge, the protagonist, dies, and could not take his money and wealth to the grave. But before he died, Dickens made a point in transforming him from a miserly person to one who is charitable: the message was clear to the Victorian as it is for us; we need to exercise social responsibility towards humankind, otherwise, in death, no one will remember you, nor grieve for you. As far as education is concerned, we all need to take heed of Dickens' allegorical story. If we don't work together, the pandemic could be seen as a pathway to destroy poor families, their business and empower corporations to take over as 'rescuers' from chaos and rescuers from the poor thus keeping them in a perpetual state of lack. Better education for all, working together and not independent of each other is more likely to create a healthier and wealthier community. As The Week (2020) aptly shows what would be the damaging effect if countries work in isolation citing Britain as an example, "Pro-EU campaigners put economic security at the heart of their message, claiming three million jobs would be lost if Britain voted to leave."

Review

Some major issues affecting learners in deprived areas have been highlighted in the recent Covid-19 pandemic, which reflect similar situations recorded vividly in literature. Whilst there are no easy answers, I believe that the government should reconsider some of its policies concerning education, inequality and learning. It is understandable that learners from poor families and as young adults give priority to money rather than education because they cannot afford the basics, like food, books and travel. This should prompt the Government to change funding policies. Education benefits should be more widely communicated. In particular, outcomes associated with improved

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employability and finance need to be given more prominence, though it is recognised that this is an area of variability across the student body, especially in the first years.

The cost of study is a concern for most learners at FE and HE levels, especially those from impoverished backgrounds like ethnic minority groups. The knock-on effect when teaching them is that without the necessary books, assignments and research, class work cannot be done effectively. The majority feel that the investment is not worthwhile because records show that there are still too many ethnic minorities unemployed. They need not just academic knowledge and how to apply it practically, but the personal abilities such as effective language and communication in order to cooperate and collaborate with others effectively. This is often not the case and educational institutions do not always have the expertise to support student needs.

A large number of learners in city areas are from problem homes, resulting in disrupted personal lives. Some are young and inexperienced who find it challenging to cope with academic pressures and workloads. The problem of lower classes failing to achieve is further exacerbated by the need to include greater numbers from wider backgrounds. Institutions invariably have a mixture of learners from all races, religions and cultural backgrounds. Despite this expansion in learner numbers, those from lower, social-class groups are still failing because of family background and perceptions about costs and benefits of further study. On the whole, learners from lower, social-class groups, in recent surveys appear to have less confidence about their ability to succeed on a global stage and taking career decisions, than did those from higher groups. Appropriate support is vital for them to succeed.

Issues and Solutions

Literature, as in the novels of Charles Dickens, is an excellent way to introduce both teachers and students to how society has evolved (or not!) and reflect on the issues that people face in life. This develops self-awareness through the life-style comparisons that are presented. Also, studying the lives of past people helps us to understand cultures, customs, attitudes and values and how they become established in particular communities. As we progress deeper into 2020, let us pause and reflect on lessons learnt from Dickens' novels, Covid-19 and Brixit. In summary, educators at all levels have an important part to play in changing addressing the challenging issues and providing solutions such as:

- Teach students resilience and adaptability in light of Covid-19
- Teach self-awareness, competence and confidence, providing role models to students
- A sound ethos and relationships that demonstrate ethical, equable behaviour among each other and nations
- Irrespective of social status, provide students with a sense of belonging & community, involving parents in educational preparation
- Break down barriers that favour one group over another.
- High quality learning and teaching experiences based on knowledge and experience
- collaboration between the school/college/parents/family & outsides partnerships & mobility (links internationally) to develop global citizens
- Provide an excellent link between agencies and schools, colleges and universities

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