

GREAT MISTAKES IN EDUCATION POLICY

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM
IN THE FUTURE

RUTH LUPTON AND DEBRA HAYES

P

CASE Social Exclusion Seminar

7th July 2021

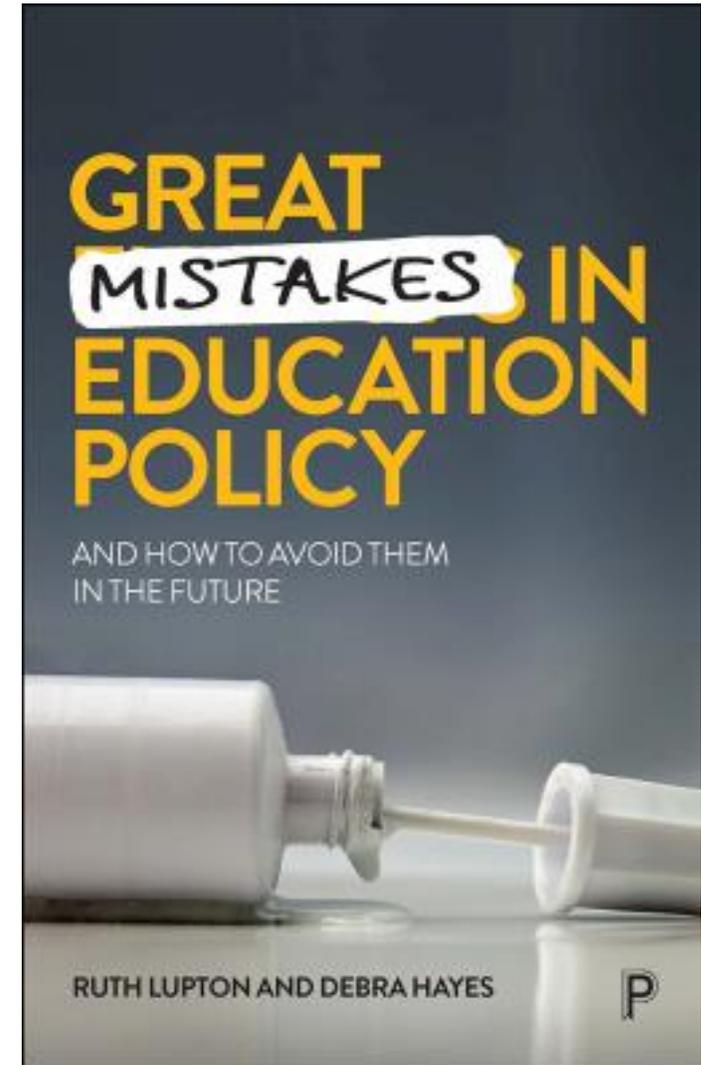
Great Mistakes in Education Policy:
and how to avoid them in the future

Ruth Lupton

Honorary Professor, University of Manchester

About the book

- A joint endeavour with **Debra Hayes**, Professor of Education and Equity, University of Sydney.
- Covers **England and Australia** (schools not FE and HE)
- Written for a general audience and **aiming to influence policy change by helping build consensus on some big issues.**
- To this end:
 - Takes a long-term view (40 years ish)
 - Assumes policies were well-intentioned
 - Depoliticises 'mistakes'
 - Attempts a balanced review of evidence
 - Asks simple questions: **have policies made education better and fairer?**
 - Deliberately naïve optimism about policy change
- Not specific 'blunders of our governments' (King and Crewe)





The central propositions

- Not everything is bad.
- But **three big problems** characterise our systems:
 - Overemphasis on tests/narrowed and diminished education
 - Divided school systems that work for some but not others
 - Teachers' time spent on the wrong things
- These limit schools' capacity to meet 21st century challenges and to serve all children and young people equally.
- **Policies work least well in the areas and schools where they need to work best.**
- This is the result of **five big 'mistakes'**, embedded over time, and compounding each other, baking in inequalities.
- It can be different, but **policy 'tweaks' are not enough.**

Five mistakes

- #1 Turning to the market
- #2 Letting test scores drive policy
- #3 Over-prescribing teachers' work
- #4 Misunderstanding inequalities
- #5 Leaving education out of education policy making



Our approach (1)

- Trace the policy history
 - Identify the rationales
 - **Synthesise the evidence – did these policies make education better and fairer?**
 - A work of synthesis and translation (and persuasion!) not (mainly) a work of discovery
 - **A wide range of evidence** – trying to draw on the richness of educational research from economics to ethnography
 - Thus a broad expert review, not a systematic search for studies on very specific questions
-

Our approach (2): a litmus test

“it is **more difficult** to get education right in challenging contexts because economic and social difficulties put pressure on children, young people and their families and on schools as organisations”

“it is also **more important** that education works really well in areas of social and economic pressure because it is there that students and families rely more on schooling to supplement the economic, social and cultural capital that their counterparts in better off areas enjoy”

“So designing policies that work really well for the least advantaged learners and in the least advantaged places is ...essential.. if education systems are going to have a levelling effect and contribute to increased social mobility and reduced inequality. **Arguably this is the real test of whether education policies are performing equitably and well**”

- Draws in detail on 10 school case studies

10 case studies	
‘Farrell High School’ (North of England, urban)	Firth et al. (2014)
‘Parkside Academy (North of England, urban)	Salokangas and Ainscow (2018)
Coastal academies (different English regions)	Passy and Ovenden-Hope (2020)
‘Dreamfields Academy’ (South of England, urban)	Kulz (2017)
English urban primary schools (different regions)	Hempel-Jorgensen et al (2018)
‘Northwest college’ (Australia, urban)	Jackson and Lamb (2016)
‘City Campus’ (Australia, regional centre)	McInerney and Smyth (2014)
Northern primary schools (Australia, Adelaide suburbs)	Hayes et al (2017)
Queensland rural primary schools	Hardy (2015)
‘Waterwell Primary school’ (Adelaide suburbs)	Comber (2012)

On England and Australia

England	Australia
High and stable inequality	High and growing inequality
Social and spatial divisions: major cities and 'left behind' industrial and coastal areas. Employment precarity	Social and spatial divisions: high poverty for Indigenous Australians and rural areas. Also 'rust-belt' areas and new employment precarity
Most schools are 'state schools' (93%), including church schools	Smaller 'government' sector (65%). Catholic and independent schools are 'non government, but all schools are partly state funded
Tradition of local authority administration (until recently)	Tradition of State and Territory administration (but not local)

'Convergent paradigms'

- Early school starting
- High stakes testing
- Upscaling (centralisation) of education policy
- Promotion of choice and competition

'Policy borrowing' or 'policy learning'

- Synthetic phonics
- School funding

Some big differences

England more established tradition of redistributive funding

Australia more established tradition of teacher autonomy in relation to curriculum/pedagogy

GREAT MISTAKES IN EDUCATION POLICY

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM
IN THE FUTURE

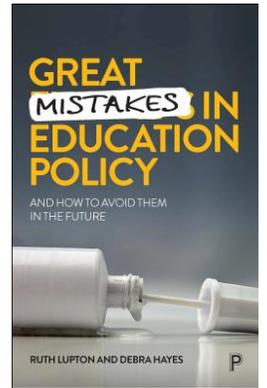
RUTH LUPTON AND DEBRA HAYES

P

A selection of the evidence and arguments

- Divided school systems
- Turning to the market
- Misunderstanding inequalities
- Leaving education out of policymaking

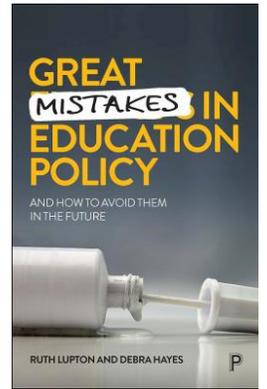
Divided Schools Systems that Work for Some But Not Others



- **(Old News) Children who need the education system most are actually getting less from it than their more advantaged peers.** And system **increasingly** marginalising those who rely on it most
 - **Unequal access to schooling:**
 - Private schooling
 - Less well resourced schools
 - Quality differentials
 - **Unequal school experiences:**
 - Extra curricular activities
 - Ability grouping
 - Curriculum materials and misrecognition. Falling rates of ‘school belonging’
 - **Not in school:**
 - Rising rates of school exclusion and home education, especially among disadvantaged groups
-

“Thus, despite the intentions of policy-makers to create equitable systems that develop everyone’s talents and abilities, the reality is that the young people who rely most on schooling to secure their educational pathways and contribute to their longer-term well-being are least likely to be in well-resourced and effective schools in the first place, least likely to get the full benefit of the curricular and extra-curricular resources in their schools, and more likely to be marginalised within them or excluded from them, ending up in weaker provision still”

“These problems... are hard to tackle but cannot be avoided if we want our education systems to be better and fairer”



Mistake#1: Turning to the market

- Relying on a market model of school provision: non-state providers, self-managing schools, competition and choice
 - Rationales: Principle of parental choice, imperative for improvement and innovation : “poorer schools would literally have to close”
 - English evidence:
 - Early academies improved performance but not sustained
 - School choice facilitates social sorting
 - ‘residualised schools’ struggle with funding, recruitment, morale, school climate
 - Schools focus on institutional well-being: effects on admissions, exclusions, curriculum
 - OECD (2010): marketisation has little if any positive effect on outcomes. Choice decreases rather than increases equity
-

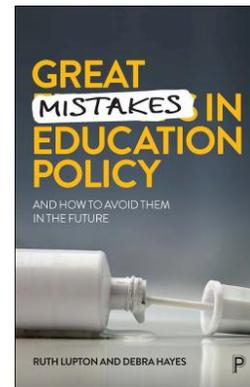
Parkside Academy: Market Pressures and the Homogenisation of Practice

When Parkside Academy was set up.... it was regarded as the bottom school in an established local 'hierarchy of desirability' .

Parkside's student population was skewed towards those experiencing the highest levels of deprivation, drawn almost exclusively from the immediate locality. It tended to include parents who did not exercise a choice through local authority admissions procedures, and children who did not get places at other 'more desirable' schools. ...One parent explained these patterns as resulting from particular groups of parents choosing to send their children to schools where, in the light of growing interethnic tensions within the district, 'they thought they would be safe' .

Competition to attract 'good' students, and to be seen as academically successful (and thus 'desirable') led to secondary schools in the area having very similar approaches – strict, formal, teaching from the front of the class. The lack of diversity among the schools' approaches to learning was seen as a factor perpetuating the exclusion of certain groups, and the unwillingness of some learners/families to engage with schooling

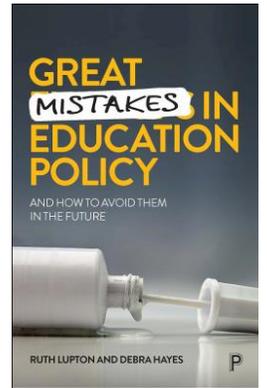
Mistake#4: Misunderstanding Educational Inequalities



- Educational inequalities would have been expected to be persistent in a time of persistent economic inequalities. There have been some good initiatives but:
 - ‘Looking in the wrong place’ (at school improvement not social determinants)
 - Aiming to overcome individual barriers not change standard systems and practices
 - Insufficient funding redistribution (and latterly too much emphasis on individuals not the work of schools)
 - Focused too much on attainment gaps (and created unequal educational experiences)
 - Neglected education policies that increase middle class advantage

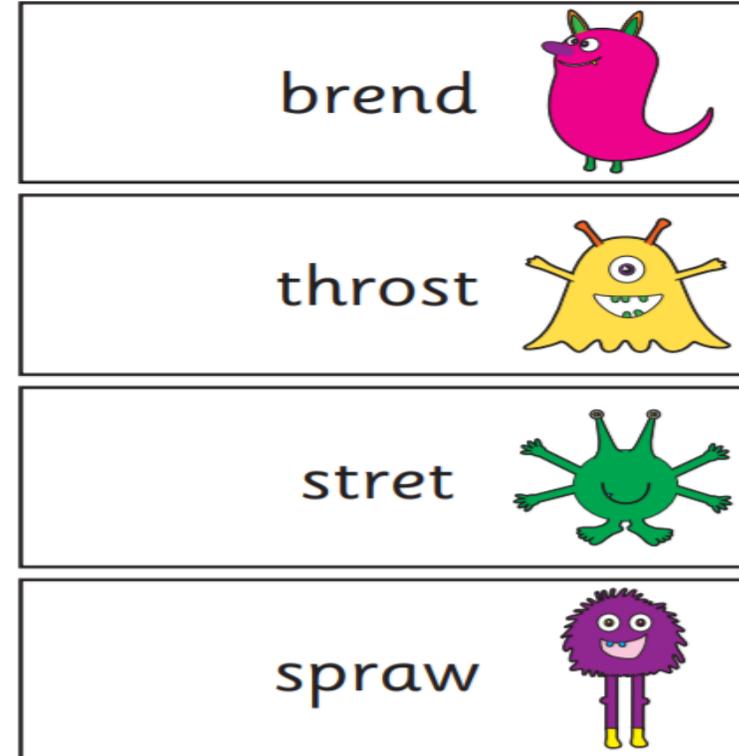
Mistake#5: Leaving Education out of policy-making

- **Not harking back to a golden age!** : Longstanding problems: **human errors** and **system failures**
- But four **changes** have made matters worse:
 - Paradigm convergence: GERM
 - Upscaling/centralisation of decision-making
 - Policy space both more dispersed & more crowded, & more attentive to bite-sized chunks of knowledge.
 - Greater reliance on quantitative research: education economics/‘what works’ . In some quarters dismissal of teacher knowledge and classroom research as unreliable or ideological
- **Consequences**
 - Evidence is often misunderstood
 - Valuable knowledge is often disregarded
 - New kinds of path dependencies – less likely that existing ways of doing things can be challenged and changed and more likely that new mistakes will be made



Synthetic Phonics

- Mandated in England since 2006. Year 1 check.
- Huge improvements in success rates in check.
- But:
 - No strong link to reading success
 - No evidence of reducing gaps
 - Evidence of curriculum narrowing, limited pedagogy, and very early ability grouping
 - Teachers are dis-abled
 - And wider propositions about the reduction of inequalities in the early years are ignored
- Decision based largely on one experimental study
- Ignored wider evidence
- Shored up by accountability pressures and market actors



An extract from the phonics screening check in England 2019

A narrowing repertoire of policy solutions (tweaks?)

‘Managing the ordinary present’ (Laidi) . Lacking a ‘progressive imaginary’ (Lingard)

Spending the Pupil Premium on ‘what works’

Extended school hours to enable ‘catch up’

Changing performance metrics for schools

Giving out laptops

Targeting the Pupil Premium better

Tutoring and mentoring

Financial incentives for teachers



It can be different

Chile:

- Recent legislation expands state subsidies, eliminates parental 'co-payment', ends for-profit voucher schools and school practices to select students

New Zealand

- 2010, introduced National Standards testing regime, 2017 abolished it – a compliance exercise and a distraction

Singapore

- Moving away from focus on exam success to a 'broad-based and well-rounded education'

Wales

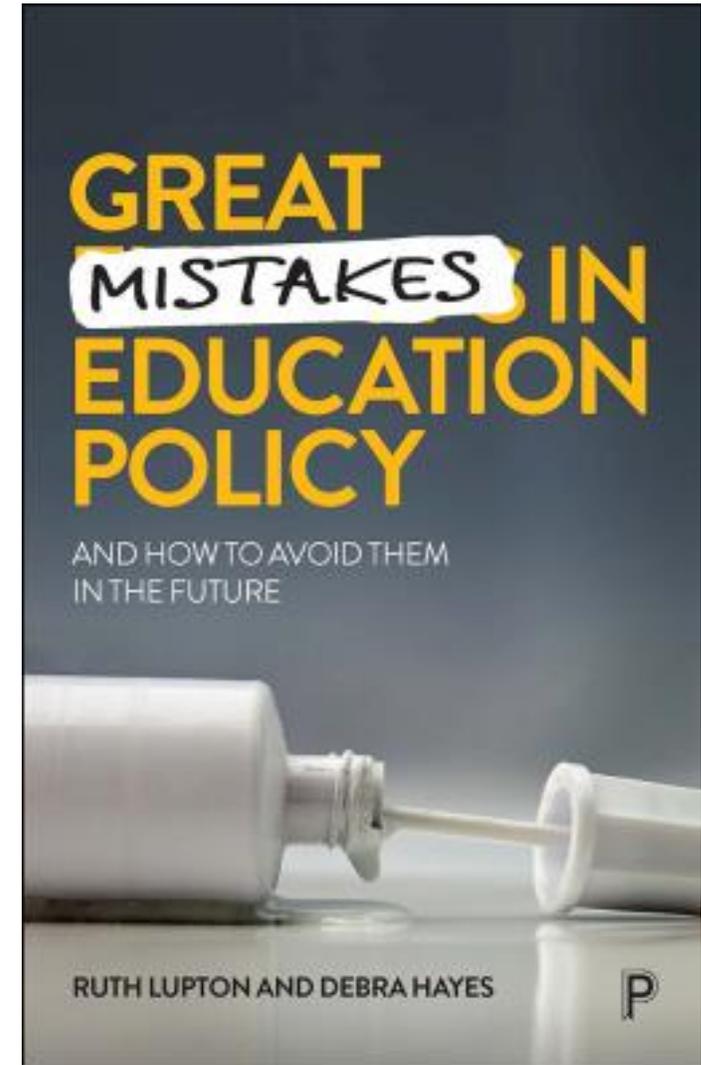
- Teachers at the centre of curriculum development. Student-centred approaches. And a new research strategy!

Finland

- Schools as part of broader service delivery. Support teams of counsellors, dentists, nurses
-

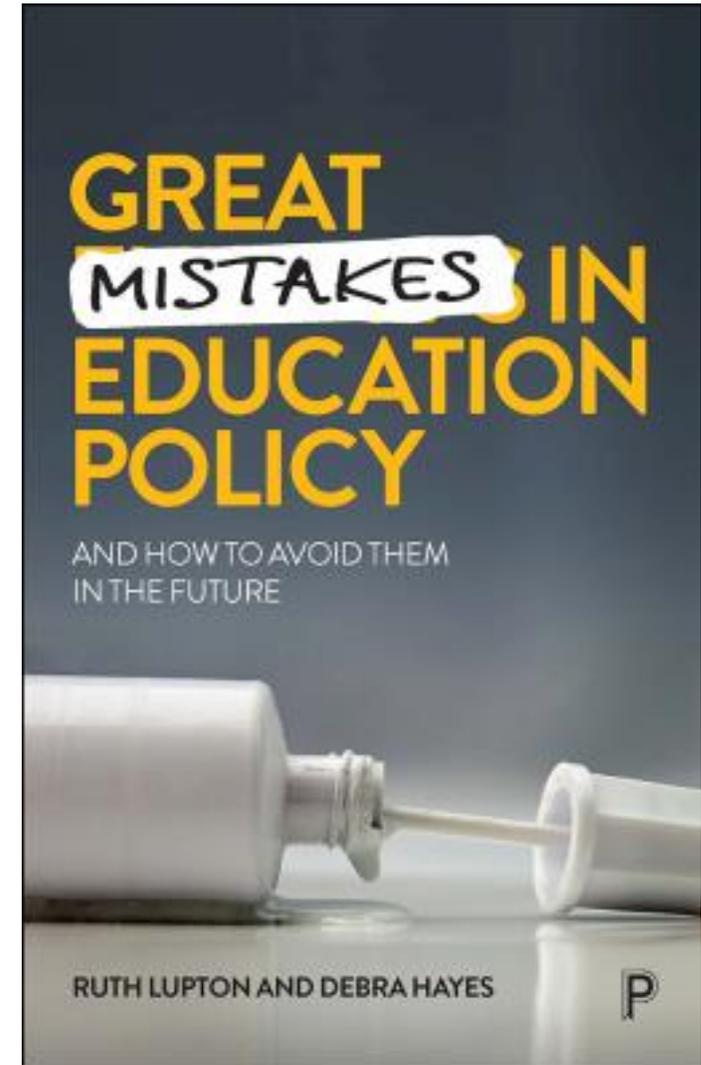
A blueprint for change

- Wider vision of education
- 'Education for all'
- Re-conceptualise inequality
- Understand education policy more broadly
- Level the playing field through more redistributive funding
- Build systems for collaboration not competition
- Reduce the volume of testing
- Accountability, 'yes': Distortion 'no'
- No single way to improving practice
- Support teachers and school leaders more



Preconditions for change

- Spending research funds more broadly: not just 'what works'
- Building greater depth of policy knowledge: long term civil service roles; processes of consultation and deliberation, & so on
- Promoting teacher and 'expert' research further up the evidence hierarchy: and making time for teachers to do it properly
- Developing better scrutiny processes: independent evidence and scrutiny bodies, or should universities self organise?
- International collaborations for deep learning from other countries



Time to be bold

- **Time to look both back and forward**
 - Recognising the big mistakes
 - Dropping the fear of being seen as old fashioned (Lister 2000)
 - Acknowledging current policy ‘fantasies’ (Clarke 2020), Including ‘critical fantasies’
- **Time for Utopian thinking?** (Levitas 2013)
 - IROS (Imaginary Reconstruction of Society) facilitates: “genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures”
 - “for those who still think that utopia is about the impossible, what is really impossible is to carry on as we are”
- **Time to drop crude binaries, build consensus and pool knowledge**
- **Time to question our assumptions and framing of problems**
- **Time for consensual leadership**

GREAT MISTAKES IN EDUCATION POLICY

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM
IN THE FUTURE

RUTH LUPTON AND DEBRA HAYES

P

Thankyou for listening

What do you think?

Comments and questions please!