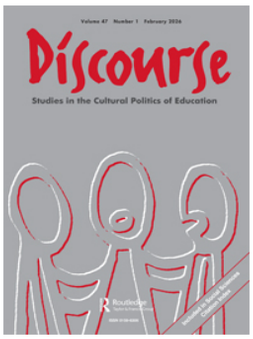

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Governing after COVID-19: the discourse of education recovery policy in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Comparative studies of responses to the pandemic illustrate some interesting differences among nation states. This paper builds on these insights into the interaction of global, national and local governing agencies through analysis of the approaches to planning for education recovery in the different UK nations. It builds on contemporary arguments that federal and quasi-federal education systems offer particularly productive environments for identifying those culturally specific expectations and enactments of governing, that help to explain differences in policy content and discursive style in policy spaces that share many institutional and economic features. Through analysis of policy texts on education recovery produced by each of the four UK nations, combined with a narrative approach to governing, the paper illuminates how policy discourses promote specific ways of governing education.

KEYWORDS

Federalism; Covid; recovery; governing; narrative

Introduction: federalism in the UK

The crisis-driven nature of policy-making during the global pandemic and the accompanying widespread shift to strong state action, characterised by some scholars as a 'return of the state' common in times of emergency (Boin, Stern, & Sundelius, 2016), encouraged a shift from binary conceptualisations of governance as global/local towards attention to the heightened complexity of an 'unsettled' policy environment (Milner, Mattei, & Ydesen, 2021), where relationships between government and stakeholders across policy fields were destabilised, and path dependencies disrupted (Jasanoff, Hillgartner, Hurlbut, Ozgode, & Rayzberg, 2021). Recognition of that complexity has encouraged enquiry into the complex interactions between transnational policy agencies and national/local 'translation' or reception, drawing on perspectives that understand policy as relational and mobile, and that highlight the importance of studying the dynamics of governing in varied policy spaces, with shifting power relations, different histories and contrasting socio-political structures (Ball, 2020; Gorur, 2011; Ozga, 2021; Savage, 2020).

As Beech et al suggest, federal and quasi-federal education systems offer a particularly productive environment in which to adopt these dynamic approaches to governing, as

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they allow for exploration of the complex interaction of different policy scales (Arnott, 2023 Beech, Engel, Savage, & Lingard, 2023; Prince, 2017). Moving away from conventional conceptualisations that stress a linear, hierarchical relationship between state and federal systems, or that see them as a 'nested' multilevel formation of national and sub-national or regional structures, enables more attention to be paid to their distinctive politics, histories and practices of governing (Burgess, 2006 Savage, Gregorio, & Lingard, 2022; Steytler, 2021). Furthermore, through adopting a perspective informed by the literature on policy mobilities, we may combine insights into the continuous transformation and mutation of policies globally (Beech et al., 2023), with the potential to identify the specifics of the social and economic formations within which policy is actively contextualised. As Bonal, Pages, Verger, and Zancajo (2023) suggest, through researching a federal policy space that often shares broadly similar institutional and economic characteristics, the role of other factors in producing differing policy discourses or governing practices is more readily identified. The United Kingdom (UK) is one such case of shared broadly similar characteristics, and it faced a shared global crisis in COVID-19, which enables exploration of those other factors, including distinctive politics, histories and practices of governing that are revealed through exploration of their governing narratives (Bevir, 2012 Miller, 2012).

Before exploring those narratives as expressed in policy texts for education recovery after COVID-19, we consider the specific nature of federalism in the UK. Although it has been described as a 'quasi-federal' state (Furlong & Lunt, 2016), characterised by asymmetrical or unsettled devolution arrangements (Arnott, 2023; Keating, 2022) the UK is, perhaps, more accurately described as a plurinational union state consisting of four parts-England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Anderson, 2022). This is, in effect, a union of nations with autonomous governing bodies-the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Irish Assembly, which legislate in all areas not 'reserved' to the United Kingdom government in the statutes applying in each nation. The UK Parliament in Westminster remains the sovereign power, through the Sewel Convention, according to which Westminster, may legislate in devolved areas and, indeed, alter the devolution settlement itself, with the consent of the relevant legislature (Keating, 2022). Although devolution in the UK was part of a global trend in the 1980s as many states decentralised power to sub-state governments, the UK 'settlement' was highly asymmetrical with different powers and institutional arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while England was excluded, so that the UK government has a dual role, governing England and, in areas of policy 'reserved' to Westminster (foreign affairs, defence, social security, macro-economic management and trade), the whole of the United Kingdom.

Evidence of differing policy outcomes and discourses characteristic of federal/quasi-federal systems is apparent in increased intra-UK political differences since the late 1990s. The political pressures that led to devolution resulted from the policies of austerity and the dismantling of the welfare state, along with increased marketisation and privatisation of public service pursued by successive UK Conservative governments between 1979and1997 (Jones, 2020). In Scotland, national sentiment became a vehicle for the defence of public services (Keating, 2022). A weaker pro-devolution campaign appeared in Wales, and in Northern Ireland, where 26 years of direct rule by the UK government had failed to address the sources of conflict there, while austerity measures deepened the

exclusion of Catholic communities. Political pressures across the three nations and an incoming UK Labour government led to the devolution 'settlement' of 1998, when a Scottish parliament, with legislative powers over all matters not reserved to the UK government and a cabinet form of government was established. An assembly with limited powers was also established in Wales, but there has been a steady progression there since 1998 towards the Scottish model, and Wales now has a Welsh parliament-the Senedd-with reserved powers and tax-raising capacity. Northern Ireland, through the Good Friday Agreement, was granted a legislative assembly where the executive must be drawn from the two communities (unionist and nationalist) (Keating, 2022).

Underlying asymmetries became more pronounced as the tendency towards greater autonomy for Scotland and Wales clashed with increasingly centralised policymaking by the UK government in Westminster, especially following the 2007–2008 economic crisis and its impact on public expenditure, and since the UK's departure from the EU following the referendum in 2016 (Arnott, 2023). Brexit destabilised the devolution settlement across the UK and in the divided island of Ireland (Keating, 2022). Some of the activity of the then Conservative UK government indicates attempted (re)assertion of control over the devolved institutions of the rest of the UK (rUK) (Arnott, 2023 Keating, 2022). It is not yet apparent if the UK Labour government, elected in July 2024, will alter that trend.

The four UK nations have competing long-term aims, including nationalist aims of full independence from the UK, and since 1998, as indicated above, these political 'settlements' have been adjusted in response to political change, as devolved institutions have become focal points for demands for increased autonomy or for independence and have also expressed different policy preferences from those of Westminster, perhaps especially in Wales and Scotland, where governments and parliaments reference social democratic values (Arnott, 2023; Keating, 2022) and where state action to address social inequalities is visible, for example, in welfare provisions such as free elderly care, or policies to address child poverty. Some of those tensions reflect differences in party political control, across the UK, the effects of which are especially visible in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party (SNP), in government since 2007, campaigns for full independence from the UK. In Wales, the Welsh Labour Party has been dominant, often in some form of partnership agreement, though it lost seats in the UK General Election of 2019. The Northern Ireland Executive operates under power-sharing agreements enshrined in the Belfast (Good Friday) agreement of 1998, but devolution has been suspended on several occasions, leading to the reinstatement of Direct Rule by Ministers from the UK Government's Northern Ireland office. After the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) blocked the formation of a new power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive; however, the Assembly reconvened in February 2024 with, for the first time, a Sinn Féin (nationalist) First Minister, pledged to the unification of the island of Ireland.

These differences indicate distinctive governing forms (Savage et al., 2022; Steytler, 2021) identified by students of comparative federalism who draw attention to cultural, political and societal conditions that have consequences for governing in globalising times, including governing education during and after the global crisis created by COVID-19. Comparative studies of responses to COVID-19 illuminate differences in governing practice (Lindblad et al., 2021). However, literature on the management of the pandemic in the UK

context (see, for example, Cameron Blake et al., 2020), is, however, mostly restricted to comparison of such issues as social distancing rules, or differences in the timing of specific government interventions. Here, we argue for approaches that examine differing national strategies with reference to distinctive politics, histories and practices of governing that are revealed through the exploration of their governing narratives.

Governing narratives

In adopting a governing narrative approach to the analysis of policy texts, we draw on theoretical resources from the fields of cultural studies and social anthropology, especially as they have been applied in studies of policy and governance, where ideas of contextual resources and local narratives have been developed (see, for example, Anderson-Levitt, 2023; Bevir, 2012). Miller's identification of the importance of symbolic politics in constituting governing narratives is also a key resource (Miller, 2012, 2020), especially his argument that effective governing narratives draw on a constellation of connotations-images, emotions, understandings-that together reflect and produce a commitment to a 'general and ill-defined normative goals' (McGee 1980 quoted in Miller, 2012). Such perspectives are attentive to the extent to which policy and policy actors are embedded in social and cultural worlds (Shore, Wright, & Però, 2011:1), whose cultural imaginaries they draw upon to foster processes through which a community may be led to agree on its collective aspirations (Rahm, 2023). These cultural imaginaries include what Jasanoff calls 'civic epistemologies'; that is, 'the stylised, culturally specific ways in which publics expect the state's expertise, knowledge and reasoning to be produced, tested and put to use' (Jasanoff, 2015). In examining UK policy texts that represent the approaches to education recovery planning taken in the different UK systems, we are seeking to identify those culturally specific expectations and enactments of state action, with the additional insights derived from narrative governance and policy mobility approaches that, as Beech et al. (2023, p. 5) put it, see policy discourses and artefacts as promoting 'specific ways of thinking about education.'

A significant literature has identified the importance of new actors, networks and technologies in assembling new governing relations, but recently the emphasis has, perhaps shifted in assemblage thinking towards further investigation of the forms of 'mutation, translation and re/dis/assemblage as they are adopted and adapted once they move between different policy contexts' (Jules & Salajan, 2023). We suggest that narrative approaches to governance can help to identify the resources drawn upon by policymakers in processes of translation and re/dis/assemblage, particularly those resources that are 'constitutive of context, of problems and their potential solutions' (Hartley & Bennington, 2011, p. 210). Here, then, while accepting the argument made by Beech et al. (2023) that we must develop a deep understanding of political and policy forms, structures and technologies in studying federalism, as well as an understanding of different scales, we respond specifically to their call for attention to 'distinctive national and subnational politics, cultures, histories and path dependencies'. Moreover, as indicated in the section above on tensions in the UK devolution 'settlement', we suggest that the issue of path dependency needs to be understood with reference to historical, political and cultural elements shaping how policy is imagined and represented (see, for

example, Bonal et al., 2023), and not limited to the study of the legacy of formal, structural organisation and relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as indicated earlier, had a global impact, and although many states responded to the crisis, including the crisis in education, in similar ways, comparative studies have identified significant differences in policy (see, for example, Grek and Landri, 2021, Milner et al., 2021), while policy narrative approaches have been adopted in explaining differences in the effectiveness of government interventions (Mintrom & O'Connor, 2020). In comparative studies of the different UK nations, however, research has tended to focus rather narrowly on enumerating instances of difference in, for example, the timing and severity of lockdowns (Cameron Blake et al., 2020).

Our earlier work on the nationalist governing narrative of the SNP in Scotland supports the usefulness of a narrative approach. It identifies key elements of the SNP's political text and talk in education policy that promotes governing as a joint endeavour aimed at producing collaborative improvement, inflected with historically embedded references to fairness, 'crafting the narrative' of government that is (implicitly) nationalist in its references to a shared 'project' a 'journey to independence' though drawing on historically embedded themes (Arnott & Ozga, 2016, 2018; Ozga, 2021). Recently, that narrative has focused on educational underachievement and on major curriculum and cultural change designed to support system-wide reform (Muir, 2022). In Wales, a narrative of ambitious reform has emerged, increasingly distancing Wales from its neighbour, England, especially through its emphasis on local partnerships and 'bottom-up' development. Enhanced devolution has encouraged distinctive education policymaking and distinctive ways of thinking about education. Education in Northern Ireland has also changed through the creation of a single Education Board in 2015, and initiatives including cross-community development (Furey, Donnelly, Hughes, & Blaylock, 2017; Gallagher, 2021) that stress cross-community engagement in governing education.

Before the pandemic, then, the education policy narratives produced in rUK acknowledged global 'reform' agendas and neo-liberal pressures but were also quite strongly contextualised, reflecting their governments' continued recognition of the role of education in governing through creating a coherent, inclusive and persuasive collective myth of belonging, identity or purpose (Ozga, 2017). That narrative also expressed a clear leadership role for and acceptance of responsibility by the state, working in partnership with other actors-local authorities, communities and (sometimes) learners and parents. In contrast, the dominant policy narrative in England prioritised individual goals to be achieved through 'world class' competitive status in a data-based national regime of performance assessment, curriculum control and inspection managed and provided increasingly by private actors and reliant on corporate outsourcing (Peruzzo, Ball, & Grimaldi, 2022). In what follows, we explore the extent to which these differences in governing narratives are present in the content and context referenced in education recovery planning across the UK, but first a note on methodology.

Methodology

The research reported here developed from a comparative study carried out between May 2021 and March 2022, with colleagues, on knowledge and policy in the management of the COVID-19 crisis across the UK.[1] As part of that research, a representative collection of

policy texts produced by all four UK administrations during the pandemic was analysed. These documents dealt with both management of the pandemic and future planning for recovery. (Details of the documents analysed can be found in the Appendix to Ozga, Arnott, Baird, Saville, & Hell, 2023). Policy texts were selected from across the UK and a discourse analytical approach was taken to comparison of their content.

This methodological approach extends to the texts analysed here, and to its theoretical framing. We understand policy as discourse: that is as constructed and presented in texts, speeches and other public forms – discursively. Policy texts carry definitions of problems, reference particular kinds of evidence and argument and produce 'knowledge' of particular kinds to present and promote policy solutions (Arnott & Ozga, 2016). Policy actors use discourse to foreground certain key ideas and thus restrict or reduce the significance of other competing ways of seeing or thinking about a policy issue. Discourse, in effect, creates and recreates the world by eliminating some possibilities and focusing on others. Discourse analysis works well with a narrative theory of governance, it enables the identification of the techniques and approaches that are used to build a specific 'storyline' and allows the analyst to identify the 'salient values and norms' (Wodak, 2020) that are mobilised to create and promote the governing narrative. We read the texts firstly in terms of the overarching narrative, then with attention to the processes of production and reception of the text and finally, in terms of how texts relate to broader social structures (social, political and economic) and reflect or construct relations of governing. We were explicitly concerned with showing how discourse works to maintain or attempt to maintain, the status quo, – in this case to preserve existing party-political control of education governance in the different nations of the UK, after a significant crisis. As indicated earlier, in carrying out this specific analysis we are also responding to Beech et al.'s (2023) call for attention to 'distinctive national and subnational politics, cultures, histories and path dependencies.' In being attentive to those issues, we are drawing on our knowledge of historical and political differences in the governing of education in the UK.

Textual analysis, based on reading and manual coding of keywords and noting their retention and relationship within each text, was carried out to identify key points to be considered during the analysis. Inductive narrative analysis was achieved through reducing and summarising information and the informing theoretical perspective of narrative governance led to a selection that focused on three overarching issues (i) what the texts told us about *governing, especially the role of the state,* in recovering from the pandemic (ii) what *policy priorities* were identified as part of recovery planning and (iii) which *policy actors* were recognised as contributing to recovery.

These broad, investigative themes allowed for further development of text analysis focusing on how governing was presented (for example, as responsible, directive, collaborative) and how the impact of COVID-19 was defined for example, as (primarily) economic, individual or societal, which actors were identified and how they were characterised (as partners, recipients, co-producers). This identification of key terms and their different deployment took us back to tore-reading the texts as *narratives* of recovery. We were able to see how some narratives were created by ignoring some possibilities, selecting and prioritising others and constructing 'projects' to create movement in preferred directions.

Policy texts from the four UK administrations, covering the period from October 2021-March 2022 were selected as follows:

(1) UK/England: The White Paper Opportunity for All (March 2022)
(2) Scotland: Education Recovery (October 2021)
(3) Wales: Renew and Reform (June 2021)
(4) Northern Ireland: Building Forward (July 2021)

It is immediately obvious, from the titles of the documents, that there are differences between the rUK, which signals the recognition of crisis and the need for renewal and recovery and the UK (England) text, whose title could apply to almost any education policy text produced during the UK Conservative government's time in office. This signals the UK government's strategy of emphasising continuity in a long-term project of improvement of education, and reinforcing a narrative that, by not acknowledging the pandemic-induced crisis, enables its impact to be ignored.

All the selected texts were issued in the name of the Minister responsible for education in each of the UK administrations. They varied in the degree to which they set agendas for recovery and although they were all addressed to the wider society, this was more or less explicit, and that society was defined variously as parents, or learners, or citizens and communities.

Document analysis

Policy text 1: opportunity for all

We deal first with the UK government's White Paper 'Opportunity for All: Strong Schools with Great Teachers for Your Child' that was issued by the then Secretary of State for Education in England, Nadhim Zadawi, In March 2022. In Zadawi's foreword, the text is summarised as expressing the government's vision for a school system that ensures every child receives the right support to reach their full potential, focusing on excellent teachers, high standards and targeted support. From the outset, education is presented as a distinct policy field, without reference to wider social and public policy areas, although the text briefly acknowledges the UK Conservative Government's 2019 election manifesto pledges to the broader policy agenda of (regional) 'levelling up' of areas of economic disadvantage, in a reference in the Secretary of State's foreword. No direct connections to the broader government levelling up agenda are made subsequently and there is no acknowledgement of evidence collected during COVID-19, underlining the more severe negative outcomes experienced by schools and learners in those regions of England identified as in need of levelling up policy interventions. Indeed, references to poverty and its impact on school performance are hard to find throughout the document.

Indeed, what is most striking is the almost complete absence of references to the pandemic and its impact on education. There is a very strong impetus in the text towards a swift return to 'normal' and the narrative expresses a commitment to continuity with an established project of improvement, detailing recent achievements and stressing the importance of standards in achieving '*world-class levels of literacy and numeracy*', with 'rigour' paving the 'path to success.' In the rare instances, where recovery is directly addressed, it is to be achieved through means that do not represent direct state responsibility but instead highlight the corporate outsourcing that has come to characterise provision in England. The text promotes readymade resources that will support and guarantee 'great teaching'. In reaching for an outsourced resource, we see evidence of

the economic and technological solutionism that has characterised education policy in England in recent years. These references are highly visible throughout the text, with listings of resources, for example, a National Tutoring programme, along with the deployment of the standardised resources mentioned above, the production of which is outsourced to agencies like to Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

Funding for a '*secure footing for the EEF*' is promised to help achieve this. There is an implication that any problems identified in relation to performance may stem from inadequate teachers and that readymade resources, made available online during the pandemic, may well be implemented as preferred practice to improve standards in school performance and in the profession. Teachers are characterised as beneficiaries of these interventions, as are students. Problems of teacher supply, morale and retention, exacerbated by COVID-19, are not directly addressed, but further reforms to teacher training are proposed, reforms which further limit the engagement of universities in this field. The issue of school non-attendance, also highlighted and increased by the pandemic, is to be dealt with by better technology - a '*national data solution*' will be found, though it is unclear how the better recording of absences will improve attendance.

The tone throughout the text is centralist and directive with learners and teachers characterised as recipients of policy, they are decidedly not co-producers. Given that the text does not connect education to wider public and social policy issues, it is unsurprising that context is absent. There is no discussion of *governing* or *societal* priorities, as the overarching narrative is intent on re-establishing what is presented as the UK Conservative government's established project of improvement through continuity with principles of centralising authority, investment in technology and outsourcing to corporate providers. The absence of terms like 'inequality', 'equality' and 'equity' indicates continuity in the Conservative narrative of isolating education performance from social context (Jones, 2020). Terms used frequently in building the narrative relate to digital solutions, the conceptualisation of 'access' is weak and 'poverty' is only mentioned in terms of lack of access to digital services. This contrasts with the policy texts for both Northern Ireland and Scotland, where challenging inequality, building equity and improving access are terms used extensively to support and explain recovery policy.

Although Opportunity for All includes the chapter heading: 'A stronger and fairer school system', the term fairness and the societal perspective is notably less prominent than in both the Northern Irish and Scottish documents. The first 'deliverable' in this chapter is:

> A fully trust- led system with a single regulatory approach, which will drive up standards, through the growth of strong trusts and the establishment of new ones … .

The term 'Trust' here refers to the Academy Trusts that is a model of state school provision in England, introduced and expanded by Conservative UK governments, where schools (Academies) are provided and managed by not-for-profit private enterprises. The language of 'driving up standards' through 'strong trusts' is representative and represents adjustments to governing of education that continue the rollout of privatised public provision, rather than any engagement with the radical rethinking called for by the OECD and the World Bank in the aftermath of COVID-19. Instead, terms like 'standards', 'evidence' and 'reform' are invoked to underpin the route to recovery through improving education in England. Where consequences of the pandemic are mentioned, they are categorised as

learning or time 'losses', suggesting a deficit held by learners, rather than a debt owed by the government to them.

To summarise, the UK Government's policy text 'Opportunity for All' does not offer a narrative of planned education recovery in England after COVID-19, rather it continues a long-established narrative of improvement through raising standards, this to be achieved through, as Jones (2020) puts it, reasserting preferences that have guided education policy since the 1990s. These preferences guided restructuring that dismantled established institutions, deskilled professionals and brought in new partnerships and networks and agencies and companies as leading providers. Both before and after COVID-19, the number of children in poverty continued to rise, and the attainment gap, between poorer students and wealthier ones, measured by examination success, widened. As Jones (2020) notes, the response of Conservative policy-makers is to confirm traditional curricula and constant assessment as their policy choices in enabling social mobility. Disadvantage and poverty do not feature in their lexicon.

Policy text 2: Scotland: the education recovery plan

This policy text develops, from the outset, a strong narrative of schooling as embedded in society and as important to societal cohesion. There is an explicit focus on the need to plan for recovery from the effects of the pandemic, including in there are frequent references to partnership and public service, gratitude is expressed for the work of education professionals during the pandemic and they are described as 'truly inspirational.' Loss is described as involving health and well-being as well as attainment, and the pandemic is acknowledged as having sharpened the focus on 'some of the inequalities that persist in our education system.' Policy for education recovery is clearly identified as a shared responsibility that involves a range of partners:

> The Scottish Government cannot deliver on these ambitions alone. A wide range of valued partners will play critical roles in doing so at all levels of the education system … .

At the same time, education recovery is located within wider policy issues including poverty and well-being but also in relation to future economic and environmental planning:

> Our focus on education recovery is one part of our strategic approach to recovery from COVID-19 and must be closely aligned to our work on wider issues. … … … … This strategy identifies three key outcomes as most likely to have the greatest impact on tackling the inequality and disadvantage highlighted by COVID-19: financial security for low-income households; wellbeing of children and young people; and good, green jobs and fair work.'

The SNP government is adept at mobilising 'salient values and norms' (Wodak, 2020) as legitimation strategies (Arnott & Ozga, 2018; Ozga, 2021) gain support for policy directions. Here the text combines economic and social references and defines investment in social terms while heavily using inclusive terminology:

> As well as the moral imperative to support our current generation of children and young people, this is also an essential investment in the future of our society. We must all invest time, hope and attention in their social development and educational achievements, and we must ensure our work is underpinned by a rights-based approach, shaped by what children, young people and their families and carers tell us'.

This concern for a rights-based approach is threaded through the policy text, along with increased reference to Children's Rights and Representation, as Scotland implemented the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots Law in 2021. But the stress on partnership that includes learners and their families, is not only a recognition of legal obligation, it is a key part of the governing narrative that frames education within its societal context. Education recovery is phrased in terms of rebuilding societal frameworks, to support loss at the individual level. The Scottish Government (TSG) thus aims to portray itself as engaging in a *responsible* governance style where global and social goals are prioritised. Terms such as 'access', 'outcomes' and 'progress' are discussed in almost exclusively socioeconomic terms, whereas the texts for Wales and England use these words as neutral descriptors of the success of government programmes. Key terms with a high usage are either intrinsically linked to equity (poverty, equity, well-being) or contextualised to link to the narrative.

Engagement with stakeholders and communities is central to the Scottish narrative. Local partners are frequently mentioned and named, though without clear reference to what collaboration will entail in practice. Collaborative efforts are invariably framed by the overarching political language of equity Professionals are also positioned as key actors in recovery, and increased teacher recruitment is a priority. There is also a strong emphasis on gathering evidence of the experience of COVID-19 from educational practitioners and from young people. While some of the text references previous policy directions as appropriate and productive, there is an acknowledgement of difficulty and commitment to further work:

> … we need to increase the pace of improvement, tackle unwarranted variation in outcomes, and support and empower schools and teachers as the people who know their learners best Professor Ken Muir has been appointed as an independent advisor to advise on the next steps in achieving this clarity and coherence …

The text references the need to 'close the poverty-related attainment gap' seven times and ensuring fair, equitable and safe outcomes for disadvantaged groups is presented as the key aim of virtually every policy area discussed in the report. COVID-19-related loss is not directly aligned with structures or productivity and economics, in the ways that characterise the other UK countries' texts, instead the emphasis is placed on context and especially a context of disadvantage:

> These detrimental effects are particularly prevalent for children and young people who are vulnerable to poorer outcomes because of adverse circumstances they are experiencing.

In summary, then, the governing narrative presented in the Scottish policy text is substantially different from that in the UK government's 'Opportunity for All'. These differences are unsurprising, given that the Education Recovery Plan reflects the SNP government's political text and talk in education policy that, since it took office in 2007, has promoted a policy narrative of joint endeavour and collaborative improvement, inflected with historically embedded references to fairness. The importance of 'crafting the narrative' of government is acknowledged by its practitioners (Arnott & Ozga, 2016), it draws on references to historically embedded themes (Arnott & Ozga, 2016; Arnot, 2024; Ozga, 2021). Education is consistently presented in SNP policy text as a collective endeavour that requires collaboration with partners and contributes to the construction of a 'learning

nation', in which problems of poverty are acknowledged, but a better future is promised through (among other things) progress towards political independence.

In constructing this narrative, the SNP has been able to point to political devolution as protecting the (claimed and rather ill-defined) national character of education against global pressures, though recent poor performance in the OECD's PISA has led TSG to turn to external sources of expertise. Marketisation of provision and competition between schools has made less of an impact in Scotland than in England, in part, because of geography but also because comprehensive schooling sits well with the narrative of collective learning.

Despite those recent concerns, overall, Scotland's COVID-19 recovery narrative in education strongly references a 'policy community' of government officials, local government, professional organisations and academic experts, one that can also include parents, children and young people. It locates education in the wider framework of society and discursively promotes an image of governing in partnership.

Policy text 3: Wales: renew and reform

The policy narrative of education recovery in Wales is strongly inflected with the principle of co-construction in a journey towards renewal, building on progress already made. Like the Scottish text, the Welsh Minister expresses gratitude to the professionals working in the education system for their efforts during the pandemic, and presents that episode as a source of learning that will shape future activity:

> I would also like to thank our partners in education, including Unions, Local Authorities, Universities, and the wider education system for working together with us, at times responding to events at breakneck speed. We will continue this collaborative approach to co-construction as we move forward to the next phase of renewal and reform.

Agreement on a collective project of renewal is discursively promoted through partnership, working in partnership is embraced as a means of ensuring 'alignment' among stakeholders and suppresses tensions about priorities:

> … on the common priorities set out in this plan and that we move towards them together.

This collaborative turn in Welsh education policy predates COVID-19 (Best & Myers, 2019). Throughout the document, variations on the phrase 'in collaboration with stakeholders' are employed to present the Welsh Government (TWG) as a collaborative leader. Policy is said to be created in liaison with those affected by it and so the narrative asserts the importance of the views of learners. More than any of the other 3 policy texts, the Welsh text is concerned with alleviating the negative effects on mental health and well-being of learners resulting from the pandemic, and there is more attention in Renew and Reform than in the other rUK texts to cultural activities as a resource to be developed and extended to mitigate these effects. Support for learners is delivered through activities including funded play, sporting and cultural activities in English and Welsh, along with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) school in-reach pilots to provide dedicated mental health professionals working with schools. Recovery planning builds on and increases funding for initiatives including free school meals and the Pupil Development Grant. There is a commitment to providing support for experiences both in and out of school, including through 'summer of fun' initiatives,

working with a range of partners to provide '*creative, active and other types of learning*' and '*broadening the range of experience learners have in school beyond formal learning.*'

The narrative distances itself from the idea of learning loss and focuses on ways of supporting learners to make meaningful progression in their learning:

> Focusing on progression is forward-looking, emphasising what learners need to make the next steps in their education. This avoids a deficit-based model focused on 'catching up' on everything that has been missed.

The policy text presents Welsh policy-makers as responding to the pandemic by building on previous policies that enabled schools to identify those learners in greatest need and develop support for them. This includes support for learners in Welsh-medium schools who live in non-Welsh speaking households, and who are identified as having faced challenges during the periods of remote and blended learning. Concern to ensure professional and practitioner support for '*the pathway towards curriculum reform*' while recovering from the impact of COVID-19 is reflected in references to 'space for practitioners to collaborate'.

However, there is limited discussion of socioeconomic challenges and needs. As in the English policy text Opportunity for All the terms 'equity' and 'poverty' are absent but there is attention to 'vulnerable' students. Their problems are primarily framed as attainment issues, and recovery is presented in general terms of positive outcomes: improvement for vulnerable learners is part of a policy cluster where the result will be:

> … … a prosperous, resilient, more equal Wales with a healthy population of cohesive communities, which thrive in a globally responsible way.

The governing narrative is strongly forward-looking, key terms such as 'progress', 'opportunities', 'future' and 'development' are very common. The terms 'well-being' and 'access' indicate the use of a narrative of inclusion. However, there is no strong governing discourse that locates responsibility for recovery with the state. The discourse of education recovery in Wales references the political language of loss and recovery infrequently, in contrast to the report's ambitious name. The language of inclusion is paired with other positive terms to create a unified vision of progress, such as the 'cohesive' and 'prosperous' Wales mentioned above. The economic perspective does not constitute the heart of the argument, as it does in Northern Ireland, nor does social justice, as in Scotland. This is the case in both references made to the individual learner and to the wider society. Words like 'access' and 'outcome' are used neutrally, describing anticipated results of interventions. In contrast, in both the Northern Ireland and Scotland texts, the terms are associated with rights-based thinking and providing access to basic needs for disadvantaged groups.

In summary, the Welsh text is distinguished by its referencing of cultural resources, including language support, as a way of building recovery. It shares with the Scottish text a discourse of partnership and collaboration. There is an explicit recognition of the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable learners and the governing narrative is quite muted, state responsibility is implicitly assumed, and continuity with existing policy is stressed.

Policy text 4: Northern Ireland: building forward

Northern Ireland's recovery plan places a strong focus on economic issues and the narrative stresses the need to focus on that policy area to address societal problems. The need for cooperation and a well-functioning government is underlined:

> … ..a collaborative effort for the Executive, a significant opportunity exists to achieve impact which is greater than the sum of its parts.

The text reminds the reader that different areas and actors are interdependent.

> … green growth and sustainability measures including climate action can drive economic growth and build stronger more resilient economies and societies.

Here, societies, economy and climate are interconnected. The prosperity of Northern Ireland is related to such diverse topics as children's education, cyber security and university research.

Education is located within a policy frame that identifies sustainable economic development, tackling inequalities and improving health as key priorities. There is an emphasis on learning from the COVID-19 experience, to bring a 'new focus' and to align developments with the wellbeing agenda. Tackling educational inequalities is located within the wider agenda of tackling inequalities as a 'Recovery Accelerator' and is integrated with planning to reduce unemployment, increase social housing provision, reduce domestic violence and improve health outcomes. Specific education policy plans prioritise support for disadvantaged pupils, as well as enhanced skills programmes to support transitions to work. Action plans include enhanced digital provision, as well as delivery of the recommendations of an Expert Panel

> … to support children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of their educational and lifelong learning.

The implementation of an interdisciplinary 'Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework' is also part of the plan, as is investment in sustainable schools, including in rural communities and expanding the 'curricular offer' to improve learning outcomes.

The Northern Ireland Executive policy discourse for education recovery thus tells the story of looking ahead with confidence, that citizens can trust the government, that the bright future will be realised through economic growth and that equity and sustainability will follow. There is a marked lack of specificity. About the plans, and about who is responsible for what.

In summary, this text reflects the complexity of the context of Northern Ireland, which results in an idealised policy narrative, constructed against the backdrop of continuing political uncertainty. The period 2017–2020 was shaped by the absence of a working Executive in Northern Ireland, creating a policy vacuum with consequences that lingered until the re-formation of the Executive in February 2024. The uncertainty created by Brexit had a marked effect on Northern Ireland, where deep anxiety about the economic consequences made themselves felt politically. The period of direct control from Westminster had a lasting impact on the context of governing undoubtedly shapes the emphasis in the report on stability and reassurance.

Towards a conclusion

The texts analysed here offer some considerable contrasts. The English policy text differs from the rUK texts in identifying education as a distinct, separate policy field, while the rUK texts discursively locate education within the framework of broader economic and social policy concerns and Wales also references cultural issues. The narratives expressed in the selected policy texts from the rUK are pre-occupied, to a much greater extent than the English document, with issues of poverty, health and well-being. Their Ministerial forewords note the impact in terms of loss of life and detrimental effects on mental and physical health. All the rUK texts present co-production and integrated policy development as desirable and express broadly similar strategic priorities that include economic recovery in tandem with tackling inequalities.

Importantly, with the exception of England, all the policy narratives present the government as responsible for recovery-and for the rUK, the government is the national government, not the overarching UK policy space. In England, as earlier research has noted (Jones, 2020; Ozga et al., 2023) there is a marked absence of a compelling or inclusive account of governing responsibility and shared experience and little acknowledgement of a need for reform or reconstruction that identifies a role for teachers or local authorities. This is unsurprising, given changes in governance in England since the 1980s that reflected the dominance of neo-liberal principles in the design of reform and restructuring programmes so that decentralisation and devolution were pursued with the aim of enabling the market to operate effectively and reflected policy commitments to shrinking the state. Policy and provision were distributed or decentralised to a range of actors and agencies, including, in some cases, private companies, resulting in a diversity of actors located in new organisational forms, including public-private hybrids guided in action by data.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed many fault lines in governing practices (Strake et al., 2022). The analysis presented above draws attention to variations in discourses of governing, that in turn suggest differences in the resources that policymakers mobilise in order to legitimate their governing strategies. In relation to state responsibility. The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments present themselves as active problem solvers, engaged with their populations in learning from the pandemic experience and charting a path out of crisis. The absence of similar references in the English text suggests that recovery, like the management of the pandemic itself, is being constructed as the responsibility of the individual, and largely understood and presented as economically driven.

This is in line with earlier work on governing that highlights the influence of historically embedded assumptions of state responsibility in the inflection and translation of neoliberal education narratives (Ozga, 2011, 2017, 2021). In England, such mediation seems absent and we suggest that the discursive construction of recovery planning by the UK (English) government may be best understood as evidence of *depoliticisation*. Depoliticisation entails a silencing or suppression of what was once seen as shared understandings or experiential knowledge in civil society. It works by eliminating or de-legitimising political demands by shrinking the space in which politics and political agency can occur (Costa Vieira & Foster, 2022) and ensuring that the state is not responsibilised. The policy texts discussed here reflect and promote national narratives within which problems

are defined and addressed, and specific ways of thinking about education are communicated and promoted. Those narratives reveal differences within the UK, illustrating the effects of those distinctive national and subnational politics, cultures, and histories that act as discursive resources in the construction of governing narratives, including, as Bonal et al. (2023) suggest, in policy spaces that share broadly similar institutional and economic characteristics.

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