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POLICY MORTALITY AND EDUCATION POLICY: A RESPONSE TO GUNTER AND COURTNEY

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ABSTRACT

This note offers reflections, largely by way of questions, in response to an article published by Helen Gunter and Steve Courtney in the British Journal of Educational Studies Volume 71, 2023 – Issue 4. It expresses reservations about what they have to say, especially about their assertion that, for England, governments have adopted 'failure' as a deliberate strategy to impel reform – indeed have required failure as central to policy design.

Keywords: failure as strategy, English education policy

The term 'policy mortality' might be expected to be about the conditions under which institutional or other policy dies – what causes a policy's termination whether by accident or design: what cultural or other factors are worth taking into account in working out whether a policy's death is to be welcomed or mourned; and how far the Lasswell (1936) realities of politics are engaged in relation to who did what, why, when and how?

In this instance, Gunter and Courtney seem to have something else in mind. They appear to argue that educational policymakers in England (there is silence on Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) exhibit a systematic, but previously unacknowledged and relentless determination to contrive mortality. They act over policymaking and implementation not merely in response to identified shortcomings, but rather to create service weakness of a scale and quality sufficient to justify putting certain institutions, or modes of professional practice, to death. They suppose that they cultivate drivers for change in schools by picking on vulnerabilities, engendering fear and spreading blame for underperformance to those least able to deal with it.

Central to the argument is a suggestion that government policy has been fixated on a specific reading of the term 'failure'. This is because governments have deliberately set out to shape policy initiatives in such a way as to

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actually require, even impose, failure so as to sustain momentum for change. That is not seen as an incidental systemic effect, analogous to the cycle of 'creative destruction' that Schumpeter (1942) attributed to capitalism. Rather, it is regarded as *calculated* and *enacted*. The implied purpose has been not merely to confront failure, as ordinarily understood, but to use it as a 'weapon' to generate an assault on the very idea of public provision. The unspoken object of government is allegedly to realise educational objectives that are, or are likely to be, convenient for some winners, but unjust for the losers.

For the authors, this is a form of 'policy violence' whose purpose is to encourage widespread acquiescence over initiatives that amongst other things:

- detach schools from local democratic oversight;
- increase experimentation towards, or otherwise enlarge, the diversity of institutional types;
- tolerate efforts to incentivise apparently innovative approaches to practice and to test what works and what does not;
- provide opportunities for the introduction of competitive markets;
- enable governments to shift blame for underperformance to teachers, parents or whole communities;
- divert attention from the radical rigour that is, or would be, required to restructure the economy in favour of collaborative enterprise, equity and inclusivity so as to enable education to live and flourish; and
- give no quarter to practitioners who do not own their own prescribed accountabilities.

They also give some indication that their position draws upon British Academy and ESRC-funded research projects – which naturally suggests that it deserves to be taken seriously in so far as it is based on reliable material, and even that it enjoys reflected validity. This is despite their apparent sensitivity to being caught in a trap as researchers – keen to challenge public policy and yet nervous about being 'vilified' for doing so (as though wilting in the face of critical challenge is ever defensible).

So how are policymakers to respond?

There is no reason to object to commentary that seeks to illuminate, inspire or complement close reflection about public policy positions of whatever sort. To the contrary, that is always welcome. Nonetheless, there are questions that might reasonably be asked about what the authors suggest – questions that would naturally come from policymakers, and from others – and questions about the manner in which they express themselves too.

To begin with, the article's authors seem to allude to mortality policy as a novel form of theoretical analysis, or rather as a 'strategic conceptualisation'. Without seeking to argue for a drearily fastidious attachment to language-critical analysis, this is plainly a slippery term. It accompanies their

appropriation of trauma vocabulary which is often used as a device to overwhelm proportionate judgment and forensically considerate argument.

It is usually typical of an effort to amplify fevered description, perception and emotion as being demonstrably persuasive, or proof against any suggestion of falsity. High-flown verbiage frequently clothes nothing more than hyperbolic polemic. However described, the language in this article is clearly and anxiously ideological in the sense that it does not self-test reflectively but instead gives the appearance of seeking to proselytise and embed tendentious pre-conceptions.

That aside, it simply does not follow that because governments have sought to develop and improve services for schools and other provisions (partly by clarifying and legitimating socially beneficial purposes and fundable standards) that the express intention has been *to create* the conditions in which failure is required, made inescapable and then penalised. Tackling weaknesses of whatever sort simply does not necessarily entail a determination to both design policy to sustain those same weaknesses and simultaneously sanction them.

If problems are alleged to exist, then it is appropriate to expect that they are disclosed in terms that can be tested – that criteria be clarified, standards made transparent, shortcomings explained and deficiencies of value be exposed for public debate and action.

Overcoming problems of practice or provision may be expensive, demanding and painful but that does not mean that failure is a necessary and sufficient condition of success, that its definition is always deployed holistically or that the identification of failure ineluctably creates a caste of losers.

Anyone who has followed or contributed to the development of educational policymaking and implementation within the UK would reasonably acknowledge that there have been significant changes in policy – both institutional and professional – since the passage of the 1944 Education Act. The landscape of opportunity and provision for learners could hardly be said to be wholly satisfactory, but its quality and reach have been transformed, not least since 2000.

Resources have played a significant part in this. Money matters – even though the way it is used counts more. On the big picture, there are useful data on this from the House of Commons Library UK Parliment (2021), although they are long on spending and less compelling on application and outcome.

These data indicate that, in real terms, public expenditure on education (at 2020–21 prices) increased from nearly £50 billion in 1979–80 to some £100 billion by 2011–12.

Spending was certainly restrained in the years that followed, but, by 2018, it was taken to its highest level since 2012–13. The numbers do not immediately suggest that responsible decision-makers have made a determined effort to require failure of learners, practitioners or whole systems (and to invest a massive real-terms increase in public expenditure for the purpose).

Of course, it is incontestable that figures can be misleading. However, in addition, those that are available, and of strong provenance, do not suggest that

education has been substantially penalised or starved of money, whether revenue or capital, taking account of the competing priorities upon which governments have to make judgments and for which they are accountable.

Whilst it may be acknowledged that there will always be arguments for higher levels of expenditure on education, there are for other socially relevant programmes too. The other priorities that any UK or devolved government has to meet for collective and common purposes are many and various. Not all of them have potent implications for educational progress.

Indeed, the uncomfortable reality is that housing, health and social services amongst others are strong combatants when it comes to making cases for spending the tax-take from individuals or corporate entities. The arguments for funding education are not made in conditions of all sweetness and light. They can only be advanced by making cool, credible and balanced cases related to performance, return on investment and learner fulfilment too. Thus, attending to performance evaluation and inspection assessment, in terms that capture both quantitative and qualitative data, is an essential discipline.

It is not defensible to ignore this reality – or to ignore that very large element of constraint for public expenditure that arises from the demands of funding government debt. Nations, and associated financial entities, do not lend to nations without assurance as to stability, viability and overall economic health. The price at which they are prepared to lend takes a sharp account of these variables and wider contextual perceptions at the same time.

Raising revenue becomes as important as expenditure. Yet there are constraints that bear on productivity and benefit multipliers arising from differential tensions implicit in revenue generation. For example, in the UK, the highest earners account for some 10% of overall taxpayers and contribute 60% of income tax receipts, but every citizen has an interest in the way in which money is used. Indeed, one of the largest challenges for all governments – whether in open markets or not – will always be that of avoiding provider dominance, clientism or complacency and promoting demonstrable service improvement.

Therefore, a study on policy morbidity might usefully say something verifiable about how governments can end the lives of those programmes that are ineffective or of poor value; about what gets in the way of doing so; about how barriers to change can be overcome; about how to ameliorate unintended consequences or risks in actual practice and about how to create resource headroom for innovation and stronger outcomes. The authors do not dilate on this, although it may be possible to infer that they favour more spending for community-orientated initiatives given that, as most educators would acknowledge, it takes a community to raise a child. Rather, they suggest that policymakers have done no more than promote a dynamic of failure.

In principle, there might reasonably be doubt about the value of educational research or commentary affecting a critical stance that is so savagely damning of other’s motives (including those public servants working in OFSTED). Conniving in failure, and seeing to it that failure is required as a cardinal element

of policy as distinct from honourably creating the circumstances in which failure or shortcoming can be avoided, would actually and simply be malign.

The professional commitment that so many educators in the UK exhibit towards creating robust, humane and deliverable prescriptions or incentives for change deserves respect. These may generate discomfort – and it is certainly true that some of the policy initiatives of the last half-century have challenged practitioner identity and opened up stretching requirements which, in good governance terms, involve the rigours of '*comply or explain*'. However, valued professional practice cannot, and ought not, be relieved of these natural strains of development and growth – no more should any publicly funded system of social provision.

Anyhow, the authors do not weigh the degree to which they have smeared those who engage with the rigours of educational provision and improvement, given the implied assertion that they have promoted or been caught up in a cult of denigration, degeneration and death. Signalling a general devotion to progressivism without testing its weaknesses, substituting fevered myth-making for dispassionate analysis and offering no more than broad remarks about the need for more research are unlikely to win friends or gain dependable policy traction.

The public – whether limited to taxpayers or not – is entitled to ask how well services are doing to support positive outcomes for economic well-being, nourishing communities and enhancing individual fulfilment. And governments of whatever stripe need to be able to give answers.

They have to do so in circumstances in which the bias to inertia is strong, interest groups are quick to defend their own profiles and benefits, the public space is heavily contested and social media amplifies perverted stories over incisive inquiry. This is tougher territory than most will ever expect to encounter – and naturally, research commentary should properly demonstrate an understanding of realities if it is to be shaped for beneficial results. It is always disappointing when educational research falls short of cutting through to policymaking relevance for want of that understanding.

In suggesting that education policy in the UK is dominated by a determination to make a fetish of failure, the authors rely on particular episodes or incidents sometimes selected from events of decades past, from which they then generalise extensively to map the bleakest of landscapes. They cast issues of legitimate public and professional concern – as perhaps there might currently be about the effectiveness of 'strict care' towards pupil behaviour and learner attainment – as illustrative of a nefarious desire to treat the entire public school system as endemically diseased, as ripe for privatisation and as damagingly detached from political discourse (as though that were possible or patently evidenced).

One voice, one metaphor, one bout of media tittle-tattle that is less than favourable to schools or education provision, in general, does not make a basis for compelling analysis. The authors express a distaste for medicalised

language yet say that anything which can be construed as failure in public is calculated to 'vaccinate' schools to, or within, a morbid system. Yet they do not appear to consider that providing progressively improving learner experiences and entitlements has to begin with an informed discussion about where unfairness and inequity arise for educational attainment. In the same way, comprehensive data are vital in tackling the social determinants of ill health.

They seem resistant to acknowledging the contribution that systematic quantitative and qualitative data analysis can make, and has made, to reveal the needs of individuals, institutions, practitioners and communities – in disclosing shortcomings within educational systems – in delineating entitlements – in challenging falsehood and convenient ignorance about learner needs.

How far is it reasonable for educators to dismiss the value of the data needed to assess outcomes, or to deploy publicly accessible standards of inspection and evaluation? Certainly, they will always carry a risk of being used as blunt instruments. Yet that does not invalidate their purpose, especially as their application or interpretation can always be made susceptible to proportionate and measured judgment. How far is it reasonable to avoid confronting the realities of disadvantage in order to keep the facts quiet? Surely, not at all.

As a further elaboration of their argument, the authors adopt the view that allegations of failure legitimise takeover, closure and the invention of new types of school or collaborative 'trusts'. The suggestion is that this is designed to mimic the drivers of a competitive market and thus, by implication, to dismantle all hope of securing a functioning public system irrefutably benefitting all. However, a determination to address those school settings and social conditions which do not remotely reflect a just culture by methods that are not conservatively hidebound is not persuasively reducible to a binary success/failure mindset. Educators are usually more than well aware of the irritating success of the inappropriate method in any event.

In all of this, the authors consider that parents and learners are cast as consumers capable of making good choices free from State direction, even though they may actually lack the agency to choose. It is held up as a 'theatre' of failure where language, actions and numbers are combined in an 'argumentative strategy' that is intended to frighten the 'ordinary' citizen into fighting for 'my child', shed trust and confidence in practitioners' professionalism and discount the State's capacity to steer well.

In a key passage the authors comment as follows:

> *... parents are required to calculate the best 'choice' of school place, to invest in private tuition, or to move house, or to home school; children calculate how to achieve top grades or face aspirational failure; teachers calculate how to produce the best value-added data or face contract termination; headteachers and other postholders calculate improvements in the data to demonstrate entrepreneurial nous ... or face contract termination; and the school and system as organisations are based on*

these individual and networked calculations where competition and market exchanges produce both success and failure as incentives for further calculation.

There is no denying that the educational system in England does exhibit some of these features – but not everywhere to the same degree or without countervailing benefits. Moreover, no one who has taken the trouble to digest reports of the Public Accounts Committee can cheerfully come away with secure faith in State-directed provision – vitally important though it is, and well-performing though it sometimes can be. For professionally valid, locally relevant and nationally concerted objectives to hold sway, serious and often uncomfortable attention has to be given to incentives for improvement and change, wherever systems sit on the market/non-market spectrum.

One of the primary drivers for education policy development (as provision gradually moved from an elite to an inclusive model) has focused on the number of children and young people who have had their hopes and achievements disappointed. It is no use pretending that the scale of this problem and its quality has been of little interest or unimportant – no more that parental agency should not be enlarged and respected. Not every child is above average and talent is not the possession of any one economic group.

Those who have been actively confronting the associated problems of provision have done so at different times and in different ways. To a greater or lesser extent, they have sought to ground policy and provision on evidence. They have attended to levers that are at once legitimated authoritatively and that have a chance of achieving positive outcomes. They have not scuttled for narratives of pretence.

Evidence means numbers as well as a descriptive analysis of feelings and narratives of perception – numbers relating to how we describe what it means to have been left behind, or at risk of being so. It also means responding to the numbers and shaping accessible evaluation criteria. Not taking an interest in school performance, the performance of practitioners, the ways in which different communities may engage with education and educators and the realities of intersectional advantage and disadvantage is more than likely to sweep the fact of diminished opportunity into complacency counter to radical action.

It is incumbent on those who do not wish this to happen, but who are also critical of the existing arrangements (variable though they are) to answer this challenge in terms that policymakers and the wider public can understand. It is not for researchers to indulge in haughty and morose handwringing around descriptions and perceptions that make them appear as though they alone cleverly understand the world. The object should be to generate research that has a chance of changing it.

The authors could perhaps have picked up on their concluding passages to consider what approach to shaping policy security (or policy well-being) might mitigate the ill effects of policy mortality that they assert, as well as simply

asserting them. That might suitably begin with some reflections on the likely utility of moderate language. Arguably, the notion that failure is being weaponised is a classic example of an incontinent and exaggerated expression that immediately raises doubts about the capacity of the users to engage in constructive dialogue with anyone else. It is rather like the effect of hearing an adolescent complain of being 'violated' when a parent or carer has insisted that they wear a Mac in the rain.

Is it seriously suggested that no effort should be made to assess whether learners, institutions or systems are improving or deteriorating. Is it reasonable to suggest that success is only identifiable if other people fail – cast to the outer darkness never to recover? Is it expressive of personal or professional self-command to be overwhelmed by media rubbish about some alleged weakness or other amongst practitioners? If not, then what is the professional – not just the Unions' – response to be?

Is it supposed that stakeholders and others cannot tell the difference between shortcomings amongst a small minority of teachers (and other professionals for that matter), or weaknesses in some schools, and the positive achievements won by teaching professionals in general? If it is, then what should leading (and other) practitioners do about it, and with which allies?

Is it really to be accepted that devolving budgetary and other responsibilities to schools, and distributing leadership more widely, leads always to frustration and to insuperable tensions? Is there not a proper case for recognising parental responsibility, just as there is for equipping communities to exercise it where it is unpractised?

Is it wholly misplaced to recognise that in an increasingly complex social and cultural context, more is required of educators than ever – and that this is as evident for them as it is for any other professionals? How is a stimulus to be given to school improvement without any contract implications for practitioners, continuing professional development and even overhaul for institutions?

Is it reasonable to assert that because a tiny number of voices give the impression that aspects of educational provision may be spoken of in the language of diseased institutions (and even of practitioner morbidity generally), this is accepted as tangible reality by, or acceptable to, policymakers in general? If it is, then what moderation is to be applied when, and for whom? Is it wise to tackle one sort of florid generalisation with declamatory narrative musings that offer no practical policy prescription and do no more than pander to (a thoroughly misplaced conception of) professional helplessness?

Most issues of public policy present problems of balance, coherence and consistency. None is responsive to resolution by a single profession or one type of professional alone. Those who argue that we are faced with a model that is negatively obsessed with competition, choice and consumerism have to confront the fact that it simultaneously embraces practice focusing on citizens, community and collaboration – that the elements of both can coexist, whether easily or uneasily, locally, regionally and in the different parts of the UK itself.

Sustaining a culture in which personal freedom and authenticity are combined with collective inclusivity and equity – where those very concepts exhibit internal tensions and contradictions – is no small task for the government. It is unlikely to be made any more productive by pretending that the decision has to be a binary one, or that identifying shortcomings, and being clear about their character and origin, discloses an intention to perpetuate failure.

If the authors' line of argument is not a species of misrepresentation or propaganda, it is a functional mistake. To follow Clark (2023), disparate events are selectively adduced and associated with pain, fear and features of context that are uncomfortable. They are given ever more elaborate and over-weighted precision which simply affirms misplaced prediction and misleading expectation. By extension, they evade a privilege and prejudice check.

They conclude with a brief mention of projects that 'enable the voices of children, parents and professionals to be heard'. They trail pointers but are noticeably unspecific. That does not mean that there is nothing to learn. Indeed, future research might usefully consider the ways in which education policy has shifted in the devolved administrations of the UK, and what that suggests for dealing with the practical deficiencies or concerns that may be identified in England and vice versa.

For schools in England, there is also important work to do to compare and contrast how far policy towards institutional innovation, phonics, the pupil premium, a knowledge-rich curriculum and competitive comparison measures is having, or has had, beneficial results in extending the skills and enriching the lives of the least advantaged and the generality of learners. Perhaps most importantly, research is essential to secure a policy that effectively supports the educational attainment of children 'looked after'.

In all of this, the accent should desirably be upon the tangible and the practical, not upon an apparently contrived narrative disparaging the motives of others.

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