

Review of Whitty et al's *Research and Policy in Education*

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In *Research and Policy in Education*, Geoff Whitty provides an analysis of recent educational policymaking in the UK. The perspective is sociologically driven, with a class inflection, and draws upon recent original research, as well as seasoned reflections emanating from decades of immersion in educational research, policy and practice. Whitty curates the work he has been involved in since 2000 to produce a coherent volume that walks the reader through some of the key policy developments in UK education, as well as some of the research and ideology that informed them (not to mention the research evidence that policy ignored). In doing so he provides an interesting (and rather depressing) insight into the relationship between policy relevant research and evidence-based policy-making. This short and accessible book offers a key overview of the policy landscape and is a "must-read" for researchers, educators and students interested in understanding the interface of policy and research in contemporary education in the UK. To aid the analysis it brings together a selection of previously published articles on educational policy and research, co-written over the past decade by Geoff Whitty, Jake Anders, Annette Hayton, Sarah Tang and Emma Wisby. The reproduction of previously published work enables a more distanced reflective account of research to be developed around, and in response to, policy developments in critical areas.

The complicated relationship between research and policy

In the last decade the breadth of educational research activity has been threatened by successive governments' and research councils' orientations towards the 'what works agenda' (which calls for research to be geared towards answering policy questions) and more recently the 'impact agenda' (which demands that research leads to measurable societal impacts). Whitty argues that this narrow view of what counts as valuable research has the potential to endanger theoretical work, 'blue-skies thinking', and critical research. Although acknowledging the existence of an uneasy relationship between policy and research in the preceding decades of the 20th century, he traces the problems of the current manifestation of the rocky marriage through the New Labour and Coalition years, where the value of educational research was spotlighted and called into question. He cites a range of high profile reviews in the mid to late nineties which coalesced to provide such a negative picture that, when dispersed through the press, the impression was created that educational research was characterized by: 'a lack of rigour, an absence of cumulative research findings, theoretical incoherence, ideological bias, irrelevance to schools, lack of involvement of teachers, inaccessibility and poor dissemination' (pp. 3-4). With the reputation of educational research in tatters it is easy to see the development of enthusiasm for evidence-based policy after the election of New Labour in 1997 through to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-2015). Whitty skillfully foregrounds the more empirically driven chapters in this volume with these sorts of contextual details, equipping the reader to adopt a sociological informed policy-aware lens in relation to a range of issues

and developments in UK education. Throughout the book he uncovers and examines the complicated and messy relationship between research and policy.

Through a chapter on 'Ideology and evidence in teacher education' the book provides a good example of the way in which ideology can trump evidence when it comes to policy-making. The chapter discusses the plethora of changes that have been imposed on teacher education, and their 'rapid roll out', none of which has been based on a careful analysis of the evidence. The theme of the use or misuse of evidence is carried through to a chapter on policy borrowing which discusses the British take up of US educational policy initiatives despite no convincing evidence based rationale. The book goes on to explore the persistence of the achievement gap between the rich and the poor in the UK, pointing to the fact that despite an abundance of solid research on this area politicians fail to learn the lessons provided by the evidence. In the penultimate chapter widening participation research evidence is critically reviewed to present the complexities of the successes and failures of widening participation policies. The chapter is a little more optimistic in tone and provides concrete suggestions for what might be achieved, albeit recognizing the limitations of incremental changes. As someone whose research sits within this policy arena, for me the chapter, although it does not make this argument, highlights that widening participation policies are set to fail if all they allow is for tinkering within a system that is fundamentally underpinned by the ideology of maintaining class divisions with recourse to supposed meritocratic principles. Combined these chapters show a disregard for evidence by policymakers, even when they claim to be thus driven.

The importance of sociology of education

After a walk through a critical analysis of the interplay between policy and research, and a discussion of different pieces of policy relevant research, the book ends with an argument in favour of sociology of education. This may at first appear to be an odd and unexpected way to conclude a book on this topic but Whitty pulls together an engaging discussion of the relevance and importance of educational research, even, or perhaps especially, when the ideology of policy actors (think Gove) mitigates against the recognition, let alone valuing, of critical research. The academies agenda is a contemporary case in point, where even government funded research on the effectiveness of academisation could not find evidence to support the conversion of schools from local authority to direct government control: yet the ideological juggernaut was set on course to rip successfully through the education system in England. The book highlights that despite an apparent belief in the importance of evidence driven policy, ideology can supersede reason when it comes to policy decision-making. While on the one hand this may seem to call into question the point of ever trying to impact policy debates, on the other hand it calls out to critical sociologists of education to keep hitting at important policy targets. One such contemporary issue that springs to mind is the Conservative direction of travel towards the resurrection of Grammar schools. Again, despite a host of strong evidence to the contrary, Grammar systems are being heralded by the Conservatives as having the potential to "turbo-charge" social mobility. This is important new policy ground for sociologists of education; further research is needed, and regardless of

ideological deflector shields, the evidence and argument need to be directed to policy makers over and over again.

In this book the argument is well made that sociology is an essential tool for making sense of policy in context, and that sociologically informed reviews of the evidence are critical to debates (such as widening participation). However, given all that Whitty reveals about the difficult relationship between policy and research, his final words offer little hope of research evidence reaching the ears (and minds) of those who need to listen. He fails to resolve the sense of frustration that hangs in the words of each chapter and almost conveys a sense of defeat in his parting words – ‘I hope future generations of sociologists of education will make a better job [of justifying the place of educational research in the public mind] than mine has’ (p.108). The question of how to make academic voices heard in policy debates is left hanging, and the onus is placed on newer academics to make inroads into the ‘public mind’. An interesting omission, despite the reflective insights in this volume, is fine detail on the barriers faced by researchers with policy relevant findings to be part of the discussion, and what might be done about them. Perhaps us new generation of sociologists of education could do with a final note of encouragement to keep on fighting.