Back to Normal: Evaluating the UK Government's education recovery approach and the missed opportunity to 'build back better' post-Covid

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I declare that this research was approved by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.

Dedication

To Mum and Dad, thank you for everything you've done to get me here.

I hope I've done you proud.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Jonathan, for his guidance, encouragement and feedback throughout the process of writing this dissertation. His support has been instrumental in helping me shape and develop this research.

I am especially thankful to my Mum and Dad, for their constant encouragement and for always being willing to help. My Mum's work in the education sector inspired this research, and her support in connecting me with interview participants was truly invaluable.

A final thank you to E, for the constant supply of sweet treats and reminders of how hard I've worked to get here. I couldn't have done this without you.

Abstract

This dissertation offers a critical examination of the UK Government's post-Covid education recovery strategy, assessing whether the pandemic served as a catalyst for meaningful reform or whether, as restrictions lifted, a significant opportunity to 'build back better' was ultimately missed. Particular attention is given to the Government's dominant 'back to normal' narrative, with research analysing how this framing influenced policy responses and evaluating the extent to which it constrained the potential for systemic innovation.

Combining discourse analysis of government communications with interviews with educational leaders, this study explores the interplay between policy rhetoric and practical implications. Key themes include the impact of austerity on sector resilience, the structural consequences of academisation, the prioritisation of accountability measures over holistic education and the limitations of the Government's 'back to normal' recovery approach.

The findings reveal that the Government was narrowly focussed on restoring pre-pandemic metrics (such as attendance and exam results) at the expense of deeper reflection and reform. Despite the initial presence of the 'build back better' slogan, there is little evidence of transformative action in the Government's strategy. Interviewees expressed frustration at the lack of forward-thinking across the sector, although some maintained cautious optimism that opportunities for change had not yet been entirely lost.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the Government's prioritisation of a return to pre-pandemic norms curtailed opportunities to address systematic inequalities and challenges within the education sector, thereby undermining the potential to 'build back better' in the aftermath of the pandemic.

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Government Paper Coding

Paper Number	Title	Date Published
Paper 1	Education recovery in schools: spring 2022	4th April 2022
Paper 2	House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts: Education recovery in schools in England	7th June 2023
Paper 3	Emergency planning and response for education, childcare, and children's social care settings	Updated 10th May 2023
Paper 4	What are the latest rules around COVID-19 in schools, colleges, nurseries and other education settings?	11th October 2023
Paper 5	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan	March 2023

Interview Coding

Respondent Number	Name	Job Title
R1	Shonogh Pilgrim	CEO of Whole Education
R2	Chris Parkinson	CEO of LiFE Multi-Academy Trust
R3	Anonymous	CEO of a small MAT in South-East England
R4	Anonymous	Director of Primary Education within a MAT in the East Midlands
R5	Peter Rowe	Executive Headteacher of Primary School & Chair of Primary Heads Association Slough
R6	Lord Jim Knight	Legislator in Education & Digital Technology. Former Minister of State for Schools and Learners (2006-2009)

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic represented one of the most significant disruptions to the UK education system in modern history. Nationwide school closures, the rapid transition to remote learning, and a prolonged period of social uncertainty exposed and exacerbated long-standing issues within the sector. This dissertation examines the extent to which the pandemic created conditions for potential systemic change within education and whether the Government's recovery strategies realised this opportunity.

In particular, the research critically analyses the Government's post-pandemic education recovery policies, with a focus on the dominant 'back to normal' narrative that characterised official communications and planning. While the aspiration to 'build back better' was evident in government discourse during the crisis, the extent to which this was realised within education policy warrants further scrutiny.

Drawing on policy documents and interviews with education leaders and policymakers, this study investigates how pre-existing structural conditions – including the effects of austerity, the rise of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and the ongoing crisis in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision – influenced the sector's response to the pandemic and its aftermath. By integrating policy analysis with first-hand perspectives, this research aims to assess whether the Government's pandemic recovery strategy facilitated meaningful innovation or instead was a missed opportunity due to a prioritised return to pre-pandemic norms in a bid to restore stability.

2. Literature Review

This dissertation evaluates the Government's narrative surrounding the education sector after Covid-19, through a post-austerity lens. Firstly, this chapter will define and contextualise

austerity before examining the changes made to the UK education sector in the years preceding the pandemic. Understanding the wider system pre-Covid is essential context to evaluate how the sector sought to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. This chapter will then define the concepts of 'back to normal' and 'build back better', which are key themes of this research. The literature review will ultimately identify a gap in the scholarship that this dissertation seeks to address.

2.1. Austerity

2.1.1. Introduction

Following the 2008 financial crisis, many governments were forced to implement austerity measures, either by choice or under pressure from international financial institutions (McKee et al., 2012). This section aims to contextualise the UK Government's implementation of austerity policies and assess the existing literature surrounding its societal impact.

2.1.2. Defining Austerity

Blyth (2013) defines austerity as a 'form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of … public spending to restore competitiveness'. Lacey (2023) simplifies this, referring to a government policy designed to decrease debt by reducing public spending and increasing revenue through raising taxes.

Austerity measures were introduced in the UK by the 2010 coalition Government in an attempt to reduce the growing deficit following the financial crash. As Blyth (2013) comments, 'the UK was supposedly spared this drama' (pressure from banks and private investors) by 'pre-emptive tightening', implying some benefit to the initiative taken by the coalition Government to adopt austerity measures early.

Prior to the 2010 Conservative policy, austerity was largely associated with the post-war era where rationing and price controls regulated and reduced the consumption of food and other goods in the UK (Evans and Walker, 2020). In the run up to the 2010 General Election, David Cameron and George Osborne reintroduced the term to the political agenda, warning of 'a new age of austerity' (Summers, 2009). However, as Evans and Walker (2020) convincingly assert, this new vision of austerity did not match the historical national unity implications of past policies. The 2010 Conservative Government justified the measures as a necessary and reasonable solution to the financial crisis, which upon election, they maintained through their fiscal policy.

2.1.3. Economic Justifications of Austerity

As previously defined, austerity is fundamentally an economic measure designed to reduce deficits through a reduction in public spending. It is important to consider the economic justifications of such policies before evaluating the broader societal implications. In his analysis of journalists' framing of austerity, Harjuniemi (2018) emphasises how austerity has been 'an enormously powerful political idea in the aftermath of the global financial crisis'. The 2015 Economist article titled 'What is austerity?' illustrates Harjuniemi's thesis, with the subtitle 'The public view and the economists' view are not always the same'. Keeping financial statistics at the core of its analysis, the Economist contributes an economic justification for adopting these measures in the 2010s:

> [T]he risk, when a deficit is as high as 11% of GDP, is that the markets lose confidence… making the fiscal situation even more desperate. (The Economist, 2015)

However, in his paper titled 'Austerity: The Great Failure' Schui (2014) assesses the broader societal implications of these measures, providing a critical analysis of austerity, whilst

simultaneously trying to grapple with the question as to why economists remained steadfast in their defence of these policies:

> The austerity policies that have been rolled out in many Western countries have brought all the pain of economic stagnation but hardly any of the promised benefits of debt reduction, renewed growth and prosperity. (Schui, 2014)

As demonstrated, there is literature within the economic field that justifies the use of austerity measures, however, the scope of this research looks at its societal and political impacts. Therefore, it is important to consider the existing scholarship that examines the long-term and non-economic implications of austerity on society.

2.1.4. Societal and Educational Impacts of Austerity

The existing literature demonstrates broad consensus that austerity policies exacerbated wealth inequalities in the UK and negatively affected the public sector. Duffy and Gillberg (2018) argue that austerity policies have 'increased poverty and injustice in the UK,' a conclusion supported by Ridge (2013), who examines their particular impact on Britain's poorest children. Ridge's report emphasises that financial cuts risked overlooking the needs of the most disadvantaged; however, it leaves underexplored the broader implications for educational resilience during crises such as Covid-19.

Further evidence of the societal consequences of austerity is provided by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2013), which reported that by 2012 - just two years after the implementation of these policies began - 13 million people were living in poverty, with more than half belonging to working families. These findings collectively suggest that austerity not only deepened socio-economic disparities, but also weakened the structural capacity of public services, with implications for their resilience in periods of national crises.

The education sector was particularly affected by austerity-driven spending reductions, including an 8% reduction in per-pupil funding (Belfield et al., 2018). Smith (2014) details the consequences of these cuts, identifying a clear correlation between austerity measures and increased educational inequalities. Manifestations of these inequalities included 'classroom hunger', limited access to educational resources, and the strong influence of socio-economic background on academic achievement. Smith concludes that 'children's socio-economic background appears to have more influence on educational attainment than the school attended', raising concerns about the long-term effects of austerity on educational outcomes.

International comparisons reinforce these findings. In Italy, Pavese and Rubolino (2023) report that austerity measures negatively impacted student performance, with significant declines in maths and reading scores, particularly among children with limited resources at home. Their study corroborates the patterns identified by Smith (2014) and supports the broader consensus that austerity measures have been a significant driver of widening educational inequalities.

2.1.5. Austerity and the Response to Covid-19

Due to the recency of the pandemic, research specifically addressing the intersection of austerity, education and the Covid-19 pandemic remains relatively limited. However, emerging studies offer valuable insights into the broader relationship between fiscal retrenchment and public sector resilience.

During the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, former Chancellor Osborne, asserted that austerity measures had a 'positive effect' on the country's resilience, suggesting that fiscal restraint improved the Government's capacity to respond to the crisis (UK Public Covid Inquiry, 2023). However, this view is vehemently rejected by McKee and Williams (2023) who argue that austerity measures significantly weakened public services, thereby reducing the country's capacity to manage the pandemic effectively. Their conclusion is consistent with the broader literature on the societal

impacts of austerity, which emphasises its role in undermining public sector capacity, therefore it aligns more convincingly than Osborne's assertion.

Similarly, Evans et al. (2022) contend that austerity adversely affected the UK's pandemic response, observing that:

> The Covid-19 crisis of 2020, a crisis of public health … revealed the consequences of years of austerity. Austerity did not cause this crisis, but it was responsible for a lack of public capacity to deal with it effectively. (Evans et al., 2022)

Hernandez (2021) extends this analysis, highlighting that the most significant pandemic-related hardships were borne by socio-economically disadvantaged groups:

> The outcomes of the pandemic have had a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable and poorer groups. A decade of austerity placed lower-income households and poorer communities in an unfavourable position in terms of overcoming the struggles caused by the pandemic. (Hernandez, 2021)

Taken together, these emerging analyses suggest that austerity measures constrained the operational capacity of public services, and critically limited the education sector's preparedness and adaptability in responding to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, given the limited longitudinal research available at this stage, further empirical studies will be necessary to fully ascertain the long-term implications of austerity on crisis resilience.

2.2. Contextualising the Education Sector Structural Reforms of the 2010s

Alongside the decade of austerity, the schools sector underwent significant reform over a 20-year period, driven by market principles such as competition, choice, and efficiency. These reforms had profound socio-political consequences, shifting the focus of education away from

educational equity towards performance metrics and consumer satisfaction. Ball (1994) is critical of these developments, highlighting how the adoption of market principles in education policy undermines social justice objectives. His analysis is particularly relevant to the reforms introduced between 2010 and 2014 by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, whose policies, shaped by neoliberal ideas, positioned education as a competitive marketplace.

The distinctive character of Gove's reform agenda is often encapsulated by the term 'Goveism', which emerged in contemporary discourse to describe his policies. Taylor (2013) defines 'Goveism' as a combination of 'an individualistic orientation at the level of the system (academies …) and a hierarchical one at the level of teaching and learning (… focus on traditional subjects).' This dual emphasis on institutional autonomy alongside centralised curricular control reflects the broader neoliberal trends that Ball criticises. Similarly, Davies and Bansel (2007) characterise the neoliberal approach to education as a 'victory of capitalism', further reinforcing the ideological underpinnings of Gove's policy framework.

Building on Ball's critique, Granoulhac (2017) argues that Gove's reforms were 'largely austerity-driven,' highlighting the interconnectedness of market-oriented reform and fiscal retrenchment. Gove's tenure cannot, therefore, be separated from the broader socio-economic context of austerity, and his legacy within the education sector has become synonymous with the fiscal measures of the period.

Taken together, these analyses demonstrate how the convergence of neoliberal ideology and austerity during Gove's tenure fundamentally reconfigured the governance and priorities of the education system. While reforms aimed to raise standards and efficiency, they also introduced structural vulnerabilities, arguably reducing the sector's resilience to external shocks such as those presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.2.1. Academisation

A central component of Gove's education reforms was the expansion of the academies programme, leading to the large-scale growth of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and significantly altering 'the landscape of state education' (Lightman, 2015). Outstanding schools were encouraged to convert to academy status, while underperforming schools were assigned to academy sponsors. School funding was restructured around pupil numbers, diminishing local authority control, which became largely confined to place planning, admissions, and SEND support. Direct government funding to MATs embedded a model of school autonomy alongside centralised accountability.

However, the academisation movement has faced substantial criticism. Research from the UCL Institute of Education (2018) found no improvement in pupil attainment or progress within MATs, and worse outcomes in larger trusts (those with 16 or more schools). Similarly, the Education Policy Institute (2017) concluded that 'academies do not provide an automatic solution to school improvement,' finding little evidence of gains following conversion. The National Education Union (2024) also challenged this reform, stating that schools joining MATs were 'more likely to see a regression in their next Ofsted assessment.'

These findings suggest that, while academisation was central to this structural reform, it often failed to improve educational outcomes and exacerbated existing inequalities. The resulting fragmentation and weakened local oversight raise further concerns about the sector's resilience.

2.2.2. School Outcomes and SEND Provision

The education sector is judged, primarily, on measurable outcomes such as exam results and Ofsted ratings. Government policy defines key performance measures for schools in terms of 'pupils reaching expected standards in English and maths' and 'retention measures, which

report on the proportion of students that complete their studies' (DfE, 2016). However, several scholars criticise the reliance on such accountability metrics, arguing that they constrain educational practice and undermine a more holistic environment for learning. Beach (2021) highlights that these measures were designed to 'rank students, teachers and schools' thereby creating competition where 'some are winners, and most are losers'. He concludes that this system is neither conducive to learning nor high performance. This judgement is echoed by Selfridge (2019) who criticises a system based on 'assumptions' and 'crude calculations'. The focus on quantifiable outcomes has been widely criticised for creating a competitive environment that overlooks individual needs, particularly in the provision for students with SEND, where rigid metrics and underfunded services have compounded systemic inequalities.

In response to growing concerns, the Government reviewed support for students with SEND in 2018 (DfE, 2018), leading to the rollout of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and the establishment of 14 new special free schools to increase provision for pupils with complex needs. Nonetheless, the combination of rising numbers of children with SEND and sustained budgetary pressures has contributed to what many commentators describe as a crisis within the sector . Although the Government announced increased funding for SEND provision in March 2023 (see section 4.4.3), Benhenda (2023) argues that post-pandemic funding measures are insufficient to address the scale of the challenges now facing SEND services.

2.3. Social Contract

Social contract theory has existed within civil society for centuries. Hobbes' 17th-century model argues that political authority and obligation are rooted in the self-interest of individuals (Sasan, 2021). The theory discusses the moral obligations felt by individuals to form and sustain the societies in which they live. Applied to education, it refers to the unspoken 'contract' wherein parents send their children to school and schools provide education in return. However,

post-pandemic discussions of education describe a breakdown in this social contract, which is highlighted by the statistic that 'four in ten parents with children in secondary school think that their child's needs are not being met' (Tatum, 2024). This erosion of trust suggests that the mutual expectations underpinning the relationship between families and schools have been destabilised. The breakdown of this implicit agreement has had significant implications for attendance, engagement and perceptions of the education system more broadly. The fragility of the social contract serves as a critical lens for understanding the impacts of the pandemic on the education sector.

2.4. The 'Back to Normal' Narrative

The Covid-19 pandemic was a global crisis that impacted all areas of society. As Mehlmann-Wicks (2022) comments, 'the long-term impact of Covid-19 on poverty and financial insecurity is likely to be significant'. The British Academy (2021) reinforces this conclusion, noting that the full societal effects of the pandemic may not be understood for many years and hypothesises that 'many impacts of the pandemic are an acceleration of existing trends'. This theory aligns with Corak's (2020) description of the pandemic as a 'great revealer' of wider systemic issues and pre-existing inequalities.

The 'back to normal' narrative that emerged post-pandemic reflects an established framework familiar to crisis management. In their chapter 'Between Crisis and Normalcy', Boin and Hart (2001) argue that political actors often seek a swift return to ordinary life following crises, using the term 'crisis after crisis' to describe this process. In this context, the adoption of a 'back to normal' approach following Covid-19 can be seen as predictable response to societal disruption. However, Smagacz-Poziemska et al. (2023) caution that an obsession with normality can inhibit meaningful 'transformation of everyday social practices' raising questions about the long-term implications of this strategy.

The emphasis on returning to pre-pandemic benchmarks was particularly evident within the UK education sector. Government discourse consistently referenced the restoration of public examination standards. For example, a DfE press release following the 2023 GCSE and A-Level results stated: 'results back to pre-pandemic levels as grading returns to normal' (DfE, 2023). Attendance was another key governmental focus and, in 2024, the DfE made pupil attendance reporting mandatory in a drive to increase pupil attendance (DfE, 2024). However, McNally (2024) concludes that absence rates will remain above pre-pandemic levels until cohorts who started secondary school during the pandemic complete their education. Similarly, an Ofsted report on post-pandemic recovery, emphasised the need for pupils to 'catch up' (DfE 2022), reinforcing pre-pandemic standards as the reference point for success.

Brooks and Perryman (2023) offer a critical analysis of this approach, highlighting how the 'back to normal' narrative was used to reassert control and resist meaningful transformation, specifically in areas such as teacher training and Ofsted inspections. Their analysis illustrates how post-pandemic policy discourse largely reinforced existing systems rather than enabling meaningful reform.

Challenges to the 'back to normal' framework began even at the height of the pandemic. Pantuliano (2020) warned 'we won't get back to normal because normal was the problem' and called for critical engagement with the pre-existing issues that had been brought sharply into focus by the crisis. Similarly, Levidow (2020), examining the neoliberal restructuring of the Brazilian agricultural sector, emphasised the opportunity to build 'a better normal' rather than reinstating entrenched inequalities. His critique of market-driven models mirrors the neoliberal influences in the UK education system, where the pandemic exposed how competitive frameworks and performance metrics reinforced systemic disparities rather than addressing them.

Across the literature, the ‘back to normal’ narrative is recognised as a prevalent but problematic response to crisis, restoring short-term stability while simultaneously entrenching systemic weaknesses exposed by the pandemic. While familiar in political crisis management, its application following Covid-19 has been criticised for limiting opportunities for deeper transformative change. This is most notably reflected in the unrealised aspirations captured by the call to ‘build back better’ (see section 2.5). However, the depth of scholarship and analysis of the post-pandemic response is limited.

2.5. Build Back Better

An alternative to the 'back to normal' approach is captured in the concept of 'building back better.' The phrase 'build back better' originates from disaster recovery discourse, first formally used by the United Nations following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2004). Mannakkara et al. (2014) define it as:

> [A]n ideal reconstruction and recovery process that delivers resilient, sustainable, and efficient recovery solutions to disaster-affected communities.

Although traditionally associated with responses to natural disasters, the concept became widely adopted during Covid-19, as governments around the world confronted the economic and social impacts of the pandemic. Political figures, such as US President Joe Biden and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, incorporated the phrase into mainstream discourse (Forrest, 2020), framing it as a commitment to systemic renewal across sectors, including education.

The World Bank Group also adopted the 'build back better' framework, advocating for post-pandemic education strategies that prioritised reform rather than restoration (World Bank Group 2020). However, the credibility of this position has been questioned. Critics such as the

Bretton Woods Project (2019) highlight the World Bank's historical failure to learn from past mistakes, weakening its authority to advocate for transformative change.

Despite the rhetorical prominence of 'build back better', there appears to have been a clear shift back towards the pre-pandemic status quo in UK government discourse (see section 2.4). Although there is evidence that independent organisations and some political voices advocated for a transformation of public services, systemic inertia and competing priorities seem to have restricted the extent to which the 'build back better' agenda influenced policy. Parker's (2020) question: 'Coronavirus: have we already missed the opportunity to build a better world?', encapsulates a sense of lost potential. Across the literature, 'build back better' is recognised as an aspirational framework for recovery; however, within education its practical application post-Covid remains underexplored, giving rise to a void in the literature.

2.6. Conclusion of the Literature Review

This chapter provides the foundation from which to assess the UK Government's education recovery following Covid-19, particularly through the lens of austerity. The implementation of austerity measures since 2010, whilst economically justified by some, are widely criticised for exacerbating inequalities and undermining public services. In education, these measures gave rise to reduced funding, increased socio-economic disparities, and structural reforms, including academisation and outcome-focused accountability. McKee and Williams (2023) and Evans et al. (2010) argue that this limited the flexibility and resilience of schools during the pandemic.

The literature also highlights that reforms, particularly during Gove's tenure, created a market-driven and hierarchical school sector. Beach (2021) and Benhenda (2023) conclude that these changes left the sector vulnerable due to underfunding and systemic pressures, particularly in relation to SEND.

Post-pandemic government discourse has predominantly fixated on returning to pre-Covid norms. In the limited published scholarship to date, the 'back to normal' narrative has been criticised for reinforcing outdated benchmarks and avoiding transformative reform. Conversely, while 'build back better' gained initial traction globally, particularly as an aspirational framework for post-disaster recovery, this momentum appears largely unrealised within the UK education sector. While Brooks and Perryman (2023) provide critical insights into specific areas of education policy, this dissertation fills an academic void by evaluating the recovery approach across the sector as a whole.

A significant gap in the literature lies in evaluating the combined themes, namely a decade of austerity, systemic education reform, and pandemic recovery policy and whether this amplified pre-existing issues or vulnerabilities. This dissertation seeks to bridge this gap by exploring whether the prioritisation of returning to pre-pandemic standards actively inhibited the post-pandemic opportunities for meaningful change.

In doing so, this research draws upon underexplored themes, such as the breakdown of the social contract between schools and families, and the lost potential to rethink educational outcomes and system resilience. The research question posed seeks to explore this intersection and considers: Did the UK Government's 'back to normal' narrative inhibit the education sector's opportunity to 'build back better' following the Covid-19 pandemic?

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This study takes a qualitative approach, combining discourse analysis with interviews to answer the research question. These methods were selected to examine both the ideological framing of government communications and the lived experiences of education leaders during

the pandemic. These two methodologies allow for a deeper understanding of the interaction between policy discourse and its practical implications.

3.2. Justification of Scope

The research scope focusses on the education sector in England, examining government communications, after the pandemic to explore the response and recovery. Limiting the timeframe helps to explore how the 'back to normal' narrative influenced opportunities to reform the sector.

3.3. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis examines how language shapes policy and public perception. Drawing on Foucault's theory of discourse, which emphasises the relationship between power and language, this study will analyse how the Government framed its pandemic response as a return to the normalcy of pre-pandemic life. Hewitt's study 'Discourse Analysis and Public Policy Research' provides a valuable precedent for applying Foucault's theory of discourse analysis to public policy (Hewitt, 2009). Her study demonstrates how this analytical method can uncover hidden ideologies in public policy while highlighting the interplay between authority rhetoric and lived experiences. Similarly, this research examines how the UK Government's discourse during the pandemic framed the education sector's priorities and prevented opportunities for systemic reform.

In addition, Hajer (2002) contributes an important evaluation of this method, emphasising the utility of structured approaches to discourse research. Hajer's tools, such as identifying storylines, are particularly useful when analysing the 'back to normal' narrative in this study. By identifying recurring themes such as 'catch up' and 'pre-pandemic levels', this research seeks to expose how government narratives dismissed the opportunities to learn lessons from

the pandemic and introduce systemic changes. Discourse analysis is preferred over methods such as content analysis or quantitative analysis, because it explores deeper trends rather than surface-level patterns.

3.4. Role of Interviews

Expert interviews complement discourse analysis by offering insights into how government narratives were received by education leaders. While discourse analysis reveals the intent and framing of policies, interviews provide practical perspectives on their implementation and impact. This dual approach enhances the depth of findings.

The interviewees were chosen to represent a range of perspectives within the education sector, including the CEO of an education not-for-profit, MAT leaders and headteachers. These individuals were directly involved in responding to government policies during the pandemic and are therefore well-positioned to share insights into the challenges faced and opportunities missed within the sector. Although the sample size is relatively small, the participants' expertise ensures that the data is relevant.

Having conducted the interviews with education leaders, a reflection on the insights gained revealed a missing government perspective. Recognising the importance of including an insider viewpoint, contact was made with Lord Knight, former Education Minister. His insight is invaluable to understanding the Government's approach to education policy over the past decade and has been helpful in guiding the analysis of government communications.

Taking a semi-structured approach allowed for a balance of consistency and flexibility across each participant's interview, enabling each to share their experiences while ensuring key themes were addressed.

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research. Participants were informed clearly about the research, including the right to withdraw at any stage. All participants completed a consent form prior to the interview, including signposting wishes for anonymity, which have been respected.

3.5. Conducting the Discourse Analysis

To conduct the discourse analysis, this study examines government communications related to education policy following the Covid-19 pandemic. The selected materials include parliamentary reports, DfE blogs and published guidance. These texts were chosen based on their relevance to the Government's 'back to normal' narrative and their influence on shaping the education sector's recovery.

A thematic approach was applied to identify recurring patterns and ideological framings within the discourse. Coding was conducted to categorise key themes, such as references to pre-pandemic levels, lost learning and catch-up.

To enhance the validity of the analysis, these findings were guided by the interview insights. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of how discourse was both constructed by the Government and received by those responsible for implementing policy on the ground.

3.6. Limitations

Whilst this study aims to provide a critical analysis of the UK Government's 'back to normal' narrative and its impact on the education sector's recovery post-Covid, the limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the scope of the research is limited to England's education sector, therefore excludes a broader global or cross-sectoral analysis. The findings may not be applicable to the whole public sector, or to international systems that adopted different recovery strategies.

Additionally, the discourse analysis focuses on selected government communications, meaning not all policy documents, speeches or parliamentary debates from this period were examined. As a result, some nuances in government rhetoric may have been missed.

Secondly, methodological limitations include the inherent subjective nature of discourse analysis, where interpretation is influenced by this study's critical post-austerity lens. Efforts were made to mitigate this through systematic coding and connections with interview data, but complete neutrality is not possible. Similarly, the interview sample, while valuable, is not exhaustive. Perspectives from frontline educators (for example, classroom teachers), parents, and additional policymakers could have enhanced this study's findings.

Despite these limitations, this dissertation offers a critical exploration of government discourse and how it was received by the sector, laying the groundwork for further research in this area.

4. Discussion

This chapter examines whether the UK Government's emphasis on a 'back to normal' narrative following Covid-19 inhibited opportunities for transformative change within the education sector. Drawing on the discourse analysis and interviews, the findings are organised around specific areas of systemic vulnerability identified during the research. These areas, including measurable outcomes, technology, sector funding and structure, and community, provide insight into how pre-existing weaknesses were amplified during the recovery period. Through this analysis, the chapter assesses whether the sector's recovery trajectory represented a broader missed opportunity to 'build back better'.

4.1. Measurable Outcomes

4.1.1. Curriculum

As previously mentioned in the literature review (see section 2.2), Gove's legacy is characterised by the entrenchment of neoliberal market principles, the expansion of academisation, and the erosion of local authority oversight. This section will consider the extent to which the resultant system, with its focus on a narrow knowledge-heavy curriculum, restricted transformative reform.

As lockdown hit, pupils were forced to learn remotely, therefore, it is unsurprising that gaps in learning occurred. The narrative around 'knowledge gaps' and 'catch-up' is prevalent in the selected government papers. The opening paragraph of Paper 1 reads as follows:

> The effects of the pandemic on pupils, staff and leaders were evident. It was clear that many schools were working hard to respond to these challenges, including helping pupils to catch up academically.

Using the term 'catch up' in the opening lines of this report, clearly shows that the Government's priority was addressing the knowledge gap created by Covid, in line with pre-pandemic standards.

Importantly, the report mentions a priority for subjects 'where the knowledge that was missing was essential for pupils to progress in the subject', citing 'other subjects, such as history or geography' as subjects that do not require essential learning. This demonstrates how heavily focussed the Government was on what it defined as core subjects, namely English and maths.

In addition, under the heading 'Catch-up Strategies', there is mention of adapting the curriculum. However, the use of the word 'adapting' is deceiving, as in reality, it continues to emphasise 'teaching what has been missed' and 'focussing on the core subjects for their catch-

up work'. The report aligns with Gove's knowledge-curriculum legacy (see section 2.2), and does not reference any lessons learnt or possible reflections from the pandemic. This report, therefore, supports this dissertation's view that the Government employed a 'back to normal' narrative in its recovery approach. This hindered an opportunity for the sector to 'build back better' through re-evaluation of pre-covid policies and approaches. Furthermore, there was no evaluation of the impact of changes necessitated and implemented during the pandemic.

Paper 2 aims to hold the Government to account in scrutinising the DfE's recovery approach. As in Paper 1, the 'catch-up' narrative remains prominent. However, Paper 2 adopts a more critical stance, stating that it is 'not fully convinced that the Department fully appreciates the pressures schools are under as they seek to help pupils catch up'. This criticism indicates that the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts recognises the reduction of knowledge gaps as a key priority, whilst also highlighting the need for more substantial support to address these ongoing challenges.

It is evident that the Government continues to focus on the curriculum and the paramount importance placed on pupils catching up on lost learning. However, this agenda provoked a mixed reaction amongst the interview respondents.

R1, who was consistent in their views of missed opportunities within the sector, stated 'the catch-up narrative drove me insane'. R4 also saw the potential negative impacts of this narrative stating that they 'never said it [catch-up] to the children … we protected them as much as we could from that'.

In contrast, R3 showed some leniency towards the Government's priorities, but criticised its execution:

> The Government's focus on knowledge-based learning is really important, of course you've got to have strong knowledge of things, but knowledge can come in lots of different ways.

Moreover, echoing R3's views on a broader approach to learning, R2 reflected on a lesson learnt from the pandemic:

> It's clearer than ever that children need significant opportunities for genuine personalisation in what they experience. They need to feel that the curriculum is designed around them as opposed to they've got to flex around the curriculum. We believed that pre-pandemic, but it's so much more obvious now.

Here, R2 makes reference to the direct impact of the pandemic on their thinking around educational approaches. However, this reflection is not evident in the Government's recovery plans.

Furthermore, R4 also took this opportunity to reflect on the current system:

> There's too much in the curriculum … there's just too much to do and I think the whole thing needs slimming down … If we have less to do, we can do it better.

Although the DfE's recovery guidance refers to 'adapting the curriculum', there is no suggestion of reducing or fundamentally rethinking its scope; instead, the emphasis is placed heavily on catching pupils up and addressing knowledge gaps. This reflects a clear failure to undertake a holistic evaluation of the education sector post-pandemic, with the Government prioritising a return to pre-Covid standards over meaningful reform.

4.1.2. Attendance

It has been widely acknowledged that pupil absence has worsened since the pandemic. Paper 2 recognises the importance of high attendance levels to improve academic attainment and highlights the declining attendance rates. Moreover, Paper 1 details the negative impacts of the pandemic on students' well-being and mental health. There are strong implications in this Paper that this is a contributing factor to the ongoing school attendance issues, for example poor attendance caused by increased school-anxiety amongst students. This same section highlights the Government's narrative to return to normal, even on such a nuanced and sensitive theme: '…optimistic that pupils' well-being was improving and getting back to normal.'

Whilst both Papers acknowledge the problem, there is little suggestion of any long-term plan to tackle the issue of pupil absence. When discussing this in the interviews, the consensus was that the Government was flippant in its use of mental-health related reasoning. Rather, a theme that emerged from the interviews revolved around the broken social contract between schools and families, which has been exacerbated by Covid and has heavily contributed to the attendance crisis (see section 4.3.1).

Paper 2 acknowledges that 'pupil absence is higher than … before the pandemic … particularly among disadvantaged pupils'. This suggests mental health is not necessarily the sole contributing factor to the attendance crisis, but the Government provides no clear guidance to improve the issue.

The increase in pupil absence is a clear example of an issue that was already present and has been exacerbated post-pandemic. R1 states clearly that 'attendance was already a massive issue pre-pandemic' but goes further to suggest that 'it is not the same sort of pupils' who are struggling to return to school.

There is no evidence that the Government is working to acknowledge this growing issue and evaluate the broader causes of pupil absence, such as potential student disengagement. Instead, there is a blind obsession with returning pupil attendance rates to pre-pandemic levels. This, therefore, demonstrates another missed opportunity for the DfE to consider why absenteeism is an issue and why even more pupils might have lost interest in returning to school post-Covid.

4.1.3. School Accountability

This section will consider school outcome measures, including exam results, Ofsted reports and league tables. All three were mentioned by the interviewees in the context of a missed opportunity to reevaluate the way in which the sector is held to account and potential to 'build back better'.

Whilst this was a prevalent theme across the interviews, there is very little mention of these measured outcomes in the government discourse. A rare example is the acknowledgement in Paper 1 that governors and trustees had been less able to hold schools to account due to lack of in-person access during lockdowns. Overall, however, this lack of focus around future thinking of measured accountability suggests that the Government does not intend to review the systems. In Paper 3, which updates the guidance for emergency planning, there is no mention of how accountability measures might need to be adjusted in the face of any potential future crisis.

Furthermore, the interviews showed that within the sector there is a real sense of disappointment in the swift return to the same measures post-Covid:

> I think it's a great pity we've gone now straight back to league tables because they will always be more dependent upon the nature of the children that walk through your door rather than what you do for them. -R2

R6's comments echo the missed opportunity to reevaluate the academic benchmarks but emphasise the need to learn lessons from how the sector operated during the pandemic:

> There are bits to learn from the period, teacher assessed grades didn't go so well, but centre assessed grades might only be slightly better.

This sentiment is displayed in Paper 1, but with no suggestion as to how the situation could be improved: 'The pandemic appears to have amplified the impact of weak legacy assessment practices'. This statement seems to shift the blame to previous practices, whilst simultaneously accepting no sense of responsibility to amend the system.

There was clear consensus among the interviewees, that the dominant emphasis on exam results, particularly GCSEs and A Levels, has negatively impacted the broader education they believe schools should be providing. R2 deplores the position in which schools have been placed, but also blames school leaders for not working innovatively enough to provide a rounded education:

> The sad thing about our sector is that everybody will look at the frameworks and work out what they've got to do to be safe … as opposed to going 'what do we believe our kids need and how do we deliver that?'

This indicates a growing dissatisfaction with the current system of accountability. The Covid-19 pandemic represented a critical juncture, offering an opportunity to pause, reflect, and pursue the aspiration to 'build back better'. An opportunity that ultimately was not realised.

4.2. Technology

As society was forced into lockdown, the use of technology became one of the biggest talking points of the pandemic and has continued in many areas since. However, there is clear evidence that this discussion has not continued in the education sector. The focus on 'normality' seems

to have taken precedence over an evaluation of technological advancements made during the pandemic. Teaching depended upon remote learning in an attempt to minimise learning loss when students were unable to attend school in person. Schools made huge advancements in the use of technology, but government discourse seems to discourage this progress.

In Paper 3, which looks at future emergency planning, the discussion of technology is only used within the context of a remote learning contingency strategy. There is no discussion of encouraging students to improve their technological skills or how devices could be used in schools effectively on a regular basis.

Paper 1 appears to acknowledge that education is increasingly centred on technology but still seems outdated in its approach:

> Schools have been reminded how much pupils rely on technology. This led them to review their computing curriculum and consider how best to make it relevant to their pupils.

This was met with universal disappointment by the interviewees, all of whom praised the technological advancements made in education during the pandemic. R6 shared a valuable insight into the negative impacts of austerity on the use of technology in education:

> They, as part of austerity … got rid of the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency which provided advice to schools and colleges around the deployment of technology.

When asked further about whether or not the progress made during the pandemic should be continued, R6 expressed disappointment:

> I was hopeful that this would precipitate a paradigm shift where we thought more strongly about the use of technology, but … there was a rush to get back to normal.

This is an explicit example of austerity measures weakening the education sector's ability to respond to the pandemic, and the subsequent 'back to normal' narrative reversing any lessons learnt. This reinforces the arguments presented in the literature review (see section 2.1.5) which state that austerity weakened the education sector's ability to respond to the pandemic.

R5 also shares an important technological system introduced at their school, which has helped to improve the attendance issue (see section 4.1.2):

> We've got an attendance app so every family can access NHS information which says here are the suggestions of when to send you child to school and when you shouldn't … so that certainly has been very helpful.

This provides a clear example of how technology can support the education sector in building greater resilience post-pandemic. However, it also highlights an area largely overlooked by the Government, which has not integrated technological innovation into its education recovery strategy.

Finally, R3 highlights how technology could be integrated permanently into the school structure suggesting that for older students a hybrid approach to learning could be considered, allowing for more focussed study time:

> I think we have potentially missed a trick in saying we're going back to delivering education in exactly the same way … We're [currently] trying to work on … thinking what does hybrid learning post-16 look like?

Therefore, this demonstrates another missed opportunity for the sector to 'build back better' by continuing to innovate in the use and integration of technology to improve teaching, learning, systems and overall student outcomes and life chances. Instead, progress was rapidly reversed by the Government's intent to return to normal.

4.3. Community

As Covid-19 struck, schools were forced to react and adapt to an unprecedented set of circumstances. As an essential service, teachers had to continue delivering the highest possible quality of education and care via a hybrid format. Schools were also forced to remain open for children of key workers, and those most vulnerable. This reinforced the position of schools at the heart of communities, which was a dominant theme from interviewees' reflections . This section will assess the extent to which schools provided for their communities, and if this has been considered in government discourse emerging from the pandemic.

In the discourse, mentions of communities are made within the context of the most disadvantaged areas, and discussions of the role of schools in helping parents who have been negatively affected by the pandemic. Paper 1 acknowledges that 'the pandemic has strengthened some school's relationships with parents', due to increased communication and trust. However, this was with only the case with some parents and certainly not all.

This sentiment is partially echoed in the interview data, which found that due to regular contact by schools with families, stronger relationships have been established - typically with previously more disengaged families:

> Because of what we did during Covid, some of our most difficult parents, [their] attitudes really changed because we were the only ones that cared. We were the ones that stayed with them. -R4

The role that schools played in aiding the most vulnerable during the pandemic was a key theme that emerged from the interviews. Every school leader interviewed shared that they had handed out food parcels within their community. Whilst this work from schools went largely unacknowledged, in the post-Covid updated emergency planning guidance (Paper 3), the

Government outlines that schools should ensure pupils entitled to free school meals still receive a 'good quality lunch' if attending school remotely. This contingency in the emergency planning demonstrates that the Government is aware of the vital role that schools play. However, arguably this small inclusion in emergency planning does not prove that the Government is rethinking schools' broader position within communities.

In their reflection on the future role of schools within communities, R3 shared some forward-thinking views on the provision of support for students, emphasising the need to take this role seriously as a public service:

> Covid shone a light on how schools can connect different services and be a hub for children and families and society more broadly … If [social workers, psychiatrists and councillors] came into our schools we could [provide] these things really well.

This vision for a more recognised and integrated role for schools within communities was a potential positive legacy of the pandemic. However, such ideas were entirely absent from government discourse on post-pandemic priorities for schools.

4.3.1. Social Contract

Within the subject of schools as community enablers, an important sub-theme emerged surrounding the social contract between society and the education sector, specifically parents and schools, as discussed in the literature review (see section 2.3). The narrative around strengthening relationships with parents, seems to have sparked a further conversation about the social contract between schools and families. As previously demonstrated, in both the government discourse and the interviews, there is consensus that the pandemic provided an opportunity for schools to reinforce relationships with parents. However, there is evidence in both the literature and selected papers which contradicts this notion, suggesting that the social

contract between schools and families has broken. There is further tension in discussions as to when this perceived social contract was broken.

The Government hints at this in Paper 1, which discusses attendance issues post-Covid, highlighting that 'there was push-back from some parents when schools communicated high expectations and the importance of attendance'. This clearly evidences the apathy of some parents around their children's attendance and perhaps demonstrates a changed mindset post-pandemic. That would, therefore, suggest a flaw in the Government's 'back to normal' approach, as it relies on students and parents adopting the same attitudes to schooling as pre-pandemic.

The view that the social contract has been broken post-Covid was shared amongst the interviewees. R1 was not surprised that attendance became an issue after the pandemic, as they believed remote learning gave parents a direct look into the curriculum and an opportunity to see its flaws:

> It's a social myth that it was acceptable to make students go back to school when school wasn't fit for purpose.

R3 concurs with this sentiment, stating 'trust in the education sector has eroded massively … that social contract between schools and homes has broken down'. This explicitly demonstrates the belief within the sector that the uncodified agreement between schools and families has failed.

However, as mentioned, when it failed is not universally agreed among interviewees. R5 believes that this was a result of austerity and was not something unique to schools. Their implication here is that trust and confidence in the public sector more broadly has been eroded over the last 15 years, reflecting another damaging effect of austerity.

However, in discussing the missed opportunity for change, R1 believes that a broken social contract could be the momentum needed for society to demand improvements to the education sector. They wonder 'whether there will be a tipping point for society to demand systemic changes to the education sector, rather than it changing itself?'. This suggests that the dissatisfaction, as a result of a broken social contract, could bring about demands for positive changes within the system. This evidences the view that not only has the Government missed an opportunity, but the sector itself has also not capitalised on the momentum to 'build back better', although arguably this is because it was restricted by the Government's narrative.

4.4. Sector Funding and Structure

As outlined in the literature review (see section 2.2), the education sector underwent significant changes to its funding and structure during the 2010s, driven by austerity measures and Gove's academisation agenda. This section evaluates the potential advantages offered by MATs during the pandemic, whilst also examining how funding cuts critically undermined the sector's capacity to respond effectively to the challenges posed by Covid-19.

4.4.1. Funding

To critically assess the Covid-19 response through a post-austerity lens, it is necessary to examine the funding provision. Government discourse during and after the pandemic frequently emphasised the allocation of a substantial budget to mitigate negative impacts on young people and support their 'catch-up'. Updated guidelines published in 2023 (Paper 4) detail £5 billion allocated to education recovery, with £1 billion directed specifically to the National Tutoring Programme. While this demonstrates an acknowledgement by the Government of the need for additional investment to restore pre-pandemic levels, the framing of recovery solely around returning to previous benchmarks highlights the limited ambition of the approach and a missed opportunity for systemic innovation.

This has been poorly received by the sector which, as established in the literature review, faced harsh funding cuts under the austerity measures of the 2010s. R6, speaking from a parliamentary perspective, was extremely critical of the austerity measures, claiming they were unnecessary and that funding within education could have been maintained:

> At the time of austerity, there was significant policy debate about whether or not to adopt a Keynesian approach of borrowing more money … or whether you cut right back, and obviously the Government chose the latter … it's a credible and viable economic policy to do the former, so I would not agree that those cuts were inevitable, they were choices.

When pushed further on how this impacted the sector, R6 vehemently disagreed with Osborne's claim outlined in section 2.1.5**,** stating that these measures 'significantly weakened the resilience of the system'.

R3 argues strongly that Covid exacerbated huge inequalities that were already present as a result of austerity, reinforcing Corak's (2020) view (see section 2.4). The consensus among interviewees supports the argument that austerity critically weakened the sector's ability to respond effectively to the pandemic. Moreover, this structural vulnerability has largely gone unacknowledged by the Government, with additional funding solely directed towards restoring pre-pandemic performance levels. This evidence reinforces the central argument of this dissertation that: the Government's pandemic recovery strategy prioritised a return to normality over the opportunity to 'build back better' by reimagining and improving the broader experiences of teaching, learning, pastoral and co-curricular provision for children.

4.4.2. MATs

The pandemic provided an opportunity for MATs to demonstrate their role as being instrumental within the education sector. Serving as focal points for associated schools, MATs were able to provide localised support amidst muddled and untimely government communications. Although not directly critical of its own approach, the Government acknowledges in Paper 1 that '[school] leaders have also had support from academy trusts', contrasting with the largely negative discourse around MATs explored in section 2.2.1.

Further recognition of MATs' contribution is evident in the Government's commentary on the National Tutoring Programme, where it praises the resourcefulness of teachers working across trusts to deliver specialist tutoring support. Nevertheless, there remains a noticeable lack of substantive discussion on how MATS could be further leveraged to strengthen sector-wide resilience and capacity. Interviews with MAT leaders reinforced the view that trusts provided vital support to their schools during the pandemic, highlighting another missed opportunity to reevaluate how the sector operates.

This point is summarised neatly by this comment from R2:

> I definitely think during those pandemic times and particularly during periods of lockdown that MATs were able to provide … a level of support for schools that local authorities and central government just couldn't.

Both R2 and R3 also commented that their MATs expanded after they were assigned schools to support during the pandemic, which subsequently chose to join the trusts permanently. This is testament to the assistance that trusts were able to deliver to schools during a period of unprecedented uncertainty. However, R3 offers an important caveat, noting that trusts can be 'well led and managed, or badly led and managed'. This perspective is echoed by R6 who

described the pandemic as ‘an opportunity for good MATs to secure strong reputations’. These observations suggest that the potential impact of MATs must be approached with caution, recognising that not all trusts operate with same level of competency. Nevertheless, as R1 asserts, MATs have become ‘a big player’ in education following the structural reforms of the 2010s, and their role should be leveraged more effectively rather than overlooked or marginalised by government discourse.

4.4.3. SEND

The UK is facing a crisis with its SEND educational provision. This is addressed in government discourse, but the interviews suggest that this does not go far enough. The SEND crisis is primarily the result of underfunding, due to the extremely limited funding available to respond to a significant increase in those requiring support. In March 2023, the Government published the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (Paper 5). While much of the preceding analysis has been highly critical of the Government’s post-pandemic education recovery approach, this plan does outline positive steps for improving SEND provision. It acknowledges three interlinked systemic problems: poor outcomes, lack of parental trust and financial unsustainability. The latter is closely linked to the austerity measures of the 2010s.

It is important to recognise the Government’s awareness of the long-standing issues facing SEND services, many of which have been worsened by the pandemic. The commitment to introducing national standards seeks to directly address the ‘postcode lottery’ that currently exists in SEND support. However, much of the language in the plan is highly aspirational (relying on slogans such as ‘right support, right place, right time’) while concrete, actionable measures are vague and lack the urgency required to address the scale of the crisis.

Unprompted, all the interviewees mentioned the SEND crisis, demonstrating the prevalence of this issue. However, there was not a single reference to the Government’s specialist

improvement plan, implying that it does not adequately address the crisis. Moreover, the interviews highlighted the direct link between reduced funding due to austerity and the SEND provision crisis. R2 spoke passionately about their frustrations with the system which, due to councils with high deficits, has meant two things:

a) Not all eligible students are receiving an EHCP which allows them access to specialist education provision, due to the associated costs.
b) Despite this, there has been a significant increase in the number of students with EHCPs and schools are overwhelmed. Consequently, they are not enrolling SEND pupils.

This was echoed by R3, who described the scenario of a child not receiving an EHCP due to a council's lack of funding as 'immoral' and 'awful'. They emphasise the acute need for increased funding within the sector.

Whilst SEND provision was a problem pre-pandemic, R4 highlights there has been a surge in students with special educational needs or disabilities since Covid. This is another example of Covid exacerbating a deep-rooted problem. Addressing the significant increase in students with SEND, R5 shared an important perspective that captures the scale of this issue:

> Somewhere between 3 to 5 children in every class are now being defined as having a significant SEN. The S of SEND is 'special', well 3 to 5 in every 30 … that's not particularly special, that's then a norm.

Whilst this comment is designed to provoke, it creates a strong case for redefining and rethinking the approach to SEND provision. The SEND improvement plan was a positive step, but with no further discussion since, the Government is close to ignoring one of the biggest crises in recent education history. Emerging from the lockdowns was an opportunity to 'build back better' with truly transformational reform, which the Government failed to seize.

4.5. A Missed Opportunity?

The interviews provided nuanced insights into the broader opportunities for systemic reform following the pandemic, revealing a more complex picture than simply missed reforms in specific areas. R6 reflected that '[the pandemic] was a significant thing that happened to all of us, and it will have undoubtedly affected some people's thinking about these things' suggesting that some degree of societal change was inevitable. In exploring this idea further, R6 compared the pandemic to the innovation that followed World War 2 noting: 'I think [change] was possible. Those moments come along very rarely where the country has been brought together', referencing the creation of major reforms such as the welfare state.

Further critical perspectives emerged regarding the limitations of the 'back to normal' approach. R5 challenged the notion of a full return to previous norms, arguing: 'It's not just business as usual because although we've moved back into that traditional system, the cohort is fundamentally different'. This observation highlights a crucial oversight in government policy: the pandemic fundamentally altered pupil development and reshaped educational needs. Therefore, making a return to pre-pandemic systems a fundamentally flawed approach. Similarly, R4 criticised the Government's position, suggesting that: 'the Government would like to forget it ever happened and expect everybody to be exactly the same as if it had no impact'.

Taken collectively, these insights offer direct evidence of sector leaders' damning response to the Government's 'back to normal' approach and reinforce the view that significant opportunities for improvement were missed. However, a degree of optimism persists within the sector. R1 noted that the change of government in July 2024 had 'sparked excitement amongst the sector', while cautiously observing, 'there will always be opportunities, whether the sector has the potential to grab the opportunity is a different question'. R2 echoed this sentiment,

warning that ‘if we don’t see significant change over the next 18 months, it will be a missed opportunity. The window hasn’t quite closed, but it’s narrowing’.

Overall, while this research strongly supports the conclusion that a sector-wide opportunity for reform has been missed, there remains some hope that momentum for change could still be revived; only the passage of time will allow this to be fully evaluated.

5. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore whether the UK Government’s approach to education recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic represented a missed opportunity to ‘build back better’ through the re-evaluation and reform of the sector. Through discourse analysis of government guidance and reports, alongside interviews with education leaders, this research has revealed a consistent emphasis on restoring pre-pandemic norms, particularly through a focus on measurable outcomes. The dominance of the ‘back to normal’ narrative shaped the Government’s strategy, at the expense of any critical reflection on the systemic issues exposed by the pandemic, which resulted in the absence of substantive ‘build back better’ policies or plans.

The findings suggest that while the Government acknowledged some of the challenges facing the sector, such as deficiencies in SEND provision and mental health support, its response was characterised by a lack of urgency, innovation and long-term vision. This was particularly evident in the narrow prioritisation of ‘catch-up’ strategies, which were rooted in traditional academic benchmarks with limited consideration of curriculum reform, personalised learning or a broader approach to pupil well-being.

Interviews with educational leaders revealed both frustrations and residual hope. Respondents expressed disappointment at the Government’s failure to capitalise on a unique opportunity for

systemic reform, though some maintained that the window for meaningful change remains partially open. This was particularly noted in relation to the breakdown of the social contract between schools and families, where shifting parental expectations could yet act as a catalyst for sector-wide re-evaluation. Ultimately, this research concludes that the Government's Covid-19 education recovery approach was primarily an attempt to get 'back to normal' representing a significant and overarching missed opportunity to 'build back better'.

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