Introduction

ANDREW WILKINS

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to provide the reader with a comprehensive introduction to some of the most recent developments in the field of education policy research. A key focus of the book is education policy research that adopts post-structuralist and social constructivist perspectives of policy-making and policy worlds, namely policy scholarship that is post-positivist and anti-foundationalist. This includes sociological, interpretative, and "historically-informed research" (Ozga 2021: 301), which uses "historical, theoretical, cultural and socio-political setting[s]" (Grace 1995: 12) as critical lenses for investigating the construction of policy problems and their solutions. These approaches to education policy research are unique in that they represent a challenge to the orthodoxy of more mainstream approaches to policy studies, namely (1) managerialist and technocratic perspectives that view policy processes ahistorically and asocially as emergent properties of systems and structures; (2) the "empiricism" of the "policy sciences" (Lerner and Laswell 1951) with its emphasis on "positivistic methods assuming a political neutrality" (Pillow 2003: 146); and (3) "rationalist" perspectives that overestimate the coherence of policy processes and which "construct policy problems in ways that match the answers they already have available" (Gale 2001: 384). To be precise, the book captures emerging research from a subfield of education policy research called "policy sociology" (Ozga 1987), otherwise known as "sociology of education policy" or "critical policy sociology" (see McPherson and Raab 1988; Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992; Ball 1997; Gale 2001).

Policy sociology can be traced to the rise and influence of specific antecedents or "turns" throughout history, such as the "postmodern turn" (Lyotard 1979), the "interpretative turn" (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979), the "linguistic turn" (Rorty 1992), and the "argumentative turn" (Fischer and Forester 1993). A focus of this book is how these and other philosophies and traditions continue to inspire innovation in our thinking and writing about policy-making and policy worlds in the field of education. Such innovation is evident in the range of conceptual, theoretical, and analytical developments that characterized the movement of twentieth-century social and political thought. Further "turns" have been identified in more recent years, including the "governance turn" (Ball 2009), the "digital turn" (Williamson 2018), the "topographical turn" (Lewis 2020), and the "temporal turn" (Lingard 2021). Moreover, the book details some of the important epistemological and ontological positions and tensions arising from these turns and their implications for thinking about the role of knowledge production within policy-making and policy research, specifically the relationship between knowledge and governing (see Ozga 2021). The book therefore is designed to be used for reference and instruction as it provides the reader with a number of different and complementary vantage points and perspectives through which to debate and research policy-making and policy worlds as objects of education research.

Education policy research can be broadly defined as empirical and theoretical investigations of policy-making and policy implementation in the field of education. This may include, but is not exclusive to, studies that examine (1) the rhetorical construction of policy texts or the discursive and political work of policy texts as meaning-making tools for the legitimation of reform; (2) the movement and interaction of subnational, national, and international policy spaces and actors as agents of policy-making and policy change; and (3) the role of "mediating structures" (institutional orders, value systems, imagined communities, and political settlements) as sensitizing contexts for the expression and translation of policy enactments. On this short description, education policy research can be described as a fluid and dynamic space owing to the multitude of traditions and philosophies from which it takes inspiration, including political science, economics, philosophy, social anthropology, sociology, public policy, social policy, and geography.

The interdisciplinarity of policy scholarship also means that, like other policy-focused disciplines (social policy, public policy, and political science in particular), education policy research is a contested space. This contestation is due to a long history of enduring disagreements about the role and value of different methodological and analytical approaches to policy scholarship. There is, for example, education policy research that is driven by the production of knowledge in the service of policy, otherwise known as "analysis for policy" (Simon, Olssen, and Peters 2009: 29). These studies of education policy are

sometimes classified as positivist on the basis that they start from the position that knowledge can be tested and objectively classified using value-free instruments, such as research methods. As this book shows, the foundational ontology of positivism continues to have significant bearing on how education policy research is conducted and valued today, evident by the rise and global dominance of "school effectiveness" research and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) designed to produce measurable results that can determine the costs of different interventions and programs (Connolly, Keenan, and Urbanska 2018). On the other hand, post-positivist approaches to knowledge production are increasingly popular within contemporary studies of education policy as they hold out the possibility for both interpreting and transforming the contingent regularities upon which policy-making and policy worlds rest.

Through a strong focus on post-positivist epistemologies and philosophies, the book also demonstrates the role and contribution of theory to education policy research. Here, theory can be usefully defined "as a sort of moving self-reflexivity" (Gregory 1994: 86) that helps to situate both the researcher and researched within new kinds of "historically-informed research" (Ozga 2021: 301). This has two important implications for education policy research. On the one hand, it brings into perspective the historically contingent relations and practices that shape the production of the self. This represents a decisive move away from the liberal notion of the bounded or "rational" self inspired by Enlightenment thinking (Gray 2007). Instead, theory makes possible the kinds of introspection that lead (hopefully) to an improved rational understanding of the limits of reason, including the prejudices that researchers bring to bear upon their analyses of the policy process.

As Ball reminds us, "the absence of theory leaves the researcher prey to unexamined, unreflexive preconceptions and dangerously naïve ontological and epistemological a prioris" (1995: 265–6). The value of theory to research therefore is that it enables a fuller appreciation for the presumptions that sometimes lead researchers to overestimate their own understanding or the rationality of policy-making and policy actors. For example, there is a strong tendency even among postmodernist and post-structuralist education researchers to denounce essentialist or structuralist claims while, in the same breath, clinging to the seductive language of meta-narratives to comfortably reduce complex phenomena to expressions and functions of global hegemonic projects and governmental rationalities. This is obvious when we consider how many "critical" education researchers continue to overestimate the rationality and coherence of neoliberal projects, as if there is no excess or surplus that exceeds neoliberal capture (Wilkins 2021). As Ball explains, "Most policy analysis work begins with an assumption of or brings to bear a perspective of coherence or rationality or planned order, in this sense the analysis works to constitute the object of its concern" (2021: 5).

Theory calls into question the nature and reliability of knowledge production itself. More specifically in relation to policy research, it means "challenging the contemporary interdependency of governing and knowledge" (Ozga 2019: 13) and making visible how different modes of governing over time and space are themselves the contingent outcome of historical trends and political tensions. Developed under the auspices of continental philosophy and the "discursive turn" in social sciences more generally (Corsen 1995), these approaches to education policy research are less focused on how policy might work better and more concerned with how power and claims to authority are inscribed in policy decisions and policy effects. The implication here is a strong rejection of some of the more enduring features of modernity and the Enlightenment project, specifically the concept of "autonomy of reason," and the movement away from any pure "rationalist" perspective that assumes the coherence of policy-making and policy implementation. Instead, as the contributors demonstrate in this book, we need to hold onto a view of policy-making and policy worlds as dynamic spaces for the negotiation of a plurality of rationalities: as contested, emergent spaces in which "meanings are made, installed, naturalised, normalised, and, of course, contested" (Clarke et al. 2015: 20).

In Chapter 1, "Mapping the Field," Wilkins provides a provisional roadmap of the intellectual history and contributions of education policy research and theory from the 1970s to the present, with a focus on the political and ethical commitments that have influenced the development of different analytical approaches to education policy research and theory. A focus of the chapter is to document the key theoretical turns and concepts arising from this complicated history and to explore the different historical relations and political movements that have shaped its development. These historical relations and political movements are captured through an exploration of three separate yet overlapping and interrelated time periods or "policy settlements": welfare liberalism (1950s–1970s), neoliberalism (1970s–2000s), and traveling liberalism (2000s–2020s). Each of these policy settlements provide a useful set of lenses through which to trace ruptures and shifts in the development of education policy histories over time and space, as well as their relationship to and influence over the development of major research paradigms and analytical strategies guiding education policy research and theory, from positivism to post-structuralism.

In Chapter 2, "Purposes of Education," Stacey and Mockler examine the role of politics and economics as dominant discourses shaping the development of education nationally and internationally. Through an empirical investigation of Australian education policy, Stacey and Mockler examine the construction of policy problems and solutions within key Australian education policy documents published between 1989 and 2019. Drawing on Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach, Stacey and Mockler

show how education policy does not address policy problems so much as it creates and sustains them through the political-discursive work of language: the articulation of assumptions, the delineation of arguments, and the specification and legitimation of solutions or governing practices. Similar to Bacchi and Goodwin, who write about policy spaces as "productive (or constitutive) – making 'things' come to be" (2016: 53), Stacey and Mockler demonstrate how globally circulating discourses, key among them being human capital theory, have been rearticulated and translated by successive Australian governments to develop a specific vision of education and its purpose within society and the economy.

Adopting a similar anti-foundationalist approach in Chapter 3, "Curriculum," Saltman draws on a hegemonic theory of curriculum development to capture the contested terrain of education policy as cultural and political struggles over meaning with an explicit focus on the competing knowledge claims that influence policy discourses about curriculum. Through an empirical focus that traces the recent history and development of policy debates about the curriculum in the United States, Saltman highlights how curriculum purpose and design have come to be influenced by various interests, both political and commercial. These interests are traced to a number of specific national and transnational movements and value systems, including neoconservatism, venture philanthropy, and corporatization. Saltman also documents the disproportionate influence of certain epistemologies as dominant paradigms for the development of curriculum theory and design, namely positivism, resilience theory, and scientific management. On this account, Saltman demonstrates how political and commercial interests overlap and combine in unique ways to legitimate spaces for reform of the curriculum through new digital forms of privatization and standardization.

In Chapter 4, "Schools and Education Systems," Bingham and Burch draw on several empirical studies to demonstrate the value and application of institutional theory to understanding the competing, interactive elements that make up the provisional structures for schools and school systems. As Bingham and Burch show, the movement from policy text to policy enactment to policy effect is a dynamic process involving various actors and practices operating at different levels and different sites. The complex interaction of these forces at the regional, national, and global levels means that it is important to make sense of how schools and school systems mediate and negotiate macro- and micro-level tendencies and their situated, often competing, demands. At the same time, Bingham and Burch are keen to remind us that, despite this complexity, schools and school systems often resemble each other through their shared commitment to satisfy wider demands, such as a requirement to operate within a highly prescriptive framework of national regulation or a desire to tailor provision to local need. For Bingham and Burch, the benefit of

institutional theory to the study of schools and school systems is that education policy researchers can more accurately and rigorously trace the interactions and impact of these competing demands in highly localized, institutionalized settings.

In Chapter 5, "Learning and Human Development," Hoadley and Muller address how theories of learning and human development are mobilized nationally and globally, with an empirical focus on South Africa that connects national policy reforms to wider global policy movements. Drawing on Bernsteinian theory (1990), which proposes that there are two ideal types of curriculum ("competence" and "performance"), Hoadley and Muller examine the social logics and subject positions implicit in the design of different types of curriculum, from creative and progressive curriculum to instrumental and competency-based curriculum. A key focus of their investigation concerns how specific types of learners come to be imagined and mobilized within global policy discourses and the implications and limits of these globally circulating discourses for thinking through the relationship between education and human development.

In Chapter 6, "Teaching and Teacher Education," Mills examines the significance of the "practice turn" within teacher education policy and its implications for university provision of teacher education and preparation. More specifically, Mills shows the significance of the practice turn (or the valorization of practice over theory) to teacher professionalism and classroom learning. Through an empirical focus on England and Australia, Mills points to parallels in the development of teacher education policy across national contexts, as well as strong evidence of variegation in policy-making across a range of national contexts despite the omnipresence of global policy agendas. Similar to Stacey and Mockler's approach in Chapter 2, Mills adopts Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) WPR approach as an analytical strategy for his investigation. The value of this approach, as Mills demonstrates, is that it enables researchers to trace the "problem representation" within which meanings of "quality teachers" and "quality teaching" are discursively organized around the arrangement of certain limits, silences, and injunctions.

In the final chapter, "Assessment and Evaluation," Piattoeva, Kauko, Pitkänen, and Wallenius adopt a critical policy sociology approach to trace the changing forms and functions of assessment and evaluation under conditions of decentralization and the so-called post-bureaucratic state. A focus of the chapter concerns the ways in which policy instruments of assessment and evaluation, from standardized testing to digital data governance, help to produce systems of interoperability and comparison both nationally and internationally, thus enabling different government and nongovernment authorities to govern remotely and at a distance. On the one hand, the authors are keen to emphasize the increasing role and influence of international organizations to

these developments as purveyors of agendas and technologies for the expansion of testing and monitoring instruments in the field of education. On the other hand, they point to the contingent historical relations through which different forms of assessment and evaluation have been realized and resisted in different national contexts, thus underscoring the importance of path dependencies to the implementation of assessment and evaluation policies. From this perspective, Piattoeva, Kauko, Pitkänen, and Wallenius encourage us to think through the dynamics of policy convergence and policy divergence across geopolitical spaces.

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