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CASE STUDY

Educational equity in England: the shortcomings of the UK Government's COVID-19 response [version 1; peer review: 1 approved]

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Abstract

The UK Government sought to respond to lockdowns and lost learning during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in multiple ways, including replacing cancelled examinations and compensating for lost learning through a National Tutoring Programme. In the case of the former, the system failed to realise the demands of equity by privileging wealthier students and beating a path back to a flawed 'normality.' In the case of the latter, while the idea of providing targeted, high quality small group and one on one tutoring to the most in-need students was well-conceived, implementation was a failure - particularly following its contracting out to a large outsourcing company. These two cases demonstrate that English education policy is adherent to a neoliberal conception of education equity, and that attempts to address inequalities are constrained, backfire, or both.

Keywords

UK education policy, education equity, inequalities, national tutoring programme, exams

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Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to national education systems worldwide and posed significant challenges to policymakers in developing responses that sought to strike an appropriate balance between the protection of public health and the provision of a basic level of education to school age young people (Zancajo *et al.*, 2022). The impact of measures such as school closures, the shift to home-schooling, and the requirement that young people receive qualifications were felt highly unequally by different segments of the population. The experience of the UK provides a useful illustration of the kinds of policy responses that were required and were developed in response to these developments. Focusing on England, the government's response to the pandemic's impact on education was marked by an inconsistent and partial consideration of equity concerns. This paper analyses two key interventions in UK education policy response to COVID-19 in both (i) the immediate mitigation of the pandemic, and (ii) measures to respond to the cumulative impact of lost learning.

The first intervention was the initial approach to learner assessment, triggered as a result of the cancellation of the 'high stakes' examinations (by which the English education system has historically set great store - Ozga *et al.*, 2023; Wolf, 2002). This approach aimed to avoid inequitable outcomes associated with teacher assessment of grades by introducing a 'standardizing' quality assurance mechanism or algorithm. This approach would be demonstrated to be unviable owing to concerns about the differential treatment of wealthier and poorer students. Alongside the other three nations of the UK (each with their own education system), a policy reversal or 'U-Turn' was made to rely on the self-same solution which policymakers had initially rejected (Kippin & Cairney, 2022; Kippin & Cairney, 2023). Policymakers then embarked upon a hurried 'return to normality' (set against the backdrop of a receding but still very much present COVID-19 threat to public health) followed by a faithful reestablishment of the pre-COVID assessment system.

The second important policy consideration discussed herein is the creation of a National Tutoring Scheme, launched in Summer 2020, which sought to deliver one-on-one and small group tuition to economically disadvantaged students. Again, considerations about equity were central here, with policymakers seeking to compensate those young people disproportionately affected by emergency measures of the pandemic with a highly effective mode of learning deployed to assist students in 'catching up' on lost learning as part of a wider 'catch up' scheme. Despite the high hopes and accompanying rhetoric, the scheme has been no silver bullet. Rather, it has been beset by problems of not only policy design (related to a mismatch of the supply for tutorship and the demand of available tutors) but also implementation (whereby a large outsourcing firm was engaged to deliver the programme but failed to do so in a timely and effective manner). The two case studies are dealt with below in turn, before a final section explores the interaction of the UK education systems with the competing ideas of equity.

Educational inequalities in the UK

The scale and extent of educational inequality is alarming, multi-faceted, and well-documented. Indicatively and non-exhaustively:

- Children from poorer backgrounds do worse at school. For instance, 'only 40% of disadvantaged children who achieved the expected level at age 11 went on to earn good GCSEs in English and maths (compared with 60% of their non-disadvantaged peers)'.

- Children in poorer areas achieve worse educational outcomes: In 2019, the percentage of students achieving a Grade 7 or above (considered a 'good' grade) was 25.7% in London, and 16.4% in the poorest English region, the North East.

- The funding gap between England's private schools and the per-head funding for state schools is wide and has increased. in 2009-10 the gap was 39%, but this has increased to 92%.

- While outcomes differ substantially by group, 'Black pupils have the lowest pass rate for GCSE English and maths combined'.

- 'At Key Stage 2 level, only 14% of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities reached the expected level for reading, writing and maths' (Singal *et al.*, 2017)

- Children with English as an additional language perform worse than native speakers before the age of 16 (though this gap narrows significantly by GCSE).

- 'Nearly 2 in 3 (64%) transgender young people report being bullied' and 52% report that related bullying has had a negative effect on their plans for future education.

- There has been a 9% attainment gap between girls and boys since at least 2005 (with girls performing better than boys).

Out of school factors. We can relate these noted inequalities to 'out of school factors' or 'social determinants' which sharply influence the experience and attainment of young people in school (Cairney & Kippin, 2022: 19). An exploration of the circumstances of children from poorer backgrounds helps to illustrate this point. They may not have access to relevant resources such as computers and books. They are less likely to have access to nourishing diets, may have less sleep, may be relied upon to perform caring duties at home, or more generally may be subject to stress and anxiety. At school, they may experience stigma related to their socioeconomic status, or exhibit characteristics related to the experience of trauma or other adverse experiences. Further, factors such as poorer quality housing, access to clean water, experience of racism, and environmental factors such as clean air can also play a role (Cole, 2022; Gaitan, 2018; Pelletier & Manna; 2017; Savageau, 2023). Further, children

who are preoccupied with meeting their basic needs are more likely to experience cognitive overload, which deprives them of the capacity to expand their knowledge and engage fully in processes of learning (including in the classroom) (Mani *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, they are far less likely to have access to the resources of their more advantaged peers, such as tutorship or parents who can assist with homework or advocating for their children within the school. Responsibility for these relevant policy areas goes far beyond the UK Department for Education; for instance, poverty is heavily influenced by (and influences) labour market forces and welfare policy and is a key determinant of educational attainment (Cairney *et al.*, 2022).

Social justice and neoliberal conceptions of education equity. A focus on 'out of school factors' forms a key part of international 'social justice' perspectives to education equity (Cairney & Kippin, 2022). As Table 1 shows, these approaches emphasise education as an intrinsic and emancipatory good rather than an instrumental one, advocate for the substantive 'vertical' redistribution of education resources, and the public provision of education by appropriately paid public servants. It conceives of equity as a 'response to individual needs and characteristics' such as socio-economic status, gender, race, immigrant or refugee status, or geographic area (Edgar, 2022: 12). This is contrasted with 'neoliberal' approaches, which emphasise quasi-market solutions (including the involvement of private providers and charitable trusts), the creation of a 'level playing field' between students, the 'tracking' or 'setting' of students by ability, and a reliance on student and school rankings to encourage competition. 'Bright' or 'talented' students can prosper, 'regardless of background.' In the UK, as in many comparable contexts (reference) the assembled forces of 'neoliberalism' have been ascendent in recent years. Beginning in the 1980s, successive governments and UK Education Secretaries have pursued reforms which have sought to encourage

choice and competition, to infuse education provision with market-style mechanisms (and latterly involve private sector organisations) and to make heavy use of inspections and league tables to communicate school quality to the public (Chitty, 2013; Ozga *et al.*, 2023). Despite a number of reforms being pursued with equity as a key consideration, little progress towards addressing the inequalities described above can be identified. Neoliberalism has arguably become a dominant 'policy paradigm' in the governance of English education (Hall, 1993).

The two schools of thought also emphasise the efficacy of different modes of assessment. While neoliberal conceptions support high-stakes examinations provide a means to hold schools and education providers accountable, to provide clarity and objectivity as to student achievement, and to create incentives for student learning and teacher performance. Meanwhile, social justice exponents argue that such assessment practices exacerbate inequalities by placing undue stresses and pressures on students, provide only a snapshot of their abilities, prioritise certain kinds of learning over others, and benefit more affluent students who have access to test preparation resources (such as tutorship, computer resources, and familial support) (Au, 2016; Gipps, 1994). The English education system makes great use of high stakes testing, placing a high amount of emphasis on GCSE, AS, and A-Level exams (as well as SAT tests) (Ozga *et al.*, 2023). There has been a modest shift towards a greater diversity of assessment, including oral exams, coursework, and teacher assessment. Such shifts reflect long-standing concerns about the appropriateness of high stakes examinations, which reflect a broader 'social justice' equity perspective.

COVID-19 and educational inequalities. From January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered substantial policy change in all countries, with a large portion of the apparatus of the state

Table 1. Neoliberal and social justice equity approaches in the UK.

	"Neoliberal" equity	**"Social justice" equity**
Definition of equity	Access to high quality schools	Differentiated responses based on need
Purpose of education	Participation in global economy (Instrumental)	Emancipation (Intrinsic); building of knowledge
Preferred policies	School choice, competition, ranking, inspection, accountability, 'tracking' or 'setting'	Inclusion and desegregation; culturally attuned curricula; broader action on inequalities, poverty, racism
Attitude to inequalities in attainment	Natural: some students are more gifted than others, it is education's role to reduce the role of background in dictating performance	Reflective of broader societal inequalities aka 'out of school factors;' lost learning etc
Type of assessment	Various - emphasis (at times) on high stakes, rigorous examinations	Cumulative and holistic; 'authentic assessment;'
Funding model	"Horizontal" *Equal distribution of funds between schools/pupils*	"Vertical" *Funding going where it is most needed*
Key actors	The state in partnership with the private sector, charitable and philanthropic bodies	The state (and in particular local authorities), trade unions, education professionals

(Table sources: Cairney & Kippin, 2022; Field et al., 2007; Gilead, 2019; Klees & Quarga, 2014; Kretchmar et al., 2016)

reoriented towards the purpose of protecting public health and mitigating the impacts of the pandemic. While generally not a top priority in the initial weeks, there was an education component to the radical policy change, with countries shutting down schools in order to slow the airborne transmission of a virus which could be passed from children (who generally do not suffer to a great extent with the virus) to more vulnerable adult contacts (Zancajo *et al.*, 2022). Despite reluctance, English schools were closed for long periods of time, with parents and guardians encouraged to carry out home-schooling (with schools, the UK government, state broadcaster, and local authorities providing resources to assist in this. Ultimately, there were considerable discrepancies between the degree to which young people received education during the pandemic, as well as the extent of the harms they faced. Indicatively:

- Between March 2020 and April 2021, school pupils in England missed 110 days, compared to a normal school year of 190 classroom days.

- A National Foundation for Educational Research survey published in June 2020 found that 98% of teachers thought that their students were behind compared to where they would expect them to be at the end of academic year 2019/2020 (National Audit Office, 2023).

- A May 2020 poll found that middle class parents were more likely to receive home school supporting (such as advice and resources) from their child's school (YouGov, 2020). Middle class homes were also more than twice as likely to report participation in remote school lessons (Montacute & Cullinane, 2021).

- Likewise, pupils in the most disadvantaged schools were less likely to be involved with remote learning (4 in 10).

- A study by UCL found that 'during the first lockdown, children from the top 20% of income earners lost 50% of normal teaching time compared with 62% for those from the bottom 20%, and further stated: "A quarter of pupils – around 2 million children - received no schooling"'.

- 'By the summer term 2021, the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers in reading was around '0.4 months for primary aged pupils and around 1.6 months for secondary pupils'.

- Pupils at private schools reported spending more time on schoolwork, more time spent in regular contact with a teacher, and more experience of remote lessons during lockdowns than their state educated counterparts (Anders *et al.*, 2020).

In England, as with other countries, the pandemic took existing educational inequalities, and both *revealed* and *enhanced* them (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Zancajo *et al.*, 2022). An awareness of such issues and advocacy from various organisations including education unions, researchers, and campaign organisations (and resultant news coverage) undoubtedly

played a role in shaping both the form and communication approaches of UK Government policy responses. Since 2010, the UK Conservative Party has governed England (other political parties led devolved governments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) and pursued a relatively consistent policy in schooling. Under the Education Secretary Michael Gove and his successors, the Government pursued reform across a range of areas, including hugely increasing the number of 'Academy' and 'Free' schools, reforming the curriculum to emphasise 'traditional' subjects, and placing greater emphasis on high stakes GCSE exams (Finn, 2015). These reforms were often made in the teeth of considerable professional and trade union opposition.

These changes all sit comfortably within the category of neoliberal approaches to equity described above and were accompanied by political rhetoric which justified them as creating an environment in which the best and brightest young people, regardless of their background, could perform well. They took place against a backdrop of fiscal austerity, punitive welfare reforms, a 'hostile environment' for 'illegal' migrants, and the aftereffects of a severe economic recession (see Chapter 9 of Cairney & Kippin, 2023). As such, Government policy had exacerbated socio-economic inequalities, while pursuing a set of education policy measures which - though justified as doing the opposite - inflamed them further (Greany & Higham, 2018). These details provide crucial context in understanding why the government's approach to the mitigation of the pandemic (in terms of assessment) and approach to compensating for lost learning were both so important, and so unsuccessful. These two case studies are chosen as they provide an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which the UK Government problematizes, understands, and responds to inequity.

The UK's examination replacement systems
The 2020 systems
In common with all governments faced with the public health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK faced difficult choices as to how it would allocate qualifications to learners in high stakes examinations (Kippin & Cairney, 2023; Ozga *et al.*, 2023). The most pressing were GCSEs, which were taken by 15- to 17-year-olds and represented the final compulsory assessment covering 10 or so subjects including (most consequentially) maths, science, and English. Also affected were A Levels and AS levels, taken by 17–19-year-olds. These qualifications are taken by young people who stay on, either in school (at 'sixth form') or a Further Education college, and dictate entry into university (and are also valued by employers, for those students who opt not to progress further) and represent a 'defining feature' of the English education system. The UK Government needed to find a system for allocating these grades and qualifications, which was efficient, fair, and could be implemented outside the strictures of government health guidance (which in 2020 prohibited mass gatherings) and which took account of the fact that schools had been closed since March, meaning students had been deprived of crucial preparation time and resources. Significantly, there appears to have been a disagreement as to the way forward between the Department for Education and Ofqual, with the former preferring to

avoid exams and the latter seeking to hold them in a 'socially distanced' manner.

Nonetheless, the initial plan largely mirrored preparations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Kippin & Cairney, 2023). In short, education 'centres' (mainly schools and colleges) would submit to the UK's qualifications regulator Ofqual predicted grades for their pupils and a 'ranking' of students in each subject area. These would then be 'standardised' by Ofqual, with a formula applied which sought to replicate the previous year's distribution of grades, both across the country but also within centres (Kelly, 2021). This was reportedly at the insistence of the Secretary of State. There were several justifications for the inclusion of a moderation. Firstly, teacher allocated grades have previously been shown to be inaccurate and at times discriminatory. Secondly, they were considered to run a high risk of generating 'grade inflation' (the attenuation of which had been an important part of Conservative Party policy over a number of years) (Torrance, 2011). Thirdly, it was seen as important for ensuring 'credibility' in the eyes of universities and employers, who would recruit from these cohorts. A final consideration was the separate policy decisions made by the other three UK executives. Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland had all made similar choices (with Scotland's results being released first owing to the particularities of that country's education system). With students from across the UK competing for places at the same universities, a degree of coordination (as part of a broader 'four nations' approach to pandemic management) was seen as desirable.

While equity or 'fairness' was seen as an important element of the rationale for the UK Government's approach, the results were seen as being anything but fair (Kelly, 2021). The design of the system pinned performance to previous years' cohorts and caused anomalous effects which disproportionately saw higher achieving students from less well performing schools have their grades adjusted downwards. Such students are seen as the heroes of British education: those bright young students who overcome hardship and disadvantage due to their own smarts and diligence - and their treatment was viewed by an angry public as a betrayal. Further, the calcification of inequality (through placing artificial barriers on student attainment) was seen as particularly objectionable. This can be contrasted with the improved prospects of better off students, and particularly those who attended a private school (with the size of classes a key determinant of the number of downgrades. Such better resourced and selective establishments tend to achieve higher grades, anyway. In other words, the replacement system seemed to disproportionately disadvantage poorer students, and advantage wealthier students. Such simplicity masks a more nuanced picture (for example, the poorest students did better as cohorts than their 2019 equivalents). Ultimately, however, the combination of Scotland's U-Turn and the mounting public pressure by young people, the Opposition Labour Party, trade unions, and a broader public revulsion led to the Government to fall back on 'Centre Allocated Grades' or CAGs (via an aborted attempt at enhancing the existing appeals process) (Kippin & Cairney, 2022).

CAGs were a key element of the original replacement system. To generate these grades, teachers drew on evidence such as coursework, mock and preparatory exams, classwork, and a general professional impression of the student's ability (Kippin & Cairney, 2023). There were also processes internal to centres to regulate and determine teacher grades, as well as guidance from Ofqual and the UK Government. However, these grades were not intended to be the final word on student achievement at GCSE or A-Level. Indeed, such grades were generated in the full knowledge that they would be adjusted (most likely downwards - though in some cases upwards) and as such there was little incentive to recommend 'tough' or 'harsh' grades (particularly when teachers - who knew students well, in most cases no doubt wished them well). Governments had avoided "pure" teacher grading because of issues such as the high potential for gaps between and within centres, based on matters such as expectation, teacher discretion etc. The education researcher Gill Wyness analysed CAGs and found 'only 16% of [English] students received accurate predictions for all three [A-level grades], with 75% overpredicted and just 8% underpredicted'. Significantly for our purposes here, she also finds benefits accrue disproportionately to more privileged students and a Department for Education evidence review 'suggested that predicted grades often lead to (albeit small) differences between teacher assessment and exam assessment results in relation to gender, special educational needs, ethnicity and age'. Nonetheless, 'pure' CAGs would become the entire basis for GCSE and A-Levels awarded in 2020, appearing as a lifeline for Ministers operating in a political crisis (Kippin & Cairney, 2023).

There is some evidence that the *revised* grades 2020 system was not equitable. Firstly, while there was grade inflation across the piece, private school pupils (at least on some metrics) achieved a greater increase than their state school counterparts when compared with 2019 (when exams ran normally). There was also a 10.2% increase in A/A* equivalent grades at GCSE for private school pupils between 2019 and 2020 vs a 9% increase for state school pupils. Pupils with graduate parents were '17 percentage points more likely to report that their CAGs were higher than their Ofqual calculated grades'. While not large gaps, it is worth placing this in the context of the pandemic, where private school pupils both had access to appropriate resources at home, high levels of attention from school, and parents with the time and resources to engage effectively with home-schooling. Lower down the income scale, we see stretched schools without the ability to provide high quality learning materials at home, parents who may have been key workers (for example in hospitality) or less able to provide home-schooling (Hoskins & Wainwright, 2023). Ultimately, private school students lost less (or in many cases no) learning time, *but received a greater or equivalent hand up*. An equitable system, based on the vertical principle (that those in greatest need of help should receive a greater allocation of resources) would have taken such considerations into account in allocating grades, rather than assuming parity between the different sets of students in an unequal society and education system. Nonetheless, there was no U-Turn, as the grades apportioned by schools were

seen as legitimate despite their evident shortcomings (Kippin & Cairney, 2023). As such, a policy solution rejected as inequitable and unfair initially, became a lifeline for policymakers seeking a 'way out' of a crisis of their own making.

2021 system

The following year's system also generated unfair grades. Policymakers proactively sought to avoid a retreat of 2020's immediate policy failure, and thus designed a system which sought to balance the competing demands of political feasibility and public legitimacy (Kippin & Cairney, 2023; Marsh & McConnell, 2010). However, it did not have equity at its heart. The system was known as Teacher Allocated Grades (or 'TAGS' - emphasising the judgement of educators rather than faceless 'centres' in the name) and rested on a combination of completed coursework, mock exams, and (a crucial difference from previous years) in-class assessments provided by Ofqual and administered by teachers. These became known as 'exams in all but name' or 'mini exams' due to their replication of elements of the high stakes exams that were still, for public health reasons, off the table. Assurances were provided that the grades would be closer to those received in 2020 than in 2019, and quality assurance would be provided within and between centres, with a strong link promised between student work and the grades they received - but assessment materials were provided by Ofqual to schools who might wish to do so. As with the previous year, the potential for grade inflation was high, with the Chair of the Education Select Committee in the House of Commons referring to an "all must have prizes" approach (quoted in Kippin & Cairney, 2023).

Ultimately, prizes would be distributed liberally but unequally. For example, there was a 17-percentage point gap identified between free school meal eligible and ineligible students in receiving grades 7 and above (up 2.27 percentage points since 2019). Further, there was a 26.1 percentage point increase in independent school pupils gaining an A/A* at A-Level when compared to 2019, while the number for state school pupils was 17.2. Ultimately, less well-off students would benefit from grade inflation, but to a lesser degree than the most privileged students. Again, this masks the higher differentiated experience of young people. While in 2020, there were large inequalities in how much learning had been lost, this was concentrated over a short period. In 2021, education had been disrupted for over a year, with schools closed for months at a time. Preparations for the in-class assessments were accessed and experienced differently. Additionally, private schools which were made responsible for assessment (rather than required to interface with an external state body to provide quality assurance) had little incentive to offer anything other than high grades to their students, given that the students represented paying customers (and could be prevailed upon by 'sharp elbowed' affluent parents).

Ultimately, the two years of exam preparation would see a gradual reversion to a high dependency on high stakes examinations in providing assessment grades to young people in England, with the pandemic representing a blip on the path to an ever-great exam-centricity (Ozga *et al.*, 2023). An opportunity for the embrace of more equitable practices was thus missed (Cairns, 2020; Kippin & Cairney, 2023). The 2022 examination round was broadly in line with pre-pandemic procedures, with a more 'generous' marking system introduced to account for the year's status as a 'transitional' year. However, much had changed in the meantime: young people had missed out on large chunks of learning throughout the two years, interrupting their development in ways which would prove consequential even where they fell prior to exam preparation. Those that experienced the 2020 'exams' round were firstly treated to a demonstration of the way inequity perpetuates in having lower educational performance in less well-off areas formally held against them, and secondly saw their private school counterparts treated more generously despite their highly differential experiences. The following year, they again saw discretion used to disproportionately advantage better off students. Their advantage is multi-faceted, but this discussion now turns to one in particular: access to one-on-one and small group tutoring. This discussion now turns to a UK Government initiative to replicate this usually private arrangement in state schools via a National Tutoring Programme.

The National Tutoring Programme

During the same period as they were considering how to apportion grades and replace examinations, the UK Government was also considering solutions as to how to address the broader issue of lost learning due to the pandemic. This programme would come to incorporate a number of measures, including 'recovery' and 'catch up' premiums, funding for teacher training, summer schools, and accelerator fund for numeracy and literacy (National Audit Office, 2023: 6). As mentioned above, children from more deprived socioeconomic groups lost out on learning to a much greater degree than did their wealthier (and particularly privately educated) counterparts (Committee on Public Accounts, 2023). For instance, during the first (Spring 2020) lockdown, nearly 75% of privately educated pupils were in receipt of a full school day's worth of teaching, while the figure for state educated students was 38%. There is a considerable weight of evidence for the proposition that time out of school can have serious consequences for student attainment and future economic prospects (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). One of the factors that accentuates educational inequalities in the UK is the availability of one-on-one and small group tutoring, which places a 'glass floor' on the ability of more affluent young people who may access such resources should they be struggling in advance of high stakes exams, but is not available to less affluent groups. Research carried out by the Sutton Trust shows that while some measures show comparable levels of out-of-class support for learners, there are 'big gaps between socio-economic and achievement groups in England in time spent on additional instruction', with 'well off pupils' receiving 2.5 hours 'more additional instruction' than their less affluent counterparts (2016: 3). The difference is particularly notable for children in danger of low achievement. 'High-achieving Year 11s from poorer backgrounds spend, on

average, just 7 hours per week on additional lessons outside of school, compared to 15 hours for low-achieving pupils from the most advantaged backgrounds' (Ibid: 3).

Education Endowment Foundation research suggested that a year's worth of small group tuition is worth, on average, four additional months progress over the course of a year, and the NTP sought to bring these known benefits of one on one and small group tuition to less well-off pupils, and particularly those who had lost out to a greater extent on learning during the pandemic. Launching the scheme in June 2020, a Department for Education press release pointed to the £350m scheme providing 'access to high-quality tuition for the most disadvantaged young people' over the coming academic year. Gavin Williamson set expectations high by stating that 'will make sure that every young person, no matter their age or where they live, gets the education, opportunities and outcomes they deserve, by spending it on measures proven to be effective, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged'. Involved in the process from the outset was a group of educational charities and research organisations, including the Sutton Trust, NESTA, Teach First, Impetus, and the Endowment Education Foundation (see Table 2 for a description of their roles). The latter organisation was central to developments and played a dual role as both an advocate for the expansion of state provision of tutoring, and an organisation which would, at least initially, lead on its implementation.

The NTP initially had two 'strands' (a third, 'school led tutoring' would later be added). The first, was 'tuition partners' which allowed schools to access tuition from a list of providers. The Government would provide a subsidy, and also a framework for ensuring quality control. The EEF carried out the quality control process, and did on a number of criteria, including safeguarding, quality, and evaluation. This led to 33 tuition partners being approved and providing face-to-face and online provision in the year of the scheme's operation. The second was called 'Academic Mentors', who are graduates employed by schools to provide catch up support to pupils. In the first year of the programme, these were provided by the education charity Teach First (Ibid). Schools were able to benefit from either scheme based on their own circumstances. Schools would also be responsible for the identification of the pupils who would benefit most from the additional support, and no targets were set for reaching either pupils in receipt of Free School Meals, or the related 'Pupil Premium' (the way that the UK education system tends to categorise wealth and income related disadvantage). In sum, the aim of the NTP was to provide high quality tutoring to students to help 'catch up' those disadvantaged young people most negatively impacted in their education by school closures and associated disruption.

The first year of the Programme was administered by a partnership of the EEF and Teach First, overseen by the UK Department of Education. It initially struggled to achieve ambitious targets. These targets focused on overall numbers, rather than the profile of those students. One key target which was met was the aim to enrol 250,000 pupils by the end of the year (though not all of these would have actually received

Table 2. Key organisations involved in the National Tutoring Programme (NTP).

Organisation	Involvement in NTP	Description
Department for Education	Coordinated policy response to pandemic; Commissioned and funded NTP; oversaw tendering process	The UK Government Department responsible for early years and school age education and coordinating the UK's 'education recovery'
Education Endowment Foundation	Argued for the creation of a tutoring scheme; initially responsible for its administration; set up National Tutoring Foundation	A charity set up in 2011 by the Sutton Trust and Impetus to break 'the link between family income and education achievement'. It is the Government's "What Works" centre for education.
Sutton Trust	Year 1: Campaigned and argued for the creation of a tutoring scheme; involved in initial design of scheme	A charitable trust established to promote and research social mobility in education
TeachFirst	Responsible for elements of Academic Mentoring programme	A charity which specialises in training university graduates as teachers and placing them in schools with high deprivation levels
Impetus	Partner organisations in setting up and the initial delivery of programme prior to its outsourcing to Randstad	An education charity with its roots in the private equity industry which works with charities to address educational inequalities
NESTA	As above	A state backed endowment
National Foundation for Educational Research	Commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation to evaluate the first year of the National Tutoring Programme	An educational research institute
Randstad	Commissioned to administer the NTP for the second year of its existence, before being stripped of the contract. Played a role in recruiting tutors thereafter.	A large for-profit Netherlands-based human resources firm

tutoring). The programme struggled to overcome issues such as disparities in the availability of tutors in different parts of the country (with shortages for instance in poorer and more rural areas). As such, while the NTP achieved its objectives in certain areas (for example in the South West and South East), it fared far worse in areas such as Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West. The EEF asked the National Foundation for Educational Research to carry out an evaluation of the two strands of the programme. Both the Tuition Partners and Academic Mentors elements of the scheme encountered challenges in identifying students eligible for the Pupil Premium, as over half of the tutored students did not meet the criteria.

In short, the first year of the scheme saw the programme struggle to identify and target resources on the students who were either most deprived or had lost the greater amount of learning time (or both). While it hit some key targets, it missed others. This was partially a consequence of the decision to allow schools to identify the students most in need, but also a result of existing regional variations, the difficulties of getting a large scale programme up and running so quickly, information gaps, and not insignificantly the reimposition of regional lockdowns (and, eventually, a long national lockdown beginning in early Winter 2020). Secretary This both exacerbated the scale of the problem (in terms of adding considerably to the amount of learning lost by young people, and particularly in hard-hit areas) and also creating restrictions on face-to-face tutoring. While online tutoring was an option (and was embraced by the NTP and its providers as the only viable option) it rested on a less robust evidence base in terms of its effectiveness. At the end of the scheme's first year, the Department for Education tendered out the contract for running the NTP. The favourite to win the bid was an offshoot of the EEF, set up expressly for the purpose, named the National Tutoring Foundation. However, the eventual victor was a large Netherlands-based multinational human resources consulting firm.

This marked a distinctive new phase in the evolution of the NTP, and saw the initial coalition of education charities which had set up the scheme relinquish leadership. Randstad's bid was ranked lower on quality than EEF and Teach First's, but was much cheaper (their contact was worth £24m, compared to the £62m offered by the Government. The Department for Education asked the company to radically scale up their tutoring offer, which they duly did, promising the delivery of 2 million tutoring courses (up from the 250,000 target of the previous year). At this point, a third strand was added to the NTP, which allowed schools to identify and hire locally available tutors (rather than be limited to Tuition Partners provision). In all, this marked a shift away from the previous focus on quality assurance, reliability, and need, and towards increasing the overall scale and reach. Characterises this in an excoriating article for the UK education sector magazine Schools Weekly as a progressive 'watering down' of the programme under Randstad's stewardship. Generally, their approach can be described as representing a prioritisation of quantity over quality. Perhaps related to this

expansion, little data was available as to the nature of the tutoring. Some typical criticisms of the Randstad period of the NTP were:

- Writing in February 2022, the Chair of the Education Select Committee noted that 'over 524,000 children were supposed to start tutoring this year but only eight per cent have actually begun'.

- A secondary school teacher, quoted in the Guardian, said: "I have one word for our experience of the programme: disastrous. No-shows, lack of subject specialist knowledge, punctuality issues. One of the tutors withdrew her services entirely on the day the students were expecting her".

- The training provided by Randstad to develop "high quality tutors" was perfunctory, estimated by the Department for Education to only take around 11 hours to complete and incorporated few quality assurance safeguards.

- Having failed to hit the initial target to reach 65% of 'disadvantaged' pupils, the target was then scrapped, and was criticised by several tuition providers on the grounds that the new criteria would 'widen the attainment gap'.

- The web platform that schools would use to access tutoring was "bureaucratic and too difficult to use".

- 14% of schools in England accessed tutoring via the Randstad platform in academic year 2021/22 (compared with 53% of schools who arranged their tuition through existing NTP routes).

- Tutors based in Sri Lanka and who were as young as 17 were being paid less than £2 an hour to deliver tutoring to primary school students.

Some of these criticisms must be seen in the context of a rapidly changing context and an obvious need for schools to enjoy a degree of flexibility over the tutoring offer, indeed the Department for Education's Permanent Secretary Susan Acland-Hood told the Public Accounts Committee that there wasn't a precise overlap between the most disadvantaged students and those that had lost out most during the pandemic (Public Accounts Committee, 2022: Q60). Despite this, the Department for Education would exercise its break clause in Randstad's contract. The Education Secretary Nadim Zahawi refused to criticise Randstad, but justified the decision on the grounds that doing so would help to 'simplify' the programme. The newly announced system in March 2022 saw schools instead directly receiving the funding in line with the number of Pupil Premium eligible students. The Department put out three separate tenders for training tutors, quality assurance, and the recruitment and deployment of academic mentors (the contracts were won by the Education Development Trust, Tribal Group PLC, and Cognition Education respectively). A further important development relates to funding, with the Department reducing its funding considerably from a 75% subsidy for tuition in 2020-2022, to a 25% subsidy in 2023/23. This

'tapering' was part of the design of the programme and had been supported by the initial partner organisations in order to 'support schools to embed tutoring long-term') and to create a system funded by the Pupil Premium.

Equity in the UK Government's COVID-19 education response

Neoliberal approaches are dominant

This chapter has examined two elements of the UK government's COVID-19 pandemic response to explore the way that policymakers understand, operationalise, and respond to educational inequalities. The UK's 'neoliberal turn' from the 1980s onwards saw successive governments embrace policy solutions which sought to reorient the provision of education along market-oriented lines, encompassing a 'top down' shift to 'quasi-markets' in compulsory schooling, marginalisation of local authorities, the introduction of a National Curriculum and school rankings, the introduction of mandatory testing from age 7, and the involvement of private sector bodies in the delivery of education (Chitty, 2013; Exley & Ball, 2013: 7). These reforms were accelerated under the New Labour government which held office between 1997 and 2010, who combined increased funding and an overt focus on disadvantage with accelerated neoliberal reforms and further fragmentation. The Conservative-led governments of 2010 onwards oversaw a further expansion of the academies programme, a 'traditionalisation' of assessment policy, and sharp fiscal cuts as part of their 'austerity' programme (though the Government did introduce the 'pupil premium' policy mentioned above). These reforms both stem from, and perpetuate, the reorientation of the sector towards neoliberal logic, including the 'narrow and instrumental' definition of equity (Kippin & Cairney, 2023: 166). A key objective of these reforms has been to realise the goal of ensuring access to high quality schools whereby 'bright' students of whatever background can realise their potential (Chitty, 2013). A consequence of this was that policymakers considered existing arrangements as essentially fair and equitable, or at least underestimate the gap between current arrangements and this goal.

The problem was defined in a limited way

A consequence of this was that policymakers understood the problem in a way which sought to facilitate a reversion to the mean. In assessment, this meant preserving 'credibility' and preventing 'grade inflation' (as well as more prosaic concerns about the need for grades to be allocated). In tutoring, this meant helping students to 'catch up' on the learning they had lost, rather than recognising that *existing inequalities were worthy of attention*, too. Ultimately, this complacency shaped the responses to both, and revealed that UK policymakers struggle to recognise the extent to which education systems reflect rather than shape the nature of societal inequalities through those out of school factors discussed above. As a result, their understanding of the problem rested on a set of assumptions about the efficacy of current arrangements, rather than to 'go further' in recognising that the assessment system in England had always produced unfair outcomes, these this unfairness is a result of more profound inequalities, that education policy does not follow the approach necessitated

by this analysis, and that poorer children would at the minimum require greater assistance than to be 'caught up' to an unequal pre-pandemic baseline which saw a 'decade of progress' leading up the pandemic lost (Committee on Public Accounts, 2023).

'Neoliberal' implementation failed - again

The solution of expanding access to tutoring is consistent with social justice approach to neoliberalism, provided it concentrated resources on those most in need (in this case defined as those who had lost the most learning) and rested upon a firm evidence base as to its effectiveness. However, the means used to implement it were straight out of the neoliberal playbook. While this was adopted as a 'catch up' measure, its advocates sought to mainstream tutoring provision within English education and transform it into a central and permanent element of teaching provision. However, these admirable intentions too are undermined by a problem definition which misjudges the scale of the issue and its extra-educational causes, and the recurrent problems encountered by the UK state in its post-neoliberal guise. Such limitations were noted by the Education Recovery Commissioner Sir Kevan Collins who considered the full package to be insufficient to achieve even the more modest goal of 'catching up' disadvantaged students (National Audit Office, 2023: 16). Rather than entrust the nascently promising scheme to its founder organisations (or indeed simply deliver the programme in house) the Department for Education's decision to involve a large private contractor had foreseen consequences (particularly when taking into account the particularities of the bid). In short, even where policymakers alight upon a high potential solution for the attenuation of educational inequalities, they rely on discredited means to deliver them, with entirely predictable results. This dynamic is resonant of recent research on the public policy response to inequalities, in which we can identify a wide gap between policymaker aspirations and the disappointing reality of what occurs on the ground (Cairney *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusions

UK policymakers sought to address *new* educational inequalities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They did so through designing an exam replacement system which took account of the degree of lost learning, but ended up creating three systems, all of which in different ways systematically advantaged better-off students. They also sought to 'catch up' students who had missed out on lost learning (statistically those from less well-off backgrounds) through a National Tutoring Programme. This was beset by problems, initially through failing to effectively target resources at the most in need young people, and secondly through the predictable failure of a controversial decision to outsource the delivery of the agenda to an international human resources firm. This failure encompassed a decline in the quality of the tutoring offered, set against a huge increase in the number of courses being offered (but continued issues with targeting).

These failures reflect the longstanding dominance of the neoliberal paradigm in UK education policy. Firstly, which influences who is involved in policymaking, which perspectives

prevail, and crucially here how the problem was defined. In both cases, a narrow view which seemed to accept the efficacy of pre-pandemic circumstances prevailed, leading to solutions being geared towards 'catching up' students, rather than seeking to address the longstanding inequalities which shape contemporary education both within and outside education policymaking. Such issues are further compounded by using discredited means of implementing policy solutions such as through commissioning large for-profit companies, who here continued a pattern of skimping on quality and failing

to meet the stated objectives. In sum, at least in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, attempts in the UK to address inequalities are hampered by a dominant neoliberal paradigm, a resultant narrow problem definition, and recourse to discredited means of implementation.

Data availability
No data are associated with this article.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✓

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The author addresses a case study of two key interventions in the UK education policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic which comprised of: i) an immediate mitigation of the pandemic; ii) measures to respond to the cumulative impact of lost learning resulting from the pandemic. Specifically, the paper focuses on the examination replacement systems and the National Tutoring Programme. The abstract is tight and compelling, and does a good job of scoping the range and depth of the chapter

The case's history and progression are described in sufficient detail, with a clear timeline from 2020 to 2022. Analysis of the responses to the impacts of COVID offers a particularly important case for testing the limitations of decision-making and reactions that are informed by neoliberal decision-making and extant policy frames/ approaches. The review of educational inequalities, as well as the neoliberal and equity approaches in the UK is helpful in establishing the background of the study. Table 1 on p. 4 is particularly useful for orienting the reader to the broad dichotomy of neoliberal and social justice approaches to education (in the UK, but relevant to many other national contexts), although such dichotomous framing inevitably misses the nuance of practical endeavours and how policy-making and policy-enacted 'on the ground' can be wildly divergent - but that is a point for another chapter.

The chapter is enhanced by a fresh look at the literature, pulling together pertinent studies from this first wave of publication on the impacts of the pandemic, and providing insight into the current educational context in the UK - both within the case study period, and to the time of review. The review of the government's (heavy handed) reaction to examination regimes in 2020 and 2021 demonstrates the lost opportunity to really think and approach examination differently (and more equitably), as well as how archaic the existing system was that made other options - CAGs in this case - difficult to operationalise under extraordinary conditions. They also, as the author clearly argues, exacerbated existing inequities that will have ramifications for the longer-

term.

The second case, of the National Tutoring Programme, illustrates the "disastrous" (to quote the teacher quoted in The Guardian article, cited on p.9 of the pdf version of the article) impacts that neoliberal devolving responsibility and tendering processes can have. Learned readers will not be surprised (but will likely be horrified) that a research-informed scheme (developed because of the clear evidence that students most in need require additional support) failed because of cost-cutting and exploitative practices. The idea that tutors were being recruited from Sri Lanka and paid only 2GBP an hour (or less) to help deliver this scheme (which included a not-inconsiderable investment of public funds) is a clear case of how neoliberalism corrupts equity, and how public and private partnerships need careful design, delivery and evaluation, with accountability firmly built-in. The author makes this case compellingly, and highlights the ways that such neoliberal and reactive action corrodes public trust in institutions like government, but also in education - to everyone's detriment.

Overall, the paper is well-presented and accessibly written.

The conclusions of the paper are drawn well, based on the analysis of the interventions. The author's discussion of equity in the UK government's COVID-19 education response is useful to create awareness among teachers and other practitioners regarding the failure to adequately respond to the equity needs of students and teachers in the COVID interventions established by the government. Perhaps if word limit allows, the author could make a stronger recommendation for what should happen to avoid similar reactive processes and outcomes if we face other extraordinary disruptions from 'business as usual' schooling, which - given the precarious state of the world/ climate - are more likely than we might like to think

Text-level comments:

Page 3: You write " Rather, it has been beset by problems of not only policy design (related to a mismatch of the supply for tutorship and the demand of available tutors)" - should this not be demand for tutorship and supply of available tutors?

Page 4: You reference Cairney & Kippin, 2022 to make the point about international social justice perspectives to education equity (not a new idea but I understand the need to be prudent with references) - which of these is the correct reference? Cairney et al. 2022, or Cairney & Kippin, 2023? I assume it's not the COVID-specific reference between these two listed here, because that would be too niche to hold this broader point about international perspectives on social justice?
- Cairney P, Keating M, Kippin S, et al.: Public Policy to Reduce Inequalities: across Europe: Hope versus Reality. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2022.

- Cairney P, Kippin S: Policy and Policymaking in the UK. (Bristol: Bristol University Press), 2023; forthcoming.

Page 9: delete the word 'Secretary' between "...Winter 2020). Secretary This both exacerbated..."

Page 9: This sentence is grammatically unsound " Characterises this in an excoriating article for the UK education sector magazine Schools Weekly as a progressive 'watering down' of the programme under Randstad's stewardship." (should read 'Charactersing this...., [author] described this as a progressive...')

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for the teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Sociology of higher education; equity and education; educational precarity; forced migration

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.