Research article

Policy in the pandemic: lost opportunities, returning to 'normal' and ratcheting up control

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Abstract

In this article, we examine education policymaking in England during the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on the period from 2020 to 2022. We argue that the pandemic, while obviously damaging materially, economically and psychologically, seemed to have provided a rare opportunity for a step change, a chance to recalibrate and reconsider values assumed as 'truths'. However, policymaking in England appears to have been driven by a desire to return to normal as soon as possible or to double down on control. Through a rigorous policy analysis of two specific areas of policy – initial teacher education and inspection – we review policy and ministerial speeches, as well as academic papers, media articles and social media blogs published from the start of the pandemic in England, to analyse the extent to which policy formation was reactive in an attempt to maintain a steady state and return as quickly as possible to pre-pandemic normality and to previously stated intransigent policy positions. We suggest that this policy formation reflects a broader trend in policymaking, which seeks to use power and sustain privilege, underpinned by a constructed evidence base, to present a particular 'truth' about what needs to be done to improve education outcomes.

Introduction

Education policymaking has been significantly affected by the global Covid-19 pandemic. The most obvious effect on education was widespread school closures and resultant learning loss. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), in the first half of 2020 there were school closures in 188 countries, affecting 1.7 billion children and their families: most school closures lasted on average around 10 weeks, but some ranged from 7 to 19 weeks. However, the pandemic, while obviously damaging materially, economically and psychologically, seemed to have provided a rare opportunity for a step change, a chance to recalibrate and reconsider values assumed as 'truths'. In this article, we argue that policymaking in England appears to have been driven by a desire to return to normal as soon as possible or to double down on control. We argue that this desire reflects a broader trend in policymaking, which seeks to use power and sustain privilege, underpinned by a constructed evidence base, to present a particular 'truth' about what needs to be done to improve education outcomes.

Policymaking is a power bestowed upon politicians and people with authority by virtue of their roles. Power can be used to sustain privilege, if it supports those who already have accumulated benefits in society. Power can also be used to redistribute those benefits. This tension can be examined in what those in power say and how they act, particularly in the rhetoric of their argument (or discourse) and the evidence base upon which they draw. The illusion that during the pandemic alternative voices, including those from practitioners and marginalised groups, were being listened to was a pandemic mirage. After the initial panic subsided, we argue that pre-pandemic policy voices have emerged empowered. This leads us to ask in what way these voices have sought to control the argument, and how have they selected the evidence to support it. What are the sources of the evidence base, and to what extent has the evidence been generated by previously under-represented groups? To what extent does the evidence selected support overarching policy narratives? How open is policy formation to alternative viewpoints, evidence and discourse?

Education policy in England during the pandemic

In England, as the pandemic unfolded, there was what Fotheringham et al. (2021: 14) have described as an 'avalanche' of policy going into schools from the Department for Education (DfE):

> The DfE published 50 guidance documents specifically targeted at schools from 18 March to 18 June 2020, with 11 of those guidance notes pertaining to the day-to-day running of a school. In sum, for the 90 days from the announcement of school closure, 201 policy updates were issued by the DfE.

Much of this policy was reductive and reactive and, in significant policy areas such as inspection, examinations and initial teacher education (ITE), the drive to fill the policy vacuum as soon as possible with a return to normality was apparent. Jones (2020: 237) concurs:

> No great rethinking of pedagogy, curriculum and ethos is thought necessary to educational recovery, and ministers have been unmoved by the arguments of Black Lives Matter, that 'knowledge' and 'culture' should be rethought, inclusively. Instead, the emphasis has fallen on a rapid return to 'normal'.

In ITE, Brooks et al. (2021) found that, while the pandemic offered an opportunity for reflection and a more self-conscious societal perspective that valued the ways in which certain workers (for example, teachers) were fundamental to how societies worked, the values shift that occurred was short-lived, and once the immediate policy concern about teacher supply was resolved, the policy perspective reverted to the pre-pandemic position, which sought centralised control and influence over ITE provision. Similarly,

while the inspection of schools in England was paused, and briefly recalibrated to be supportive rather than judgemental, advisory rather than punitive, it has now resumed under the framework introduced just before the pandemic. School performance tables based on public examinations (rather than on teacher assessments) continue to be the main mechanism for how schools are judged. These manifestations of performative accountability (Perryman, 2022) have consequences that are yet to be addressed. While the pandemic briefly boosted applications for teacher training courses, presumably due to the illusion of stability that a career in teaching still brings, a survey of 2,000 teachers by the Education Policy Institute (Fullard, 2021: n.p.) indicates that 'teachers are now almost twice as likely to leave as they were before the pandemic', due to worsening workloads, anxiety and low levels of well-being, some exacerbated by inspection. Recent data from the DfE also show that in 2022, two years after the initial stages of the pandemic, teacher recruitment numbers hit only 59 per cent of the target, falling short for the ninth time in ten years (Adams, 2022).

In addition, data on post-pandemic recovery show that students in England are still suffering dramatic 'learning loss', which schools are ill-prepared to address. Progress 8 data, a value-added measure of progress, show that the gap in average progress scores between different types of schools has widened during the three years of the pandemic, with more disadvantaged schools increasingly showing worse outcomes, despite additional catch-up support (TES, 2022a). The Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study revealed six factors whereby disadvantaged students were hit the hardest during this period. However, the current government is resolute that policies developed before the pandemic are focused in the right direction, particularly noting that they are formulated on a 'robust' evidence base (TES, 2022b).

Education policymaking is an expression of power. While recent data (TES, 2022a, 2022b) show a widening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, this has been built on a sustained period of education policymaking since the publication of the Conservative government's White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). Richardson et al.'s (2020) synthesis of the current literature highlights the importance of intersectionality in overarching participation and academic attainment trends, as well as the persisting inequalities based on gender, social class and ethnicity. As Gillborn (2005) has noted, education policy in England is shot through with a patterning of racial advantage and inequity, which, while not planned as a deliberate goal, represents a form of tacit intentionality within education policy.

In seeking to understand the intended and tacit intentionality of education policy, in this case focusing on ITE and inspection, we draw upon Ball's (1993) distinction between 'policy as text' and 'policy as discourse'. In 'policy as text', any particular text will have a plurality of readings by a plurality of readers, although policy authors *attempt* to assert control over the reading of a text. 'Policy as discourse' pays greater attention to constraint, albeit within a moving discursive frame. Policies can become regimes of truth (after Foucault, 1991) in which only certain voices (dominant discourses) are heard as authoritative. Phrases such as 'experts say... ', 'studies show... ' and 'research has concluded... ' give power to those who hold the knowledge and decide how it should be acted upon. It creates new truths, the specialist knowledge which those who hold it can use to gain power. Therefore, with policy, discourse constructs a topic, dictates how it can be talked about and influences how ideas are put into practice. It 'rules in' and 'rules out' certain ways. Morley (2003: 72) argues that 'as with any powerful meta-narratives assuming "truths", other "truths" are silenced and excluded from the quality discourse'. In silencing research and alternative voices, governments control policy discourses and even challenge alternative theoretical and research-based viewpoints. This has the consequence of maintaining privilege and power in the hands of certain voices and of excluding others.

Methodology

Through a rigorous policy analysis (Browne et al., 2018), this article examines policy and ministerial speeches and reviews academic papers, media articles and social media blogs published from the start of the pandemic in England to analyse the extent to which the policy formation was reactive – an attempt to maintain a steady state and return as quickly as possible to pre-pandemic normality, and previously stated intransient policy positions. What opportunities were considered, rejected and, thus, lost to affect real positive change? Can deliberate attempts to exert more central control be evidenced? And to what extent have these succeeded?

Discourse analysis can be defined as an examination of data in order to gain familiarity with the social processes behind the words. As Phillips and Hardy (2002: 2) argue, 'without discourse there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse we cannot understand our reality, our experiences or ourselves'. Discourse analysis is a vital part of any research focused on issues of power and social interaction, as it is about uncovering the socially constructed context in which words are spoken and written. As MacClure (2003: 9) puts it, 'a discourse-based educational research would set itself the work of taking that which offers itself as common-sensical, obvious, natural, given or unquestionable and trying to unravel it a bit – to open it up to further questioning'. As Hewitt (2009: 13) summarises, 'discourse analysis challenges researchers to question policy-making processes, how dialogue takes place, and how power relations produce dominant discourses and marginalises [sic] others.' Hoggart et al. (2002: 165) describe critical discourse analysis as 'something like bike riding … which is not easy to render or describe in an explicit manner'. Hence, as Hewitt (2009: 3) explains, 'truth is constructed within a discourse and, therefore, is relational to the knowledge and practices of that discourse. The relational nature of truth means that methodological choices made in any research project are driven by the problem at the centre of the research.'

We employ an approach influenced by Foucauldian genealogy (Tamboukou and Ball, 2003), which involves a focus on minor details, discontinuities and recurrences, as well as on discourses and practices that make sense of our world. The focus of genealogy is to bring to light 'the history of problematizations, that is, the history of the way in which things become a problem' (Foucault, 1996: 414). Foucault's (1980: 83) definition of genealogy is 'the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today'. This, as Tamboukou (1999: 215) asserts, allows us 'to interrogate the truths of our world'. Genealogy is therefore a means of writing a 'history of the present' by tracing 'forces that gave birth to our present-day practices and to identify the historical conditions upon which they still depend' (Garland, 2014: 373). Thus, even when examining a short and contemporaneous time-period, genealogy enables us to bring into light those power–knowledge relations that govern policy formation and enactment, 'creating an archive of stories, an assemblage of textual practices' (Tamboukou, 2013: 118) to understand the constitution of the field and to answer the broad question: What are the long-term consequences of policy decisions made during the pandemic?

We draw upon a range of data sources, mainly focusing on UK ministerial speeches, academic papers, media articles, social media blogs and official documents from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Speeches include those made by government ministers and by Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman in the period between 2020 and 2022. Social media responses were curated through Twitter searches for 'Ofsted', 'pandemic' and 'Covid', and the same search terms were used with England-based education-focused mainstream media (*Times Educational Supplement*, *Schools Week*). Ministerial speeches and other announcements were also reviewed for references to policy shifts. In addition, announcements from professional associations with whom policymakers consulted during the pandemic (such as the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers [UCET]) were collated and reviewed. The data collection and analysis pursued two lines of enquiry: policy shifts and discourses related to school inspections and ITE. These lines of enquiry dictated which documents were included and excluded from the subsequent analysis.

For the analysis, we adapted Hajer's (2006) 10 steps, which were reduced to 7, as Hajer's original steps 2, 4 and 10 involved interviewing key players, which was not part of our methodology:

1. desk research – establish the chronology of events
2. document analysis – identify discourses and the sites of discursive struggle
3. sites of argumentation – search the data for argumentation and corroboration
4. analysis of positioning effects – analyse how players are caught up in an interplay
5. identify key incidents
6. analysis of practices, in particular cases of argumentation, and data backcheck
7. interpretation.

Hence, notes were made on general themes, with the aims of becoming immersed in the data and of providing an overview of the body of material gathered. Further examination of the data was conducted to establish if there were any recurring themes and/or contradictory findings. Data management software NVivo was used to search, store and organise the data analysis, but, as Ball et al. (2012: 16) have argued, 'both the analysis work and the writing are the outcome of negotiations, arguments and compromises

within the team'. The data set was finally analysed using a system of open-coding based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which involved refamiliarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing for themes and, finally, categorising and naming them. The data set itself was broad, with sources dependent on the line of enquiry, and our selection, while representative of the full data set, reflects the sources that best illustrate the outcomes of the analysis. The selection also represents the fact that the different lines of enquiry necessitated different sources of data: for ITE, the discussion represented public engagement with policy-in-development often undertaken via and through social media or representative associations; with respect to inspection, policy formation is made public through announcements by the chief inspector. The data presented here not only reflect these differences, but also represent a similar narrative arc, as discussed later in the article.

Policy focus: initial teacher education

The British government announced the closure of schools in March 2020 to all but the children of designated keyworkers, and those with particular needs. The immediate concern was about the ongoing education of the majority of children, both those who needed to attend schools and the vast majority who were now being educated at home. Limiting access to schools, however, also had an immediate impact on those undertaking ITE. In some cases, pre-service teachers continued to work with and support their partner schools, while teacher education providers (such as universities) assessed the liability and potential risks of having pre-service teachers in schools. Two key organisations – the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), the representative body of university-based teacher educators, and the National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT), the representative body of school-based teacher training provision – took leading roles in communicating directly with the DfE and distributing communications widely to their respective groups. Table 1 illustrates the series of key pandemic-related announcements made by UCET during this period.

Table 1 reveals a flurry of announcements, particularly for the period between the end of March and early June 2020, and as such it reflects a narrative arc of education policymaking at this time.

Initial announcements regarding changes to official requirements (such as the need to conduct criminal disbarring checks in person) were initially made to promote only slight variations to current practices, sufficiently enough to allow teacher education to continue. Some announcements were focused on recruitment procedures for the following year (such as that made on 21 April 2020), which reflected a concern that the pandemic could adversely affect the future supply of teachers, while the main bulk of announcements show a gradual whittling away of formal requirements, so as to enable teacher education providers to graduate new teachers who were on a 'trajectory' towards meeting the Qualified Teacher Status requirements and, by extension, the Teacher Standards. It was towards the end of this period (24 June 2020) that an announcement was made by Nick Gibb, the Minister for Schools, regarding the launch of the ITT Core Content Framework and the future of ITT Ofsted inspections, which was the first sign of the government seeking to return to policy trajectories that were in place before the pandemic.

In the main period of school closure, significant variations were made to regulations around ITE. These included a relaxation of some statutory requirements (for example, that trainee teachers should spend a minimum of 120 days in school and have at least two contrasting school-based experiences) and of some of the advisory requirements (for example, increasing flexibility to recruit new students remotely). Most noteworthy was a significant relaxation around the awarding of Qualified Teacher Status, which was now based on judgements that trainees demonstrated that they were on a trajectory towards meeting these requirements, rather than on evidence that they had already been met. In addition, the DfE did show some concern over the provision of placements for training teachers and asked schools to accommodate new teachers.

Table 1. UCET announcements to its membership

Dates	Policy announcements
20 March 2020	Announcement from DfE that Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, a background check on student teachers, could be conducted remotely.
25 March 2020	DfE announcement of award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).
7 April 2020	Announcement of updated DfE guidance on relaxation of initial teacher training (ITT) requirements.
7 April 2020	Updated guidance issued by DfE for ITT providers with courses affected by Covid-19. For 2020/1 candidates, updated ITT criteria for providers: *Covid-19: Induction for newly qualified teachers* (GOV.UK, 2020).
21 April 2020	Updates about interviews for School Direct-salaried (an employment-based route into teaching) applicants, and requirements for the school experience of the Assessment Only route.
4 May 2020	Amended Teachers' Qualifications Regulations (legislation.gov.uk, 2003), and Induction Regulations (legislation.gov.uk, 2012).
19 May 2020	Distribution of a short survey from the DfE about availability and impact on school placements in 2020/1.
20 May 2020	Updated guidance about entry (GCSE) requirements for Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT).
20 May 2020	Email confirmation that change to entry (GCSE) requirements applies to all ITT programmes.
22 May 2020	Update on guidance for Assessment Only route regarding aggregate time spent in schools.
4 June 2020	Email from DfE confirming: (1) the removal of the expectation that trainees train to teach in at least two schools; (2) the removal of the requirement for a trainee to have met the standards across the full age and ability range of training; and (3) the removal of the expectation that training programmes cover no fewer than four school years.
6 June 2020	Announcement that government funding of ITT can be extended to support students who need more time to complete their studies.
11 June 2020	Clarification about the application of funding specific to undergraduate ITT programmes, EYITT and other students needing a deferral.
24 June 2020	Message from Minister for Schools Nick Gibb regarding the launch of the ITT Core Content Framework (to be implemented by September 2020); Ofsted inspections under the new framework to be resumed in January 2021; and ongoing support available for trainees.
2 January 2021	Announcement of ITT Market Review and Institute of Teaching.
January 2021	Suspension of planned Ofsted ITT inspections and announcement of Ofsted 'research'.
19 May 2021	Ofsted (2021e) report 'Teaching teachers during COVID-19' published; inspections resumed.

However, during this period, there were also two significant policy events that were indicative of a somewhat different approach. The suspension of school-based Ofsted inspections, which we discuss below, necessitated a similar suspension of Ofsted inspections of ITE. During this time, Ofsted conducted research on ITE providers around the impact of Covid-19 on teacher training and projected

supply. Their report, entitled 'Teaching teachers during COVID-19' (Ofsted, 2021e), did make some comment on how adaptive the sector had been and how well supported new teachers had felt during this period, but the main focus appeared to be on assessing the robustness of the ITE curriculum (a key aspect of the new ITT inspection framework). The ITT Core Content Framework had only been introduced to schools in 2019 and had been a statutory requirement since September 2020. Ofsted were not intending to inspect this aspect of provision until Spring 2021. The research findings (Ofsted, 2021e), however, were skewed towards this aspect of provision, as they concluded:

- The move to remote training and remote teaching has, in some cases, stimulated deeper and more connected thinking about the ITE curriculum.
- Partnerships have generally either maintained or improved access to the ITE curriculum and have mitigated much of the possible impact of Covid-19.

However, the Ofsted (2021e) report also took the opportunity to make more general comments about the ITE curriculum, based on their short research visits. They suggested:

- Too few partnerships have a sufficiently ambitious ITE curriculum.
- Too many partnerships are overly reliant on the experiences that trainees gain through placements to provide ITE curriculum content in subjects and phases.

The Ofsted (2021e: n.p.) report concluded:

> The ITE sector must now develop stronger and more ambitious ITE curriculums. This means developing curriculums that are better designed around subject and phase, more integrated across the partnership, and more informed by up-to-date and pertinent research.

While the main thrust and rationale for Ofsted conducting research in this period was on how the ITE sector responded to the challenge of the pandemic, the main conclusion focuses on curriculum, a key theme in Ofsted's strategic focus pre-pandemic.

The other main policy area was the establishment of the ITT Market Review, which was announced on 2 January 2021, but which had been under way before then. The aim of the Market Review was to report on 'how the ITT sector can provide consistently high-quality training, in line with the core content framework, in a more efficient and effective market' (DfE, 2022: n.p.).

Shortly after this announcement was made, there was another lockdown, with a subsequent impact on many schools, as well as on teacher training providers. Many were concerned about the timing and intention of the review and, in particular, some of the proposals that it was rumoured would make up part of the findings. At the Westminster Education Forum, held on 23 February 2021, James Noble-Rogers (2021b: n.p.), the executive director of UCET, described the review as a 'slap in the face' for the sector. After its publication, Noble-Rogers (2021a: n.p.) went further, declaring on 8 July that it was 'Disjointed, uncosted and undeliverable'. There were other critical comments from across the education sector: several individual institutions made public statements about the proposals. The University of Oxford described it as a 'threat to undermine' high-quality ITE provision; the University of Cambridge said that it would 'restrain and restrict quality'; UCL's Institute of Education (IOE) suggested that it was wrongly placed, saying that the sector needed 'professionals not technicians'; and many organisations followed the Russell Group in their 'call to reconsider' the proposals. Part of the evidence base used to make the case for the Market Review recommendations was taken directly from the Ofsted (2021e) report.

The timing of this announcement, and the thrust of wholesale change to the sector that it promised, represented a significant wake-up call to ITE providers, who felt that, despite their best efforts to work with the DfE during the pandemic to ensure a supply of high-quality teachers (in extremely challenging circumstances), they were being disregarded for a policy built on the back of an unjust Ofsted research report.

Policy focus: inspection

Inspection in England is the remit of Ofsted. Ofsted was established in 1992, and it has undergone several changes in framework. Before the pandemic, in September 2019, Ofsted launched a new inspection framework under which schools were given two days' notice of inspection, but inspectors would be on site for only one day. There was to be a 90-minute phone call between the lead inspector and the school

the day before the inspection began (Ofsted, 2018). The categories for inspection were: Quality of Education (with the subheadings Intent, Implementation and Impact); Behaviour and Attitudes; Personal Development; and Leadership and Management. The focus was now on curriculum and quality, rather than on examination results and performance measures, although critics wondered how this would be judged. As Richards (2020: 515) notes:

> Intent is probably the easiest to characterize in general terms, although deciding on whether the curriculum is 'ambitious' enough, or whether it is 'coherently planned and sequenced towards cumulatively sufficient knowledge and skills for future learning' is far from straightforward and inevitably shot through with value judgements that are far from uncontentious.

Richards (2020: 516) also makes the point that the focus on how curricula are planned and implemented 'does not allow evaluation of the worthwhileness of what has been designed and implemented. It assumes that the current legally mandated national curriculum framework is both good and incontestable.' The shift from outputs to curriculum was a significant one – no longer was quality only assessed by outcomes (data), but also now by inputs – how curriculum is defined (Intent, Implementation and Impact), and this represented a significant paradigm shift.

Analysis of the Ofsted discourse at this time reveals three key themes and priorities: the new framework as 'evidence based'; inspections as a positive influence; and concern about 'stuck schools'.

On 17 March 2020, Ofsted announced that all inspections were suspended, after a brief period when it appeared to have plans for 'business as usual'. However, by July, Conservative MP Christopher Wakeford, speaking on behalf of the Commons Education Committee, called for a probe into 'lack of school work' during lockdown. He said: 'Clearly something has gone wrong and we must examine why. While many schools have done remarkable work, others have not been able to provide the same offer for one reason or another, and this, too, needs to be investigated why' (TES, 2020: n.p.). Wakeford accused Ofsted of 'hibernating through the crisis like badgers', yet alternative voices were relishing the 'welcome respite' (TES, 2020: n.p.). Hulme et al. (2020: 12) found that head teachers welcomed:

> a changed relationship with the inspectorate. A headteacher of an English high school graded as Outstanding by the school inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, described not having the pressure of waiting for an Ofsted call as 'a cloud lifting'. A Secondary Headteacher in Northern Ireland reported, 'I feel as if the ETI [Education and Training Inspectorate] are now supporting me rather than holding me to account'. The balance between internal and external accountability was temporarily recalibrated by the pause in the inspection cycle and the repositioning of inspectors in an advisory capacity.

Despite this, and perhaps to please members of parliament rather than head teachers, Ofsted (2020c: n.p.) announced a 'Programme of visits' to start in September 2020, designed to 'reassure parents, ministers and the public about how schools and colleges are managing the return to full education of their pupils and students. Inspectors will use the visits to work collaboratively with leaders, listening and providing appropriate challenge'. Importantly, these visits were not to be graded. During this phase, Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman's tone seemed softer – Ofsted (2020c: n.p.) had acknowledged that the usual patterns of grading and judgement were not supportive, and there was talk of 'collaborative conversations' and 'constructive discussions':

> Ofsted will be part of the rebuilding effort from September. Our visits will help parents understand how schools and colleges are getting children and students back up to speed after so long at home. And we want to help schools, by having constructive conversations and not passing judgement. We all share the same aim – helping this unique generation make up for lost time and get the high-quality education they deserve.

Spielman also echoed the head teachers' positive thoughts about the visits:

> On the schools' side, the visits are going well. Feedback so far has been heartening. Schools tell us that the visits are a positive experience, that there is true dialogue and that inspectors are genuinely keen to hear what has been going on. They are also clear that we are doing what we said we would: the visits were non-judgemental and genuinely collaborative. And just as importantly, we're hearing that the conversations are helping schools to reflect on their plans, refine their priorities and celebrate the things that have gone well. (Ofsted, 2020a: n.p.)

However, it became clear that judgements were being made during this time, with Spielman (2020: n.p.) announcing that 'it became apparent on our visits that there is a curriculum issue here as well'. This is the first hint that the pandemic circumstances were being used to justify pre-pandemic policies; this despite the fact that Spielman stated that 'If there was any doubt at the outset, this was absolutely not about gathering intel!' (Ofsted, 2020a: n.p.). In December 2020, she made it clear that a return to normal was imminent and necessary:

> We owe it to them to have good provision for them, wherever they are. And where it isn't, this needs to be known about. The normal scrutiny within the system has been absent for a good while now, and it does need to be reintroduced next year – and that includes schools formerly covered by the outstanding exemption, now removed. (Ofsted, 2020b: n.p.)

In January 2021, Ofsted restarted monitoring inspections of schools deemed as 'inadequate' or as 'requires improvement', albeit remotely, given the full national lockdown. Gavin Williamson, then Secretary of State for Education, encouraged parents who were unhappy with schools' online provision to complain to Ofsted, but, in an estimated 5,000 emails, parents flooded Ofsted with praise rather than complaints (Weale, 2021). Schools reopened in the week beginning 8 March, with Ofsted announcing a suspension for that week, and promising that remote inspections would continue for the rest of the term unless serious safeguarding concerns were uncovered. Ofsted resumed some on-site inspections in May 2021 and confirmed that it would resume its full programme of inspection in autumn 2021 (Ofsted, 2021c).

In March 2021, Spielman gave a speech at the Festival of Education, in which she doubled down on the need to inspect curriculum and criticised alternative voices, who she called 'clean slaters and flag fliers', who were seeking an alternative model:

> The EIF [education inspection framework], focused on the curriculum, is here to stay. There are always those who follow the adage: never waste a good crisis. There's been no shortage of ideas from the clean-slaters and flag-fliers of the education world. The pandemic has opened up discussion about the role of schools in promoting pupil well-being; about how catch-up should be measured and sometimes about the wholesale reinvention of education. For reformers and would-be reformers, Ofsted is the carrot or the stick (depending on your point of view) that can drive changes in schools. (Ofsted, 2021c: n.p.)

In fact, not only was an alternative model not considered, but there ensued what some saw as an attack on so-called 'outstanding schools', with Spielman announcing, in a speech in November 2021, that she expected the reintroduction of inspection for formerly exempt schools to result in some schools losing their outstanding grade:

> Outstanding has to mean outstanding. A top grade signals a lot about a school, and it's right that it should be a high bar. This rebalancing is already under way. Given how much children have missed already, this is absolutely the right time to bring outstanding schools back into the fold. (Ofsted, 2021b: n.p.)

From December 2021, the message was clear – inspection would resume and the curriculum focus of the 2019 Inspection Framework was perfect for the post-pandemic recovery:

> There's a lot to do to get children where they need to be – and inspection is an important part of that. And I do believe that the EIF is the right tool to unpick how children are doing and to help schools rebuild. By focusing on substance and on the journey schools are on, it will be much easier to allow for the effects of sustained disruption. It's a fair and helpful way to look at how schools are doing. But the curriculum is the substance – the rock on which good teaching is built. So that's where we focus our attention on inspection ... Discussing the curriculum is a great way to marshal arguments and test your approach. We describe ourselves as a force for improvement – and that can often be framed in terms of our judgements and responses to them. But there is something more fundamental at the core of inspection: that professional dialogue. (Ofsted, 2022)

The key to post-pandemic recovery was therefore a policy issued before the pandemic existed. Alternative voices, which had argued throughout for a more collegiate and supportive system, were

silenced. Schools once deemed outstanding were to lose their status, and Ofsted resumed its place as stick rather than carrot. This links to our premise that these policies cement positions of power and sustain privilege, as Ofsted has been shown to work against the interests of disadvantaged schools.

Recent research by Ofsted was criticised as 'not fit for purpose' by the House of Commons (2007: n.p.) Education Select Committee, with one issue being that 'Ofsted has no capacity to give advice when a cluster of local schools suffer from systemic underperformance'.

Thomson (2022) shows that inspection outcomes are more likely to negatively affect disadvantaged schools and their communities. The report examined inspection histories post-2005 and found that:

> Of all the schools open in January 2022, 38% of schools were found to have always been judged good or better since 2005/06. This includes 6% of schools which had always been outstanding over this period. A slightly higher percentage of secondary schools (8%) were always outstanding although a slightly lower percentage (34%) had always been good (including always outstanding). (Thomson, 2022: n.p.)

However, there were regional variations:

> 44% of primary schools in London and 43% in the North West have always been judged better than good. This compares to 28% of primary schools in the West Midlands and 32% in the East Midlands. London also leads the way for secondary schools. 50% have always been judged good or better. This compares to 23% in the North East and Yorkshire and Humber and 28% in the West Midlands. (Thomson, 2022: n.p.)

And, most concerningly:

> 68% of schools in the least deprived fifth of secondary schools have always been rated good or better. This compares to 15% of schools in the most deprived fifth ... and there were almost as many secondary schools in the most deprived fifth that have never been judged good or better (13%). (Thomson, 2022: n.p.)

In other words, rather than being a force for good and improvement – as outlined in Ofsted's strategy plan – the process of inspections appears to reinforce and perpetuate existing differences between schools, and the opportunity to recalibrate during the pandemic, or to pursue a more supportive approach which both 'sides' agreed was beneficial, was not taken.

Discussion

In the areas of inspection and ITE, policymaking in England during this period appears to have been driven by a series of 'alternative truths' deliberately constructed to sustain positions of privilege and power. During the pandemic, ITE providers' judgements about the preparedness of trainees to gain Qualified Teacher Status were trusted, along with their professional judgement about making necessary adjustments to accommodate for school placement availability. However, as the initial period of crisis ended, so too the narrative oriented to the lack of robustness in ITE provision re-emerged, this time boosted by the Ofsted research conducted during the pandemic period. Similarly, while the pandemic alternative to inspections was deemed to be supportive during this period, the discourse of inspections as a necessary tool for school improvement, and the current emphasis on the curriculum, emerged as soon as inspectors were able to return to inspect schools. This reflects a trend in policymaking which seeks to use power and privilege, underpinned by a constructed evidence base, to present a particular truth about what needs to be done to improve education outcomes. The partial selection of evidence reveals how researchers and other alternative voices and truths, which flourished briefly during the pandemic, were sidelined, with a doubling down on existing policy. In both of our lines of enquiry, we found a similar narrative arc in policy formation (Table 2).

Table 2. Pandemic policy narratives

Policy narrative phases	ITE policy interventions	Inspection policy interventions
Pre-pandemic discourses and priorities	ITE required reform, increased marketisation and new providers into the market, a tighter inspection regime and a refocus on practice-based approaches	New inspection framework introduced; praise and defence of inspection process; focus on 'stuck schools'
Initial phase of 'business as usual'	Providers were told to maintain teacher training in whatever form possible	Assurance of continuation of education and inspection
Suspension	Suspension of regulations regarding the awarding of Qualified Teacher Status; relaxation of some compliance requirements and course requirements; suspension of Ofsted inspections	Suspension of inspections unless specific concerns have been raised (such as safeguarding)
Gradual re-introduction	Ofsted research visits; introduction of ITT Market Review activity; gradual re-emergence of compliance requirements	Ofsted visits to schools expressed as no-judgement constructive conversations, followed by a set of Pilot visits, and gradual introduction of judgements, followed by formal phased return of inspections
Stronger emphasis on pre-pandemic discourses	Full review of ITT market structures; new set of Quality Requirements, all providers needing to apply for accreditation in six-week time frame	Impact of pandemic couched as lost learning, schools as the focus of post-pandemic recovery; stronger emphasis on the role of curriculum, and the need for inspection to focus on curriculum and curriculum fidelity

Ball (1993) recognises that 'policy as discourse' reflects the circumstances that enable it to be written, and the impact that it has on those affected by it. While the story arc for both ITE and school inspections follow a similar path, it is the impact of that trajectory that is significant. We contend that when the pandemic struck, the unprecedented nature of the event created a vacuum – a policy-less space – where policymakers were left without a 'play-book' or a sense of how to proceed. This created a space for alternative voices, previously powerless in the policy space (including teachers and teacher educators), to share alternative visions, particularly through social media. This moment gave the illusion that things could be done differently: schools could be trusted to make decisions that were in the best interests of their communities and their students, including focusing on well-being, alternative notions of education, community and attainment, which built on a wider range of research on education for decolonised communities and traumatised societies. In ITE, there was a sense of renewed professional recognition of teacher educators, and that they could be trusted to work with their partner schools to make decisions in the best interests of their student teachers, and their ability to assess and approve teachers for qualification, and to make necessary adaptions to the process of learning to teach. This illusion affected those professionals positively at first: for teacher educators, there was a renewed sense

of professional autonomy and respect. Schools saw the possibilities of life without prescriptive tests and inspections, and where they were freed to make decisions to serve their communities (in a myriad of ways, such as distributing food). Localised and community-based decision-making took precedence.

However, this illusion was shattered when the former policy infrastructure returned, initially gradually, but then with a stronger emphasis on the pre-pandemic discourses. In other words, while there may have been a momentary absence of specific policy, it was not that there was no policy, but that there was no policy specific to those circumstances. Once the pandemic was over, there was an adaptation to the discourse which enabled the policy trajectory to continue. Indeed, our analysis suggests that this emerged at the business-as-usual phase, as, even then, the focus was on how the policy directive would be maintained, and eventually strengthened. In the end, this resulted in a policy narrative which can be described as:

- Quality is an issue of consistency across ITE providers, which required urgent policy intervention to rectify and control ITE provision.
- Teacher educators cannot be trusted with the change; they must be inspected, monitored and reaccredited against a narrow set of criteria.
- Children have fallen behind; schools must focus on catch-up; curriculum is key; Ofsted (inspection) is needed for improvements to occur.

Significance

While we draw upon the English context, we argue that this reflects an insidious trend in policymaking internationally. Our analysis suggests that, contrary to popular opinion that the pandemic was a lost opportunity, the idea of an opportunity itself was an illusion. The discourses that influenced the pre-pandemic policy context did not go away during the pandemic, and indeed evidence and truths (such as the 'evidence' gathered during inspection visits) were used to strengthen the previous official evidence base which underpinned the policy discourse. This form of knowledge was only constructed by those who already had a significant power base, and who were already influential. The illusion that alternative voices, including those from practitioners and marginalised groups, were being listened to was a pandemic mirage. The reality was that the dominant forms of truth, which became influential in post-pandemic policymaking, were still drawing upon the dominant voices of privilege and were still oriented to sustain that privilege and power base. We suggest that these are significant findings, not just for the context of England, but for many national and local contexts where the pandemic was seen as a policy opportunity for truth as well as an opportunity lost.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines and standards.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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