

# **The Moral Economy of Solidarity: A longitudinal study of special needs teachers**

## **Abstract**

Based on a longitudinal study of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in England for children excluded from mainstream schools and utilising a moral economy lens, this article explores how solidarity is created and maintained in a very particular community of teachers and learning support assistants (LSAs). A moral economy approach highlights the centrality of people's moral norms and values for understanding the multi-layered dimensions of solidarity in organisations and how it changes in the context of transformations in the labour process. The article illustrates how teachers and LSA's rely on mutuality, underpinned by moral norms of justice, and values of care, dignity and recognition, to cope with physically and emotionally demanding work that is under-resourced and under-valued. The analysis reveals that solidarity is not only against unjust workplace regimes, but also for connectivity and a humanised labour process.

**Sharon C. Bolton**

University of Stirling, UK

**Knut Laaser**

Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus–Senftenberg, Germany

University of Stirling, UK

**Keywords:** Pupil Referral Unit, Solidarity, Moral Economy, Labour Process, Austerity, Inequality, Schools

**Corresponding author:**

Knut Laaser, Institute for Philosophy and Social Sciences, Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg, Erich Weinert Str. 1-2, 03046 Cottbus, LG 10. Email: laaser@b-tu.de

## **Introduction**

This article explores how solidarity is created and maintained in a very particular community of teachers and learning support assistants (LSAs) based in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in England for children excluded from mainstream schools. A moral economy framework highlights the centrality of people's moral norms and values, the political economy and the organisation of work and the way normative evaluations, relationships and acts of solidarity are shaped (Sayer, 2005). The rich data reveals that solidarity at the PRU is not only juxtaposed *against* something, as in individual and collective action against increasingly unjust management practice, but remains *for* community; humanising the labour process through mutuality, common responsibilities and respect.

A focus on solidarity is important in the context of the wider restructuring of the public sector in the UK. Policy making has increasingly approached education 'from an economic point of view' (Ball, 2017:13), introducing a fragmented centralised governance model that reduces the decision making of schools and minimises the autonomy of teachers; while disengaging with teacher union organisations (Carter and Stevenson, 2012). The establishment of austerity-driven public management practices since 2010 brought unprecedented cuts in total school spending per pupil in England by 8 percent (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018), in tandem with an intensification of performance management practices in schools that measure in detail 'teacher's added value' (Evers and Kneyber, 2015:2); ranking and benchmarking

individual teachers within and between schools, introducing reward schemes for high performing schools and teachers and punitive practices for those who are not considered to add value (Ball, 2017; Mathert and Seifert, 2014). In this context, it is claimed that teachers lose their moral agency (Evers and Kneyber, 2015:4); becoming de-professionalised in an educational system that operates on a 'bring in, burn out, replace' system (Stevenson and Gilliland, 2015:108). Collective mobilisation and resistance of teachers have been reported to rarely materialise (Stevenson, 2017), with teachers complying with new managerial regimes (Hall and McGinity, 2015) and destroying traditional forms and sources of solidarities (Ball, 2017).

Within this landscape, the PRU operates a form of 'alternative provision' for children who have been excluded from mainstream schools. It is a particularly interesting case as the reforms implemented are in stark contrast with the neediness and behavioural challenges the children bring. These complex dynamics are revealed through the presentation of data spanning 14 years. The voice of one particular teacher, Hannah, shines through; supported by accompanying narratives and observations. The article illustrates how relationships with colleagues, teachers' engagement with pupils, and the mutuality they rely on to cope with physically and emotionally demanding work, are vital elements of work in the PRU. The occupational community relies upon particular forms of solidarity born of relational practice and underpinned by a moral economy. In what Sayer (2005:89) describes as an ethical surplus that captures workers' moral expectations, commitments and attachments that 'are likely to spill beyond what is contractually defined', solidarity at the PRU involves teachers' moral norms of justice that frame the means and ends of education, and moral values of care, respect, dignity and recognition for each other and the children they teach that inform daily practices and relations at the PRU. The article highlights that the ethical surplus solidarity in the PRU builds on a foundational form of solidarity that emanates from the inequalities of the

employment relationship and labour process. In the light of the changes the PRU was subject to, solidarity at the PRU remains but is now of a different essence as the joy and sense of achievement that once held the community together is combined with anxiety and distrust of management, embodying a weakened ethical surplus solidarity, but a strong foundational solidarity. Continuing the project of strengthening the moral dimensions of the labour process (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Laaser, 2016), the article presents a moral economy view in order to support explorations of the relationship between solidarity and morality.

### **The Pupil Referral Unit and the restructuring of education**

The PRU is an unknown entity to many people as it sits outside of the mainstream education system offering temporary provision for excluded pupils in the United Kingdom (Department for Education, 2015). The government introduced a network of PRUs in 1993 to accommodate the rising number of excluded pupils so that they did not disrupt the league table status of mainstream schools (Ball, 2017:134; Education Committee, 2018). Hand in hand with the rising number of temporary and permanent exclusions of pupils from state schools<sup>1</sup>, the quantity of pupils placed within a PRU steadily increased between 2012 and 2017. In August 2013, 12895 pupils were registered with a PRU (Department for Education, 2015), in 2016 it was 15669 (Department for Education, 2017) and in 2017, 16,732 (Department for Education, 2018a). In addition, there are 10,000 pupils with subsidiary registrations (i.e. pupils on the rolls of schools and attending a PRU for some of the time) (Department for Education, 2018b). The majority of pupils registered with PRUs in 2017 came from secondary schools; were between 11 and 15 years old (14731), and two thirds of all PRU pupils were male (Department for Education, 2018a). Despite increasing numbers of pupils requiring a place, the number of PRUs steadily fell from 452 to 352 between 2010 and 2017 (Department for Education, 2018a).

Along with stagnating numbers of full-time employed teachers, many PRUs are now oversubscribed (Department for Education, 2017; Education Committee, 2018:9).

PRUs are under pressure to reintegrate pupils back into mainstream school, though many stay with a PRU for a number of years and/ or are moved to schools that offer special provision (Gazeley et al., 2013). Children and young people educated in alternative provision are among the most vulnerable; not only excluded from mainstream school but also society (Education Committee, 2018). Commonly seen as ‘an educational underclass’ (Michael Gove in Taylor, 2012), they are mainly from socially deprived backgrounds, many with undiagnosed mental health issues and/or special educational needs and some with criminal records. PRUs are described as a ‘Cinderella service’ (BBC, 2014); they are poorly resourced, find it difficult to recruit and retain staff, and, within the fierce debate about pupil behaviour and educational standards, teachers are frequently slated for failing to perform (Cole, 2015). Much maligned by governments and the media, PRUs have become known as ‘dumping grounds’ for pupils with behavioural issues who develop into the ‘criminals of tomorrow’ (Skidmore, 2013); while the middle-class schools that are too quick to exclude pupils receive little censure (Ball, 2017; Education Committee, 2018).

Nevertheless, there has been mounting pressure to raise educational standards of the PRU to those of a mainstream school (Cole, 2015). Targets are given to PRUs as a unit but are then passed to individual teachers as part of newly introduced performance management systems. Since April 2013, PRUs are offered greater control over their personal funds and staffing (Department for Education, 2015). Within tight budgetary constraints, performance objectives are ambitious. At the PRU which is the empirical site for this study, teachers are monitored and ‘observed’ three times a year to judge classroom performance and student engagement, and are given attainment targets for pupils set at levels similar to mainstream schools. Under OFSTED inspections during the early years of PRUs, for individual teachers to

be regarded as 'satisfactory' was deemed acceptable (Cullingford and Daniels, 1999), however performance expectations have increased significantly over the last few years, coupled with an increasing utilisation of disciplinary policies for underperformance.

It is within this context that the article explores the forms solidarity take, what it means to those involved in its creation and how solidarity might be re-shaped by the intense performance and resource pressures introduced over the first 20 years of PRUS, and writ large over the period 2012 - 2017.

### **Solidarity at work: Towards a moral economy approach**

Solidarity is at the heart of the classics of social theory. A foundational contribution comes from Durkheim (1933) who, against the backdrop of the transformation from traditional, tight-knit community to a complex, large-scale industrial society, differentiates the societal structures and relationships that nurture solidarity. Introducing the terms *mechanical solidarity* and *organic solidarity*, Durkheim suggests the former is associated primarily, but not exclusively, with pre-modern societies and understood to be based on a totality of common beliefs and norms, fostering a collective consciousness; while the latter is also located in complex societies that are characterised by a division of labour and heterogenous interests and beliefs, which are bound together by actors' mutuality: a dependence to achieve common interests and goals, and shared moral values and norms. Durkheim's work on solidarity remains influential for contemporary work and employment literature (Baines, 2011; Church and Outram, 1998; Hyman, 1999), while more recent approaches divert from the Durkheimian approach to solidarity to focus on a political and relational grounded approach; exploring in particular the power asymmetries between worker and capital, workers' moral values and the forms of solidarity that emerge (Atzeni, 2012; Baines, 2016; Kelly, 1998). Expanding and reinforcing such contributions, the article further emphasises the interplay between the labour

process, solidarity and morality via a moral economy approach that offers a strong account of people as reflective, caring and lay moral actors who have complex relational needs and concerns.

Kelly's (1998; 2018) celebrated *Rethinking Industrial Relations* proposes a process-oriented version of mobilisation theory that rests on social movement theory for exploring why and how workers may or may not become a collective and confront employers. Utilising a Marxist understanding of the fundamental antagonistic relations between capital and labour, Kelly locates the starting point of collective action in workers' individual shared sense of injustice; noted as the 'conviction that an event, action or situation is wrong or illegitimate' (Kelly, 1998:27). Leaders, broadly defined as activists, workplace union representatives or union officers at local and national level are key to this process, as they frame and link individual perceptions of injustice to a cause arising from the inequalities structured within the employment relationship, while promoting a plausible solution and convincing workers of the benefits of collective organisation and solidaristic actions to fight for the cause (Kelly, 1998:127). Kelly's work has been influential for studies of contemporary workers and has brought the moral value of (in)justice to the fore (see also: Blyton and Jenkins, 2013; Gall, 2018). However, there is a neglect of the central role of moral evaluations that are shared between workers in the daily labour process and inform the building and maintaining of solidarity that aims to mediate, resist and possibly transform injustice at work through informal and formal actions and relationships.

Atzeni acknowledges the usefulness of Kelly's framework for combining workers' collective action with a critical contextualisation of capital-labour relations (2009). Nevertheless, he argues that Kelly's leadership centred approach does not account for spontaneous labour mobilisations. Similar to Kelly, Atzeni utilises a Marxist perspective for exploring the relationship between capital and labour, but places emphasis on workers' lived

experience of the labour process, while taking a ‘grass-roots’ based approach to collective action (Atzeni, 2010:12); locating solidarity within the realm of the ubiquitous contradictions and crises triggered by the capitalist labour process. Here, solidarity is conceptualised as a product of the co-operative and collective nature of the labour process that shapes mutual dependency between workers and a shared understanding that the interests between employers and workers are fundamentally different and in conflict (Atzeni, 2010). At the heart of Atzeni’s thesis is that worker solidarity exists only in potentia and needs to become activated through ‘moments of collectivism’ in times of crises as ‘spontaneous, unorganised mobilisations’ (Atzeni, 2009:7). Such moments push workers to harmonise individual and collective needs and enable a sharing of subjective perceptions of injustice and attribute collective meaning; allowing workers to overcome their structural dependency on the employer and identification with the ‘particular capital employing them’ (Atzeni, 2010:30).

Atzeni’s conceptualisation bears strong similarities with Fantasia’s seminal work, ‘Cultures of Solidarity’, that understands worker solidarity as resting on mutual association in times of acute conflict; fostering ‘values, practices and institutional manifestations of mutuality’ (1988:25) that are created intersubjectively (see also: Fantasia, 1995:280). This is particularly evident in Fantasia’s case study of an industrial conflict in Clinton (Iowa, USA) where throughout a prolonged strike by corn processing workers solidarity grew stronger, establishing over time a ‘moral economy’ (1988:206). Workers developed shared moral norms and values of mutual responsibility, reciprocity, justice and dignity which informed strike actions that were concerned with workplace issues; while also shaping wider cultural, political and economic practices that were ‘other-directed’ (1988:193) with wider social justice values at their heart. Atzeni and Fantasia emphasise the relational character of worker solidarity that is understood to be triggered by particular workplace dynamics and the wider political economy; emphasising human agency and acknowledging structural constraints.



It is the understanding of moral values and norms as emerging throughout the creation of solidarity that this article builds on. However, in Atzeni's work, and to some degree in Fantasia's, workers moral agency appear to be seriously hampered by capitalist structures and ideologies. Solidarity between workers is causally linked to rare tipping point situations in the labour process that allow workers to question the otherwise taken for granted capitalist domination and their own subordination (Atzeni, 2010).

Baines' (2011; 2016) research on solidarity and informal resistance in care work places a stronger focus on the relationship between solidarity and moral agency. Baines illustrates how moral values of social justice and equity inform strong solidaristic bonds between workers, clients and the community. Extending Durkheim's organic solidarity approach, Baines (2011:146) conceptualises solidarity as 'shared responsibility and humanising pursuit (...) [to] share concerns and defence of the disadvantaged'; illustrating how worker solidarity, in the context of hostile societal discourse towards vulnerable people, budget cuts and managerialism, included care workers' formal and informal resistance. Formal resistance includes social movement unionism that is understood as the organisation of workers and community campaigns on themes such as gender inequality and environmental issues forming a basis of solidarity that spills beyond workplace concerns. Collective informal resistance includes encouraging clients to fight against the care organisation they worked for and bending or breaking task prescriptions and performance targets for the sake of clients' welfare. Baines' account is valuable for illustrating how solidarity includes resistive practices *and* human connections at work; both informed by workers' moral values and norms. Aiming to deepen the relationship between the conflictual nature of the employment relationship, solidarity and moral values and norms that emerges in the discussed literature, the article provides a moral economy frame that deepens the relational focus and places even greater emphasis on human connection.

The concept of moral economy was popularised by E.P. Thompson (1993) who refers to the ways economic practices are bound up with shared moral norms of justice and legitimacy concerning a crowd's entitlement to goods that are considered essential for their livelihood. In this light, he argues that the food riots in 18th-century England were not 'rebellions of the belly', but a defence of traditional moral norms that were attacked by an increase in bread prices in times of scarcity. Integral to E.P. Thompson's moral economy account is an understanding of the way moral norms informed solidarity between members of a community that was characterised by mutual reciprocity, shared obligations and commitments to defend entitlements to livelihood. E.P. Thompson's approach focussed heavily on the normative dimensions of solidarity and struggle against encroaching commodification and market relations. Andrew Sayer (2005; 2007; 2011) picks up E.P. Thompson's focus on the normative aspect and includes moral values to add a stronger emphasis on moral economy's evaluative dimensions.

Andrew Sayer's work moral economy approach is located in the contemporary political economy, enabling an understanding of how capitalist economic practices are influenced by people's moral norms and, especially, moral values and how, in turn, these are constrained by capitalist forces (Sayer, 2005). This approach is informed by a wider human and moral agency account that conceptualises people as vulnerable, sentient and dependent beings who develop moral values, including dignity, care and respect, through being immersed in institutions, practices and social relationships. Moral values are understood to inform lay morality; referring to an ongoing capacity to monitor and evaluate how practices and relationships impact on people's own and others' well-being and informing actions that resist and mediate practices that are understood to be harmful (Sayer, 2011). In this way social solidarity and counteraction can be seen as not exclusively fighting for 'goods and power but about how to live, about what is a just, virtuous or good life and a good society' (2011:172). In line with the discussed work

and employment literature, approaches, Sayer (2007) highlights that a fundamental tension exists between practices that seek profit maximisation and workers' needs for human connections of respect and recognition. However, he emphasises that people monitor and evaluate through their lay morality what happens at work and engage in formal and informal practices that have a solidarity at their heart that emanates from the inequalities of the employment relationship and labour process. In this way, such a solidarity encapsulates a shared understanding of the necessity to establish, maintain and defend the well-being of oneself and those people that actors care for by mediating and resisting harmful practices and relations at work. This echoes Kelly's (1998) focus on the importance of the moral values of injustice and Atzeni's (2010) concept of embryonic solidarity. In contrast, the framework this article utilises offers a wider array of moral values that are considered to be significant in motivating people to build and maintain solidarity at work, while understanding solidarity as inevitably interwoven with the social relations of the labour process and therefore, in different shapes and forms, always activated.

In addition, the article utilises Sayer's (2007) concept of ethical surplus, which combines the concept of lay morality and the understanding of solidarity as entailing wider struggles for just relations, referring to relationships between workers that are characterized by levels of trust, respect, recognition and gift-relations, developing over time in co-operative work environments and overlapping commitments and shared identities. Solidarity that is informed by an ethical surplus represents thick human connections and practices at work that go beyond defending acts, but embody a variety of moral expectations and practices, featuring mutuality, gift-giving, a strong concern for others and the nurturing of an environment that enables flourishing. Adding to Baines' (2016) notion of a 'moral project' and Fantasia's (1988) "moral economy solidarity", the article considers solidarity as a fragile human endeavour that emerges over time through people's relationships and experiences that begin to overlap and

develop into shared moral values and norms that are for human connection and shared commitments.

## Research Process

The empirical focus of this article is the experiences of teachers and learning support assistants (LSAs) who work in a PRU for primary aged children (5-11 years old). Data presented are drawn from a qualitative study spanning over 14 years. During the first ten years (April 2003-February 2013) visits were made to the PRU, which included day to day observation and repeated interviews with staff. Further individual interviews were conducted with two teachers in 2014 and again in 2015, and a teacher and two LSAs in 2017 (see table 1.)

Interview Participants (Pseudonyms)	2003 to 2013	2014	2015	2017
Hannah (Teacher)	<b>15 hours</b>	<b>3 hours</b>	<b>3 hours</b>	<b>5 hours</b>
Betty (Teacher)	<b>12 hours</b>	<b>2 hours</b>	<b>2 hours</b>	
Lucy (Teacher)	<b>13 hours</b>			
Hazel (Teacher)	<b>9 hours</b>			
Sheila (Senior Teacher)	<b>14 hours</b>			
Celia (Head Teacher)	<b>6 hours</b>			
Martin (Deputy Head)	<b>10 hours</b>			
Lisa (LSA)	<b>13 hours</b>			<b>1.5 hours</b>
Liz (LSA)	<b>7 hours</b>			
Fiona (LSA)	<b>5 hours</b>			<b>1 hour</b>
<b>Observation</b>	<b>490 hours</b>			

Time at the school was spent observing individual teachers in class, sitting in assemblies observing the whole school together, and joining staff in the staff room at break and lunch times and also for staff meetings after school. Over a ten-year period a total of 73 days of participant observation took place; a more intensive period in the first and second year of engagement, followed by shorter annual visits during the following years. An original focus on a case study of a particular organisation changed after ten years when there was a time-gap in

data collection. Picking up with key characters again following an 18-month lapse of communication (between 2014 and 2015) forged a different kind of research conversation as some had moved to work at different PRUs. The discussion centred more on individual experience and the most recent conversations specifically asked for teachers' and LSAs' thoughts on solidarity.

The data travels through many changes and periods of time and offers insights into the changing nature of teachers' work. The most prominent, fullest and consistent narrative is delivered by Hannah. She has been involved in the research from its inception and has offered continuous commentary throughout the 14 years since. It is through Hannah's story-telling that the article begins to understand what it is that builds, breaks and re-builds solidarity in different forms. Hannah's stories are supported by a wealth of other data based on observation and interviews that shows how her narrative acts as an eloquent and powerful voice for teachers working in PRUs. The data reveals that as new institutional realities impact upon the PRUs where she works/ worked, solidarity takes on a new form that is shaped by exhaustion and bitterness and a battle against new performance regimes manufactured by a middle class notion of the 'achieving child' (Department for Education, 2015).

### **2003 to 2007: Solidarity and its foundations**

The first visits to the PRU in 2003 suggested that teaching staff held strong moral norms regarding the means and ends of education in general and about the PRU in particular; represented by a belief in education as a means to eradicate inequality, contribute to social justice and the collective goal to help pupils to flourish. Moral norms informed teaching staff's solidarity in the way caring practices were embedded into pedagogic goals, taking pupils' individual histories and vulnerabilities into account, while defending them against exaggerated expectations from external agencies:

‘Some days are hard, they feel hard. I can’t think of a better word to describe it. These children require consistent and dedicated attention. We all get so excited when a child achieves something. But the secret is not to have too many expectations. It’s not fair on the child or yourself. These children have been through hell and back and they live lives not many of us will ever really understand’ (*Hannah, 2006*).

At the same time, teaching staff were keen to express that theirs is an organisation held in little regard by the general public. Mirroring media reports, an ongoing theme throughout the data collection period was the way staff frequently refer to the PRU as acting as a ‘dustbin’ for the children mainstream education cannot and will not educate, and they frequently described themselves and the children as ‘*the people nobody cares about*’. The very disregard shown to them by society connected and bound the staff into a strong caring community. All of the teaching staff, including the Head Teacher, used the word ‘special’ when describing the circumstances in which they worked and their relationships with the children and each other. The specialness was held up with pride; drawing a line between themselves and ‘the outside world’. In this environment, relational moral values of care, recognition, dignity and injustice emerged from shared past and present experiences and translated into concrete practices and relationships that created an ethical surplus and had solidarity at their heart.

Such practices are often represented in ways that may not always be recognised by other collegiate communities in the way teaching staff communicated to each other with harsh humour and loud exchanges. This is featured in how teaching staff generally talked about their work as ‘no one could do this job but us’ and ‘it’s a tough job but someone’s got to do it’. At the core of these relationships was the mutual exchange of respect and recognition for engaging

in the physical and psychologically demanding work required of them. Hannah's narrative illuminates this further:

‘It’s a harsh environment and it’s taken a bit of getting used to. Especially hard is the sense that no one actually cares about us and what we do. We’re society’s dustbin. For example, we dialled 999 three times yesterday and nobody came. The windows in my room are being smashed (by a pupil) and no one came’ (*Hannah, 2003*).

‘I love it here. It’s exhausting but we’re like a family. The staff room is worse than the classrooms for bad behaviour! It took me a while to get used to the way staff talk to each other, they shout and swear and at the same time say how much they love each other’ (*Hannah, 2004*).

At the heart of solidarity in this environment, moral values of care built a protective space in which both teaching staff and pupils experienced support and opportunities to flourish while moral norms of justice informed lay normative evaluations about the educational and pastoral mission (Sayer, 2011). It is interesting to note that during this period of data collection, school management did not appear as ‘other’, but echoed teaching staff’s comments about the distinctiveness of the PRU.

### **2007 – 13: Solidarity meets managerialism**

Teaching staff at the PRU worked consistently to offer the children structure and care in order to encourage forms of behaviour that would normally be expected in mainstream schools. What may appear insignificant in a mainstream school can be a major achievement at the PRU and, in observing teaching staff, their responses to any form of achievement appeared over-

exaggerated and theatrical. In Hannah's poignant story about David, a PRU pupil, solidarity is embedded in the moral norm of social justice and driven by moral values of care that inform the daily commitment to improve the future for pupils:

I have taught David since I came to work here. He is an absolute nightmare. He bites, kicks, screams, runs around generally causing havoc. But do you know, last week he came and sat on my knee and said 'Miss, you're beautiful like a flower'. I was absolutely gobsmacked, I thought he was coming to bite me! Anyway, after fighting for two years we've finally got him a place in a special school. I thought I'd be jumping for joy but I feel such a sense of loss (*Hannah, 2007*).

It was a common theme from all teaching staff that 'it isn't enough to love these children' (Celia, Head Teacher, 2007). All teaching staff observed the challenge of attempting to achieve educational attainment for children that 'find it a challenge to sit still and engage in what the rest of us would class as normal conduct' (Liz, LSA, 2009). To cope with these difficulties, teaching staff paid attention to each other's well-being in the form of support and intervention in times of need. An example is when a child's behaviour is physically aggressive teaching staff call out 'kick off' and other teaching staff came to help the teacher or LSA involved. Teaching staff were trained to 'restrain', that is how to hold a child safely while they calm down. It was, and remains, a contentious policy which has been debated publicly, with teaching staff frequently maligned for taking such an approach (BBC, 2014). Comments from all teaching staff echoed how they experienced injustice, not primarily because of the abandoning of the practice of 'restraining', but because of the lack of recognition of shared values of care that were inherent in their collective efforts to support behaviour change and protect pupils and themselves from injury. Hannah describes how a new head teacher's policy on restraining children impacts on the entire PRU community:



. ‘We have new behaviour policies now and can’t restrain children. I’m not sorry as I always hated it and found it hard physically too. But now we’re meant to ignore bad behaviour. The other day a child was put in the corridor for bad behaviour. He worked his way down the corridor and destroyed all the lovely displays we had just finished with the children - weeks of work. I had to sit in the classroom and let him get on with it. It isn’t fair on him, on the other children, or the staff. One of my LSAs was in tears. There has to be a half-way house between restrain and this. I was bitten on my arm last week – it looks like a dog bite. Another member of staff was bitten on the cheek. And another twisted her ankle backing away as a child lunged at her. Who is protecting us?’  
(*Hannah, 2009*).

In support of Hannah’s narrative, other teaching staff, for the first time, expressed a strong sense of injustice that was directed internally at school management, rather than as previously at society at large. Comments from all teaching staff crept into many discussions about contemporary conditions and indicated a growing disconnection between management and teaching staff.:

‘They (the senior management at the PRU) have no idea what it takes just to function on a day to day basis with these kids. We have to spend hours producing lesson plans that would be ideal when children are able to sit and listen but we end up spending so much time on managing behaviour we never achieve the plans and are then criticised for it as our own performance issue’ (*Betty, Teacher, 2011*).

One of the most contested new developments was the managerial attention to performance evaluation, expressed in the selective codification and measurement of teachers’ work that is linked with pupils’ achievements. Teaching staff experienced this shift as an attack on their moral economy; it violated their moral norms by neglecting the necessary attention given to behaviour management and thereby undermined established caring practices and

systems of reciprocity by focussing on individual performance of teachers and academic achievement of pupils (with no recognition of major achievements in improving behaviour). However, while Hannah received a negative performance evaluation, her perception of injustice was buffered through the moral values of recognition, care and respect for her efforts and knowledge received from her colleagues that characterised the ‘thick’ horizontal relationships in the PRU (Sayer, 2011):

Since we last spoke there has been another OFSTED inspection, I got ‘satisfactory’ this time. It seems that’s not enough. Other teachers got ‘good’ or even better. But that’s ok, I think what I do is recognised by other teachers and LSAs in the School. I’ve got the class with the most challenging children. We’ve also got more children in the class and less one-to-one support for them. LSAs have helped me with the class displays and teachers are helping with planning my lesson for OFSTED. They take the piss out of me, but I know what they’re like now and I know that actually they really care. I couldn’t do this job without them (*Hannah, 2011*).

What is particularly striking in this narrative is the acknowledgement that Hannah considered her colleagues as being stronger than her in certain areas, but that they complement each other. A senior teacher commented that Hannah had ‘nailed the behavioural challenges’ the children presented and was ‘unfazed by the most un-charming children’ (Sheila, *Senior Teacher, 2012*) and an LSA described Hannah as a ‘rock’ to be relied upon (Lisa, *LSA, 2010*). This emphasised a collective solidarity and mutual dependence that was underpinned by an ethical surplus built over time (Sayer, 2007; 2011). Nevertheless, during this period solidarity among teaching staff began to build as opposition to management that was expressed in anger and a defence of established moral norms and values and the practices they inform.

## **2014-2015: Holding on to the core of solidarity in the age of extremes**

Following a time-gap in the data collection, a new narrative developed that was angry and defiant against the increasing demands to ‘achieve more with less’ and ‘whatever we do is never enough’ (Lucy, *Teacher*, 2015). Teaching staff experienced an attack on their moral norms via tightened performance targets that reduced autonomy, instrumentalised staff achievements and jeopardised caring practices and exchanges of mutual recognition between staff (Sayer, 2011). Meanwhile, teaching staff also highlighted their commitment to the shared moral norms at the PRU that characterised their solidarity, which was represented in the occurrence of ‘informal resistance’ (Baines, 2016); visible in the bending of rules and targets for pupils and the subsidising of extra school activities from personal budget:

‘There is no doubt the job is getting tougher. We don’t have any budget to take the kids swimming or out on trips. I buy treats for the kids as I’m told there is no money for such frivolities. These are essential aspects of behaviour management. We’ve got fewer LSAs but more kids. We’re being given ridiculous targets for the children. They come to us and can hardly read and we’re meant to increase their reading age by 3 years in a few months! And we’ve got yet another OFSTED inspection looming. There have been a few changes, a new head teacher and new deputy and big ambitions for the PRU to be seen as a leading light’ (*Hannah*, 2014).

Teaching staff began to recognise that their own community driven solidarity was at risk of being undermined through the emphasis on individual performance and disciplinary practices:

We’re just about hanging onto the daft moments that keep us sane. You won’t see the funny side but we were in stitches this morning as Betty told us the story about the child trying to put a greasy sausage in her Gucci bag. She was shouting ‘put that sausage down’ like it was an offensive weapon! No matter what they throw at us we watch each other’s backs and get on with it. But they [managers] are killing the goodwill. My sister

told me to join the Union and I did. Others have too. I recently sought advice on the ‘satisfactory’ status I achieved at the OFSTED inspection last time as I’m so scared I’m going to lose my job when they review me next time. I’d never have dreamt of being in a union a few years ago (*Hannah, 2014*).

Previously their community was as one against the world, but during this period senior PRU management became a distinct entity and the ‘enemy within’ (*Lucy, Teacher, 2014*). Like Hannah, several teachers joined a union; searching for protection via an institutionalised solidarity that they had not felt was necessary previously; bringing the union density at the PRU significantly above the national average of circa 45 percent in the context of declining membership in teaching unions (Dept. for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. Paradoxically, the Head Teacher was the only long-standing trade union member. Nevertheless, trade union membership did not become a new driver of their collective community. In common with many teachers across the UK, teachers at the PRU joined the trade union as an individualised insurance policy and would be reluctant to engage in any form of industrial action (Garner, 2013); holding the view that it would be ‘disruptive; for both staff and children (*Lucy, Teacher, 2015*).

The ethical surplus remained pivotal to their daily work and was primarily inherent in everyday interactions between staff. Hannah was not the only one who told the story of the sausage and the designer handbag, revealing how human connections continue to create a solidarity based on the ‘specialness’ that is continually declared. In seeking new externalised forms of solidarity, internal solidarity was not destroyed but materialised in different ways; both *for* community and *against* performative pressures.

Hannah continues her narrative following the OFSTED inspection in 2015. It is telling how the space available to develop relationships, that will both support behaviour change in

---

<sup>1</sup> Typically, LSAs are not members of a trade union.

the children and offer care and concern to staff had diminished. Rather, a sense of pressure and exasperation at the setting of unrealistic targets emerged that teaching staff viewed as a constant 'squeeze' on their ability to 'deliver the care and attention that the children deserve' (Lucy, *Teacher*, 2015). Teachers must achieve 'good' or 'outstanding' from their teaching observations; a 'satisfactory' would have incurred a 'support plan' that ultimately may lead to a formal warning, and two 'satisfactory' observations (or less than 'satisfactory) trigger 'competency' procedures; which may lead to dismissal. There is a general consensus among the teachers at the PRU that teaching is no longer a 'job for life' or even a highly esteemed profession that is able to protect its work practices and status (NUT, 2012).

Following this period of research, Hannah moved to another PRU and explained why she feels compelled to leave:

I got a 'good' at the last OFSTED but it's been a nightmare since. Every couple of weeks we're being observed and the Head keeps telling me I'm not even going to make satisfactory at the next OFSTED inspection. We don't see eye to eye on behaviour strategies and he is rotating staff so that we don't have a chance to work together closely or spend time in the staff room, which was always a means of letting off steam and sharing experiences. The targets and inspections are killing us all (*Hannah*, 2015).

### **2017: 'Different place, same shit':**

In 2017 Hannah and two other LSAs (from the case study PRU) were interviewed. The disappointed tone in the discussions of 2014/15 emerged even more strongly. A heightened performance culture drove a change in the quality of working lives for those who teach and support the children on a day to day basis. Solidarity changed shape and became increasingly oppositional against management:

‘I moved from the old place because I couldn’t get on with the Head. I was so sorry to leave people behind. But here I am, different place, same shit. I realise now that it wasn’t just an individual Head Teacher but that the system has changed. We get given targets that are just wild – some of these children come to us hungry, dirty, brutalised and they think we can get them out the door with the same reading and numeracy standards as the nice middle class kid on the other side of town.’

Solidarity? ..... I don’t think that’s the right word. We have togetherness; a bond that means we’re here for each other. We’ve always had that but it’s changed. Things have got so much worse. Every one of us has had a serious injury over the past year. I was kicked so hard on my leg it caused major tissue damage. I always thought society didn’t care about us or the kids but I think it’s even worse than that now – society has abandoned these kids. But what do they do? Blame the teacher for not performing. I had a grown man (an LSA) sit on the floor last week and cry.

I’ve spoken to the Union about the targets given to me. They are impossible to achieve. Oddly, people only go off sick with physical injury. No one is off with stress. I think it’s because we’re still working as a community and we care about the kids. They’re exploiting that. We also really care for each other. That is one thing that has remained the same. But we spend too much time bitching about management, targets etc. We don’t really have the space to have fun and let off steam like we used to. I miss that (*Hannah, 2017*).

Listening to Hannah as she moved from one PRU to another brings a broader perspective to her understanding that the issues she faced are systemic and not the result of one particular managerial regime. The LSAs interviewed at this time echoed Hannah’s concerns and a deep sadness ran through all of the interviews:

A child threw a chair at me and broke my arm. I was told by the deputy-head I hadn't followed the procedure properly in handling the child's behaviour. It made me so angry. Not at the child but the deputy head. It feels so unfair on all of us. I get blamed for breaking my own arm and the rest of the staff have to work harder to make up for the fact I've only got one working arm! (Lisa, *LSA*, 2017)

Bonds of care actively continued and an ethical surplus survived even in the face of constraints. Nevertheless, there appears little doubt that the solidarity that was for community became to a greater degree externalised; targeted more at expressing individual suffering and *against* PRU management that increasingly represented, in the eyes of the teaching staff, a system that does not care.

## **Discussion**

The article adds to approaches that share an interest in the role of values and norms in shaping solidarity at work (Atzeni, 2009; Baines, 2011; 2016; Fantasia, 1988; Kelly, 1999), refuting claims that in the context of heightened performance targets and an increasingly individualised labour process, teachers' moral agency in general and sources of solidarity in particular are destroyed (Ball, 2017; Evers and Kneyber, 2015). Through a moral economy approach, a deeper understanding is introduced of the interplay between moral norms and values and changing forms of solidarity in the context of radical changes in the workplace. Utilising the work of E.P. Thompson and Sayer as an analytical scaffold informs an understanding of bottom-up moral norms of justice as the means and ends of wider social and economic struggles; such as social justice, mutual responsibilities, and others' well-being (Sayer, 2005). Kelly's (1998) emphasis on workers' moral sentiments of injustice that support mobilisation and counteraction vis-à-vis the employer is important. However, his framework does not capture the varieties and nuances of solidarity that are embedded in workers' shared moral

values and norms and their experiences of the labour process and its social relations. Atzeni's thesis, however, usefully focuses on the centrality of workers' experience of injustice for capturing various forms of labour uprisings and solidarity at work. Nevertheless, Atzeni's position on solidarity constrains the relevance of moral values for social relations at work and the labour process. In contrast, the analysis presented here illustrates that in the PRU moral norms of justice and values of dignity, respect and care are informing different forms of solidarity, while being inevitably interwoven, though to different degrees, with the labour process and its social relations. In a similar fashion to Baines' (2011) focus on the importance of employees' moral projects for formal and informal practices at work, this article provides a novel framework that highlights how moral norms and values enable unconditional human relations at work through which ethical surplus solidarity can flourish; or, alternatively, is narrowed down through an individualised and disconnecting labour process.

Further, the article contributes to the discussed approach to solidarity by introducing the dimensions of ethical surplus solidarity and solidarity emanating from the inequalities of the employment relationship and labour process. Between 2003 and 2013 an ethical surplus solidarity was visible in the PRU, expressed in the mutual recognition, esteem and open-ended care teaching staff expressed towards each other and pupils; shielding both from negativity directed at the PRU from the public and media and the impact of austerity measures and associated managerialism. Here, solidarity was not exclusively oppositional, but a form of human connection that creates meaning outside of management control and formal policies. Nevertheless, as the data illustrates, an ethical surplus informed solidarity may be inhibited and injured in workplace regimes that attempt to squeeze human connectivity out via an exclusive focus on economic priority, instrumental and individualised performance and market discipline (Sayer, 2007). Indeed, the changing narrative of Hannah and her co-workers reveals that their ethical surplus solidarity is vulnerable to managerial agendas that increasingly individualise



working practices. It is not, however, destroyed as solidarity takes new forms based on concerns around injustice and protection (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Sayer, 2005). Anger about the increasing physical violence inflicted upon teaching staff by pupils is pivotal in Hannah's narrative and how it creates a strong sense of oppositional solidarity. Born of injustice, oppositional solidarity is visible in teaching staff's railing against the neglect of their own and children's plight, while reaching out to trade unions in the search for ways to institutionalise their solidarity to defend their individual rights.

Despite ethical surplus solidarity being thinned in the context of individualised performance management and heightened austerity politics, the community of teaching staff at the PRU hold on to a solidarity that emanates from the inequalities of the employment relationship and labour process. This solidarity is informed by a resilient moral agency and a stable set of moral norms of justice and legitimacy that are intertwined with teachers' ultimate concerns (Sayer, 2011) and, arguably, professional values (E.P. Thompson, 1993). The moral economy of solidarity that frames the rich data from the PRU illustrates solidarity as a bottom up process, involving actions and relationships that are not founded on the requirement to be set against something, but built on relational commitments and caring relationships that consistently aim to humanise the labour process.

---

<sup>1</sup>Pupil exclusion from schools is considerably higher in England than in the rest of the UK (BBC, 2018;<sup>1</sup>).

## References

- Atzeni, M. (2009) Searching for injustice and finding solidarity? A contribution to the mobilisation theory debate. *Industrial Relations Journal* 40(1): 5-16.
- Atzeni, M. (2010) *Workplace Conflict*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ball, S. (2017) *The education debate*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Baines, D. (2011) Resistance as emotional work: The Australian and Canadian non-profit social services. *Industrial Relations Journal* 42(2): 139-156.
- Baines, D. (2016) Moral projects and compromise resistance: Resisting uncaring in non-profit care work. *Studies in Political Economy* 97(2): 124–142.
- BBC (2014) Pupil referral units 'dumping ground' claim by teachers.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-27394027>. Accessed: 20.10.2018.
- Blyton P and Jenkins J (2013) Mobilising protest: Insights from two factory closures. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51(4): 733–753.
- Bolton, S. C., & Laaser, K. (2013) Work, employment and society through the lens of moral economy. *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(3), 508–525.
- Carter, B. and Stevenson, H. (2012) Teachers, workforce remodelling and the challenge to labour process analysis. *Work, Employment and Society* 26(3): 481–96.
- Church, R. and Outram, Q. (1998) *Strikes and solidarity: Coalfield conflict in Britain, 1889-1966*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cole, T. (2015) *Mental Health Difficulties and Children at Risk of Exclusion from Schools in England*. <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk>
- Cullingford, C. and Daniels, S. (1999). Effects of OFSTED inspections on school performance, in C. Cullingford (ed.) *An Inspector Calls*, London: Kogan Page. 59-69.
- Department for Education (2015) *Children outside mainstream education*.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications> Accessed 25.11.2017

Department for Education (2017) Education and training statistics for the United Kingdom: 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics> Accessed 11.09.2018

Department for Education (2018a) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics> Accessed 11.09.2018

Department for Education (2018b) *School census 2017 to 2018*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications> Accessed 11.09.2018

Durkheim, E. (1933) *The Division of Labour in Society*. London: Macmillan.

Education Committee (2018) *Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions*. Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, Parliament UK.

Evers, J. and Kneyber, R. (2015) *Flip the System*. London: Routledge.

Fantasia, R. (1988) *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Fantasia, R. (1995) From class consciousness to culture, action, and social organization. *Annual Review of Sociology* 21(1): 269–287.

Garner, R. (2013) Teachers Unions – who needs them? The Independent, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2018

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/schools/teaching-unions-who-needs-them-8483940.html>. Accessed 3.02.2019

Gazeley, L., Marrable, T., Brown, C. and Boddy, J. (2013). *Reducing Inequalities in School Exclusion*, London: The Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

Gibbs, G. R. (2018) *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, London: Sage.

Hall, D. and McGinity, R. (2015) Conceptualizing teacher professional identity in neoliberal times. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 23 (88): 1–17.

Hyman, R. (1999) Imagined solidarities: Can trade unions resist globalisation? in Leisink P (ed.) *Globalization and Labour Relations*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 94-115.

Institute for Fiscal Studies (2018) School funding per pupil falls faster in England than in Wales. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13143>. Accessed 04.01.2019

Kelly, J. (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilisation, Collectivism and Long Waves*, London: Routledge.

Kelly, J. (2018) Rethinking Industrial Relations revisited. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 39(4):701-709.

Laaser, K. (2016) If you are Having a go at me, I am Going to Have a go at You: The Changing Nature of Social Relationships of Bank Work Under Performance Management. *Work, Employment and Society* 30(6), 1000–1016.

Mather, K. and Seifert, R. (2014) The close supervision of education lecturers: ‘You have been weighed, measured and found wanting’. *Work, Employment and Society* 28(1): 95–111.

NUT (National Union of Teachers) (2012) ‘NUT policy statement on pupil referral units and government proposals’, <http://www.teachers.org.uk/files/statement-on-pupil-referral-units-gov-prop-0412.pdf>.

Sayer, A. (2005) *The Moral Significance of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sayer, A. (2007) Moral economy and employment, in: Bolton, S.C. and Houlihan, M. (eds.) *Searching for the Human in Human Resource Management*. London: Palgrave, 21–40.

Sayer, A. (2011) *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Skidmore, C. (2013) Shocking Underclass of our School System.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/10030406/Shocking-underclass-of-our-school-system-creating-the-criminals-of-tomorrow.html>

Stevenson, H. (2017) The datafication of teaching: can teachers speak back to the numbers? *Peabody Journal of Education* 92(4): 537-557.

Stevenson, H. and Gilliland, A. (2015) The teachers’ voice: Teacher unions at the heart of a new democratic professionalism, in J. Elvers, R. Kneyber (eds.) *Flip the system: Changing education from the ground up*. London, UK: Routledge, 108–119.

Taylor, C. (2012) Improving Alternative Provision.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/180581/DFE-00035-2012.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180581/DFE-00035-2012.pdf)

Thomson, D. (2017) Who are the pupils in alternative provision? Education DataLab.

<https://educationdatalab.org.uk/2017/10/who-are-the-pupils-in-alternative-provision/>.

Accessed: 11.09.2018

Thompson, E.P. (1993) *Customs in Common*. London: Penguin Classics.

**Sharon C Bolton** is Professor of Organisational Analysis at the University of Stirling Management School. Her research interests broadly cover the sociology of work with a particular focus on the emotional labour process, skills and employment, precarious work, meaningful work, public sector management, the nursing and teaching labour process, gender, management and the professions, and dignity in and at work. The origins of Sharon's research interests lie in some perennial questions concerning what it is to be human, and how we understand the relationship between people, work and society.

**Knut Laaser** is currently a Senior Researcher at the Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus–Senftenberg and Lecturer in Work, Employment and HRM at the University of Stirling. His research interests broadly cover the meaning of work, the nature and impact of changing managerial control regimes, sociological approaches to morality and labour process theory. Knut's research on the changing nature of bank work and its social relations is on-going and has been published so far in *Work, Employment Society*, *Industrial Relations Journal* and *New Technology, Work and Employment*.