## Spectacular disconnections 2022: from Partygate to the Schools White Paper

Alongside the invasion of Ukraine, two news stories from 29th March 2022 echo recent research carried out in education – and, interestingly, each other. On one hand, a [Metropolitan police investigation](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-59577129) into “partygate” showed how social distancing rules were widely flouted at Downing street during COVID lockdowns. On the same day, the government’s [Education White Paper](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-60846684) announced a new policy of reducing inequality as part of its famously opaque “levelling up” agenda. Critics have already suggested that the latest White Paper’s goals are underfunded, impractical and ideologically driven: *plus ça change*.

However, these apparently unrelated stories provide a noticeable spectacle of disconnection: boozy parties were organized as the nation stoically endured deprivation and grand announcements about [“trust-led”](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063615/The_case_for_a_fully_trust-led_system__web_.pdf) education display a lack of evidence or funding in this quest for “performance” and “uniformity”. Neither show much regard for those really affected.

This disconnection reflects [recent research](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02601370.2021.1946863). March 2022’s White Paper [(“Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child”)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/opportunity-for-all-strong-schools-with-great-teachers-for-your-child) and its January 2021 FE counterpart [(“Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth**”)**](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth)have more in common than just grand(iose) claims.They share more than just another attempt to make young people job-ready through an agenda of back-to-basic skills, apprenticeships and a now-familiar gruel of lifelong, lifewide “education”.

# This recalls a Dickensian universe, where malicious psychopaths like the Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby* exploit their charges for profit in the name of education. Having thankfully resigned such Victoriana to history, we are now seeing a shift away from strictly concrete educational outcomes towards what French thinker Michel Foucault (1926-1984) called “biopolitics”. By this, Foucault meant that politics is becoming increasingly involved in cultivating *living processes* rather than the production of actual stuff. Industrial attempts to monetize creativity, wellbeing, even sustainability (*inter alia*) are now familiar educational tropes, and the online quasi-spaces, virtual architectures and hyper-real multiverses, all designed to hothouse them, are [discussed at length elsewhere](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1469540515623607).

Naturally, the 2022 White Paper’s desire to help students “[reach the full height of their potential](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-white-paper-delivers-real-action-to-level-up-education)” is laudable (if semantically questionable). The issue lies in the vision of an effective, equitable education system; the way in which both White Papers both seek to achieve it; and the spectacular disconnection that they imply.

Critics of this disconnection readily highlight the admittedly “[cringeworthy” spectacle of the Chancellor at a petrol pump](https://www.thenational.scot/politics/20017742.spring-statement-2022-best-responses-rishi-sunaks-cringeworthy-petrol-pump-photo/). But the real disconnect is the one which uses policy to position people - and society more widely - as purely *biological* entities. Claiming to “unlock” our “potential” by “harnessing the incredible energy”  only seeks to “benefit [our] mental health and resilience” in order to monetize these processes and ablate life’s social, moral and emotional multiplicity. This is because foreclosing the fundamentally *social* value of our lives reduces us to [logistical units to be managed](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01596306.2015.1128884); excluding the *moral value* of our lives [legitimizes unethical behaviour](http://www.jceps.com/archives/10158); and eliminating the *emotional value* of existence [dehumanizes us all.](https://www.itejournal.org/issues/fall-2017/11beighton.pdf) It is partying through the spectacle of our own disconnection.