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The Policy Sociology of Geoff Whitty: Current and Emergent Issues Regarding Education Research in Use

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Introduction

As Geoff Whitty himself acknowledged, as director of the Institute of Education (IOE) (2000–10) he was pulled to some extent away from his disciplinary focus of the sociology of education towards more policy issues, pragmatically in his work as director and also in his research work. Yet he continued to argue the significance of the sociology of education: for understanding the contexts of education policy and for creating more socially just schools and schooling systems, and in the mission of the IOE to teachers and to the broader fields of education, as both a domain of research and of practice. His books *Making Sense of Policy* (Whitty 2002) and *Research and Policy in Education* (Whitty 2016a) sit firmly within what has been called 'policy sociology in education' (Ozga 1987).[1] It is Geoff Whitty's work in this domain that will be the focus of this chapter.

Whitty has contributed to the development of policy sociology in education through a large number of published papers and the aforementioned books, analysing the policy moves and their effects of Conservative, New Labour and coalition governments in the UK. This contribution, inter alia, has focused on the relationships between sociology of education and education policy, on devolution, school choice and markets, the reconstitution of teacher professionalism, school improvement, research and policy relationships, policy borrowing, evidence and policy and practice and the actual and desired nature of

educational research. The use here of educational rather than education is also evidence of a desire for such research to improve both education policy and practice, part of the redemptive and reformist disposition of the sociology of education. Whitty actually wrote education(al) to pick up on the education/educational research distinction, with the former referring to social science research about education to produce knowledge and understanding, and the latter geared also to improvement of education policy and practices (Whitty 2006). At a metalevel, Whitty's policy sociology has been concerned to document empirically and theorize the impact of the contextual specificities of the playing out of neoliberalism in English schooling, while critiquing non-empirical accounts of neoliberal framings of education policy that simply label policies as neoliberal in non-reflexive ways.

While the enhanced significance of policy in steering schooling and his own position as director of the IOE encouraged Whitty to a new research focus on policy, he has noted his continuing commitment to a Fabian, reformist politics. He traced this back to his early interest in the political arithmetic approach within English sociology of education when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge in the 1960s (Whitty 2012). He argued that a central focus of education policy research ought to be about how best to address and mitigate the intransigent social class–school achievement nexus first documented by the political arithmetic school. This is what Whitty refers to as the 'old' sociology of education, while Young's (1971) *Knowledge and Control* ushered in the 'new' sociology of education, moving the focus of attention from class structures and cultures to reforms of school knowledge and pedagogies. Whitty's sociology of education straddled both the old *and* new sociology of education, focused on social class *and* school knowledge, their inter-relationships and impact on educational opportunities. His policy sociology specifically focused on policy in relation to these issues.

To reiterate, my focus in this chapter will be Whitty's policy sociology in education. More specifically, I will outline and provide commentary on his writing about the relationship, both actual and desired, between education research and education policy in an era of much talk about 'evidence-based' or 'research-based' policymaking and related talk about the significance of 'what works'. After outlining Whitty's contributions, I will give brief consideration to emerging matters that carry implications for considering the research–policy relationships now, in a world that has witnessed the synchronous strengthening of the neoliberal and the rise of ethnonationalisms, evident in President Trump's 'America First' policy and anti-multilateralism, in Brexit and in the rise of the far

right across Europe and elsewhere. In that context, I will consider factors affecting the research–policy relationship in today's globalized world of network governance, policy as numbers, fast policymaking, datafication of the social world, contemporary post-truth and affective politics and the increased use by teacher unions of education research.

Education(al) research for use

In his policy sociology work, Whitty took as one important focus the actual and desired relationships between education(al) research and both policy and practice. He considered this matter indirectly in *Making Sense of Education Policy* (see in particular chapter 8) and very directly in his presidential address at the 2005 British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference (Whitty 2006) and reflected on this again in the opening essay with Emma Wisby in *Research and Policy in Education* (Whitty and Wisby 2016).

I ought to say here that I strongly endorse Whitty's stance that 'a healthy education research community must be a broad church', and as such it must encompass 'activity that responds directly to external priorities, but also curiosity- or discipline-led inquiry' (Whitty and Wisby 2016: 1); and that education research cannot and should not simply be the 'handmaiden of policy and practice' (2). I also agree with his view of the complexity and multiplicity of both education research and education policy, thus acknowledging the necessity of complexifying our understanding of research–policy relationships in education. Recently, I have tried to depict this relationship, observing, 'Entanglements adroitly grasps the denotations and connotations of the multiple, complex and competing relationships and uses, misuses and neglect of research in public policy making, especially in education' (Lingard 2019: 1).

In the aforementioned opening essay, Whitty provides a socio-logical and historical account from the Thatcher period through until the period of New Labour and coalition governments of changing government views of the quality and place of education research and its relationship with policy. He notes the concerted public critique of education research in England in the late 1990s and the New Labour (1997–2010) government's commitment to evidence-based policy and 'what works'. Whitty has noted how this 'what works' mantra reflected New Labour's pragmatic, third way, anti-ideological politics. In terms of education research, New Labour invested very substantially in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme managed by the Economic

and Social Research Council, which supported research that would assist in improving learning for all with a focus on application of research for the improvement of teaching and learning. New Labour also supported systematic research reviews. The emphasis was on more closely aligning education research with the perceived needs of both policy and practice framed by the third way politics of New Labour. The coalition government from 2010 continued the evidence-based policy push, reduced explicit funding for education research, and funded the charity, the Education Endowment Foundation, to support research that had direct implications for practice, especially in schools in disadvantaged communities. Whitty also illustrates how, from the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the UK research councils and research assessment exercises began to give greater emphasis to the impact of research, which aligned with earlier developments, catalysing education research more as a handmaiden of policy and practice in education. He also notes how the growth of school-based teacher education has affected the place of education research.

Against this backdrop, in his policy sociology work, Whitty argued the need to defend and support a plurality of types of education research in a democracy, especially when set against the context of the drive for evidence-based policy, the 'what works' mantra and the research impact agenda. This eclecticism of quality would support multiple types of education research, multiple theoretical framings and methodologies, quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, randomized control trials, and so forth. I strongly support Whitty's stance here, while acknowledging the significance of his historicizing of research–policy relationships in the specific and changing political and policy contexts of England for contemplating strategies for supporting such a principled eclectic stance. Whitty also noted that the idea of evidence-based policy is often linked to thinking about 'research for use' (Whitty and Wisby 2016: 2). In his strong support of a pluralism of types of education research, Whitty would also have made use of 'use' here to indicate a broad range of uses for educational research, beyond usefulness to policymakers and practitioners. For Whitty, the concept of use was an omnibus one, taken to include multiple uses beyond the more utilitarian ones. These included the development of the disciplines of education, including the sociology of education, enhancement of understanding about how schooling works and enhancement of our understanding of the ways schools work to reproduce inequalities as a way to possible interventions in both policy and practice that will militate against this outcome. While Whitty was not opposed to attempts to more closely align research, policy and practice,

he also noted the realpolitik of such relationships in an 'imperfect world', pointing out how academic research as an 'evidentiary base' for policy-making is often misused (Whitty 2016b: 50). Thus, recognition of this realpolitik meant that multiple misuses of educational research also had to be acknowledged. This is the point that educational research is often used to legitimate policy moves rather than as an evidence base for them, the concept of 'policy-based evidence'. Related, he suggested that, given politics and policy are as much driven by public opinion as research evidence, maybe the largest impact of education research might be through affecting public opinion. Here he sees the significance of the education researcher as public intellectual.

Recently, teacher unions across the globe, including the international federation of teacher unions, Education International (EI), have utilized educational research as a strategic resource in their political work in respect of policy development and broader public opinion (Verger *et al*. 2016). Here the unions have commissioned research – for example, EI's funding of research on the impact of commercialization and privatization of schooling in Global South nations and on the impact of low-fee, for-profit schools in sub-Saharan Africa – and also utilized extant research strategically. I would see the teacher unions as important allies in ensuring that in democratic societies there is funding and support for the widest range of educational research, including that critical of extant education policy. Teacher union-sponsored research is about developing effective political strategies and affecting government policymaking, but also about shaping public opinion.

My own work on the research–policy relationship in education has taken a similar stance to that of Whitty's (Lingard 2013, 2019). I have argued that if we see policy as the authoritative allocation of values, after David Easton (1953), we immediately begin to see that research is only ever one factor in policymaking (Lingard 2013; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). This is why it is preferable to speak of evidence-informed policy and practice in education, rather than evidence-based; research-informed, not research-based. Evidence-based policy would deny the democratic project through which governments are more or less elected because of their values or ideologies. Evidence-based practice would also deny the significance of teacher professional judgement in classroom pedagogies. The 'what works' approach to research–practice relationships, which Whitty criticized, also works with a limiting conception of teacher professional judgements. Later in this chapter I will consider how globalization and new modes of governance have challenged each element of

Easton's definition of public with further implications for research–policy relationships.

Head's (2008) persuasive argument that all policy is an admixture of facts (research), values (politics, ideologies, discourses) and professional knowledges also supports this normative stance of evidence-informed policy and practice. Burns and Schuller (2007), who wrote a report for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on research–policy relationships, argue strongly that policy-making in education is not straightforwardly rational or clinical, thus also supporting an evidence-informed or research-informed stance regarding the research–policy relationship. Whitty (Whitty and Wisby 2016) argued that this gives policymakers more wriggle room, but I would suggest it better represents the reality of the role of research in policymaking, and acknowledges that in societies like ours politicians, not researchers, are elected to govern.

Whitty supported an eclectic mix of research types in education, and rightly so in a democracy. In respect of research–policy relationships, an old distinction between research *for/of* policy is helpful (Gordon *et al*. 1977). The former is more akin to commissioned research and as such potentially has a direct impact on policy. Often this research is conducted by education consultants, think tanks and large consultancy firms. This research accepts the problem as constructed by the commissioners of the research and by policy and proffers research insights in a language that speaks directly to policymakers. The impact of think tank research is often directly related to the language of the research reports, and the explicit relevance of the research to policy and practice. Whitty has referred to the 'quasi-research' conducted by think tanks and other advocacy groups (Whitty 2016b: 46). Interestingly, the OECD's Education and Skills Directorate also sees its research work as being directly policy-relevant; that is, its implied readership is policymakers in national systems of schooling, not academics. In contrast, research *of* policy is about enhancing knowledge and understanding and often the first step in such critical policy analysis is to deconstruct the problem as constructed discursively by the policy text (Bacchi 2009); that is, the problem as constructed by the policy is not taken as given, as is the case with research *for* policy. Caution is needed, however, with this binary. Research of multiple kinds very well might have policy and practice impact and in very different temporal frames and is usually mediated in various ways.

Carol Weiss (1979), perhaps the founder of research on research utilization in policymaking, adumbrated various types of research–policy

relationships, notably, knowledge-driven (research *for* policy), problem-solving (research *for* policy), interactive approaches (involving researchers on committees and advisory groups), legitimation (research as legitimation for policy), tactical (e.g. used to delay policy) or enlightenment over a lengthy period of time. Weiss's enlightenment or percolation view of the impact of academic research on policy is an interesting one. This longer-term impact is often not recognized as such, but it is evidenced in the language and discourses used by policymakers and in some of their taken-for-granted assumptions. Orland (2009: 115) has argued similarly that, 'research-based knowledge affects policy gradually by shaping how decision-makers understand and frame a problem and decode potential solutions'. This is a longer-term reading of impact on the taken-for-granted assumptive worlds of policymakers. Whitty (2016b) implies that the political arithmetic approach of 1950s and 1960s English sociology of education had an impact on policymakers through modifying their assumptive worlds. Orland has also talked about the disjunctive cultures between research and policy as a reason for the mediated and at times limited impact of research on policy, at least in the immediate term. Contemporary moves to 'translate' research for both policymakers and practitioners pick up on this disjunctive cultures argument. Impact is thus a complex concept when talking about the impact of research on policy and practice, as it may well occur unnoticed over lengthy time frames.

Allusion has been made to this point about the impact of globalization on policymaking and on research utilization in policymaking. Whitty (2012) wrote about this impact in a paper on the (mis)use of evidence in policy borrowing.[2] He noted how 'international policy tourism' had become a phenomenon in our globalizing world and one in which league tables of national performances on international large-scale assessments such as the OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) have had increased policy influence. Outstanding performance on PISA had positioned various schooling systems as sites of educational tourism and of policy borrowing; for example, Finland, Shanghai after PISA 2009, the Canadian province of Ontario. These have become new reference systems. Interestingly in that context, Whitty considered why there has been ongoing policy attraction between the USA and England, neither of which has performed well on PISA. He suggests in that context that others' reforms are often used as justifications for one's own, what he calls their 'discursive and legitimatory work' (Whitty 2016b: 46). He notes the significance of the media here and its failure to distinguish advocacy research from social

scientific educational research. Policy borrowing between the USA and England had occurred historically and continues to occur, he argued, because of 'elective affinity' between policymakers' assumptive worlds in both nations. This, he further argues, reflected the 'globalization of policy making' as much as policy borrowing. Given this globalization of policymaking, Whitty suggests we perhaps ought to emphasize 'what doesn't work' in other national contexts and think about inoculating national policymaking against globalizing policy discourses.

Emerging issues in education research–policy relationships

Globalization and education research–policy relationships

Elsewhere, Fazal Rizvi and I (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) have argued that each element of Easton's old public policy definition – policy as the authoritative allocation of values – has been challenged substantially by globalization. Thus, policy authority today, the legitimate right to exercise power, functions globally, as well as regionally, nationally and sub-nationally. For example, think here of the policy influence of the OECD in respect of the schooling systems of wealthy member nations or of the authority of the World Bank in relation to policy in developing nations in receipt of its loans. Think also of the significance of the EU in education in European nations (Lawn and Grek 2012), despite education being the responsibility of member nations under the principle of subsidiarity.

Allocation processes are changing because of state restructurings and new practices of statecraft. These restructurings occurred through new public management with the state steering at a distance in a post-bureaucratic way through performance indicators and subsequently through the instantiation of network governance. The latter has witnessed civil society actors and private sector actors enter into the complex game of public policy formation, decision-making and implementation (Koppenjan and Klijn 2004: 25). This network governance is stretched globally, catalysing new scales and spaces of policy influence. Here we see different values coming into play. This is the third element of Easton's definition, values, which we might also see as ideology and discourses. Today these circulate globally. These matters have substantially reshaped and rescaled the ways research is utilized in policymaking. Research evidence flows more rapidly across national borders and

research conducted by private consultancies, multinational consultancy firms and edu-businesses has a more significant place in policymaking in the situation of network governance (Hogan *et al*. 2015). Another impact of the globalization of education policy on research utilization occurs through the global condition of what Peck and Theodore (2015) call 'fast policy making'.

The condition of fast policymaking and education research–policy relationships

Peck and Theodore (2015) describe the contemporary condition of fast policymaking to grasp the 'debordering' of policy imaginaries; that is, the ways in which policy from elsewhere enters national and local policy conversations and considerations and how this contracts timelines for policy production with implications for the place of research. They refer to this debordering as the 'porosity of policy making locales' (224). We see here as well the '[t]ransnationalization of policy discourses' linked to the '[c]osmopolitanization of policy actors and actions' (224). These globally circulating discourses encourage '[d]eference to global best practices and models' and to ideas that work (224–5). This is the mobility of 'what works' on a global scale. For Peck and Theodore, fast policymaking is actually about global policy mobilities, rather than simple policy transfer (6). The former approach emphasizes relational-ities and multi-directionality, while the latter depicts unilateral, one-way transfer effects.

It should be stressed that Peck and Theodore in outlining and researching the conditions of fast policymaking are not only attempting to pick up on the increased velocity of policymaking today, but also its global reach and relationality. In terms of research, they argue that fast policymaking witnesses a 'foreshortening' of the phases of research and development (R&D) in policymaking. They argue that, 'compressed R&D is a consequence and cause of compressed turnover time in policy designs' (224). Often, I would suggest, this goes beyond foreshortening to the elision of research done locally, as the policy model becomes mobile and 'touches down' in national and local contexts and in the process is recon-textualized and perhaps mutates. Peck and Theodore (2015: xvi) note that policy enactment 'remains a stubbornly localized, context-specific process' and thus reject outright any suggestion that we are witnessing convergence globally in both policy and policymaking under conditions of fast policymaking. The relevant point here about fast policymaking is that the rapid global circulation of policy models is accompanied by the

rapid circulation of the research that underpinned the original model and as such contextualized research in the national context is not an element in the local, path-dependent take-up of the policy.

The rise of data governance in education and education research–policy relationships

Across recent decades computational capacities have increased exponentially. This has entailed enhanced datafication of the social world. This is the way in which aspects of the social world, including schooling, have been enumerated into quantifiable forms to make them subject to computational and statistical analyses. These factors have seen the ushering in of a form of digital governance in education (Williamson 2016). Data have thus become central to policymaking in education with standardized testing being an important element of digital governance in education. Williamson (2017: 66) describes the significance of this new mode of digital governance in education in this way, 'While the production of educational data is nothing new, the appearance of new technologies for its collection, analysis and use at the beginning of the twenty-first century has catalysed significant new ambitions around data–driven educational policy'. In terms of policymaking in education and the push for evidence-based policy, Williamson (2017: 68) notes, 'Digital data makes education knowable, governable and amenable to intervention, via advanced data analysis techniques and the global exchange of information between diverse actors that can be used to make informed, evidence-based decisions'. Two observations are important here: digital governance, including the place of data, is linked to fast policymaking and is also central to the enhanced significance of data in modes of global governance in education (Lingard *et al*. 2016). The latter is a reflection of the fact that numbers, data and statistics are technologies of distance (Porter 1995). The significance of digital governance in education is that it is also potentially and actually linked to the increased velocity of policymaking and the global scale of policymaking and influences on policy. There are implications for the place of education research in policymaking here.

Digital governance functions through data infrastructures, which now constitute schooling systems and enable the flows of data central to their structuring. Often private providers are involved in these infrastructures and as such we see network governance at work, as the private sector is actually involved in the very structuring of systems through the provision of these infrastructures (Lingard 2019; Sellar 2017;

Easterling 2016). Developments in respect of testing, for example, moves to real-time, computer adaptive testing and the related production of census big data have significant potential to change policymaking and practice in education, as data become central to both. There are possibilities here for algorithmic governance and greater use of artificial intelligence (AI), both of which carry implications for the place of research in policymaking in education.

The relevant question here in relation to research relationships with both policy and practice is whether data can be seen as research and as research evidence that then ought to underpin both. Is the use of data in policymaking an example of research informing policy? If one answers in the affirmative: is data research? There are interesting issues here that need to be considered by contemporary educational researchers and their organizations (e.g. BERA and its North American and Australian counterparts, AERA and the Australian Association for Research in Education, AARE) in defence of a pluralist definition of educational research, as argued for by Geoff Whitty. Furthermore, there are significant matters to be considered in relation to the future impact of education research on actual education policy, as data become more important in the structuring and functioning of education systems and in the pedagogical work of teachers.

Post-truth and affective politics and education research–policy relationships

The *Oxford Dictionary* chose 'post-truth' as the 2016 word of the year. The dictionary defined post-truth as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs'. The Trump presidency and debates prior to the UK's Brexit vote are indicative of this context of post-truth. Climate science denial is another exemplar of a post-truth context and an example of the broader phenomenon of 'science denial' (McIntyre 2018). It is interesting to contemplate how this context sits against the considerations in the previous section of this chapter of the emergence of digital governance and the new positivism evident in that emergence. As noted earlier, Whitty argued that education researchers ought to seek to influence public opinion as an indirect way their research might have enhanced impact on policymaking. The post-truth context raises a number of perplexing issues for education researchers seeking such policy impact in this way.

Post-truth must be seen as one contemporary manifestation of the broader phenomenon of the significance of the affective in politics and policymaking. As Berlant (2011: 226) has observed, public spheres (politics and policymaking) are always 'affect worlds'. More recently, critical policy scholars working in education have also paid attention to the significance of affect in policy processes (e.g. Sellar and Lingard 2018; McKenzie 2017). Media and the (social) mediatization of policymaking are very important in this situation of the affective in politics and policymaking and in the context of the significance of post-truth.

Earlier in this chapter, the argument was sustained that we can only ever speak of evidence-informed or research-informed policymaking. The contexts of post-truth politics and the significance of thinking of public worlds as affect worlds also add another dimension to Head's argument (2008) that research is only one of three contributing factors in policy: the others being values and professional knowledges. We might need to add in affect here as an additional factor that means we can only speak of research-informed policy. However, we also need to acknowledge that the significance of post-truth and the affective in policymaking precipitates significant questions for education researchers seeking to influence actual policymaking through impact on public opinion, particularly through legacy and social media.

Conclusion

Geoff Whitty's policy sociology in education has been my focus in this chapter, specifically his insightful work on the multiple and entangled relationships between research and policy and practice in education. He documented both uses and misuses of research in policymaking in an imperfect and globalizing world. Whitty's support for a pluralism of research types has been outlined and endorsed, as well as his acknowledgement that there is a place for research in actual policymaking and encouragement to education researchers to play a public intellectual role so as to have influence over public opinion as a way to affect policy.

I have then considered the emergent conditions of fast policymaking, data governance in education, and the affective in policymaking in a post-truth world in terms of their significance for understanding education research's relationships with policymaking. There are inherent tensions between the enhanced significance of the affective and the emergence of policy as numbers as a new positivism in policymaking. Luke and Hogan (2006) have written about the new imbrications

of educational research and educational governance, linked to the enhanced significance of data. They observe, 'the centrality of data and numbers to contemporary modes of governance means that current debates over what counts as evidence in state policy formation are indeed debates over what counts as educational research' (170). Data are now central in governance in both schools and national policy. In the ever-changing world of research and of policymaking, it is here that Whitty's defence of both research for use in policy and practice and research for understanding and the production of new knowledge will have to be defended yet again by researchers and their professional bodies such as BERA, AERA and AARE. They will need to be ever vigilant of fast policy-making and the impacts of big data, algorithmic governance and AI in education and in relation to education research and its remit, including its place in policymaking.

Notes

1 See also Ball (1997).
2 See also Whitty and Edwards (1998).

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