

There is no normal anymore

Published: January 13, 2026, 2:05 am

The chaos in English schools at present is deeply significant. A tiny proportion of pupils are meant to have returned to school: half of them have not. Parents do not trust that it is safe to return their children: the lack of confidence in the government is quite staggering.

I am told by a teacher that the quality of teaching for those that have returned is seriously inadequate. Social distancing has required that the old days of a teacher standing in front of the class and barking out instructions has returned. And when a child does not understand that instruction teaching staff cannot get near enough to them because of social distancing rules to see what they are doing, and so help them to overcome their misunderstanding. It is inevitable, as a result, that significant problems will result.

What is more, at the school where the teacher in question is working there is not enough confidence to buy school books for the autumn term as yet. The belief that what will be required are home working books is, apparently, very strong. Some of that may be pragmatic: the chance that all children will be able to return to buildings simply not capable of meeting social distancing requirements is low, and so home working is likely to be necessary for a long time to come. But some of the reason is that there is real concern that a second wave of coronavirus will have hit by then and so schools will not be able to function on site anyway: lockdown will have returned instead. What is certain is that there are no funds to plan for both on site and home working options, and so everything is on hold.

This is serious in itself, of course. That there is a real chance that many children and young people will need an additional year at school to overcome the educational disadvantage that they will have suffered is very real, but I have not seen it discussed, as yet.

But it is also indicative of the chaos in wider society that we have not got close to acknowledging but will have to once shops attempt to reopen, and that is that the whole of the infrastructure of our society is premised on the logic of cramming as many

people as possible into a small space, and we simply do not have the option of changing that for a long time to come.

It may be that shops will reopen. But the queues outside many of them will be horrendous, whilst the chance of any retailer making much money will be low because of the additional cost of imposing social distancing and because of the small number of people who will be allowed in to shop at any time, which is bound to restrict the amount of trade.

The same problems will, of course, be seen in many other situations as well.

Coronavirus has not only already caused 60,000 premature deaths in the UK, many of which could have been avoided. Precisely because we have still got nothing like control of the virus, unlike many other countries, its continuing cost is also going to be phenomenal: the collapse in labour productivity in schools, shops and so many other environments is not a concern for just a few weeks, as the government clearly hopes. It will instead be an issue for a considerable time to come. And in that case our ability to do so many things previously taken for granted can no longer be presumed.

Of course, I could be wrong: Covid 19 might just fade away.

Or we may get an effective vaccine.

Or, much more unlikely, track and trace could work.

But I am not as yet at all optimistic on any of these fronts and see no reason to be so.

In that case it appears wise to think completely differently about the way in which our society will have to work in the future, which is very different from the way it has done in the past. And although I now see lots of plans coming out for the post coronavirus economy, and I am involved in some such projects, what few seem to assume likely is a fundamental change in labour productivity, which is likely to be radically lower in many sectors than it has been for decades. And until we get our heads around what that demands (and I am only beginning to do so) the chances of working out a true plan for recovery are very limited.

Whilst the chance of working out the consequences of our having massively lower productivity when many other countries do not is something no one seems dare think of, although it is very real.

I thought that coronavirus was going to be profoundly significant sometime before the government did. But I admit I underestimated its impact. I now think the future is almost unknown to us. To say that we will have to rethink almost everything is to understate the scale of the issues that we are facing. There is no normal anymore.