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### **Title**

Mapping the field: Education policy research and theory

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### **Short bio**

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## *Introduction*

In this chapter I bring together relevant literatures and debates from the Global North to the Global South to trace the intellectual history and contributions of education policy research and theory from the 1970s to the present. To give some provisional structure to what is a messy and complicated narrative, this chapter locates education policy research and theory within specific historical relations and political movements. To document the present totality of this intellectual history is beyond the scope a single chapter, however. A task of this magnitude requires sufficient space to map a genealogy of global education policy research, one that is sensitive to spatial, cultural and political issues of policy translation and accommodation. Nonetheless, this chapter is an attempt to chart a provisional roadmap that should enable the reader to trace continuities and shifts in the global history of education policy and its relationship to key developments in the field of education policy research and theory. This includes a focus on the significance of politics to education policy research and theory, namely the ways in which specific normative and ethical commitments have influenced the development of different analytical approaches to education policy research and theory, in effect giving rise to new 'genre[s] of policy studies' (Troyna 1994a, 3).

To trace these relationships, the chapter is structured chronologically through an exploration of three separate yet overlapping time periods:

- i. 1950s-1970s: Welfare liberalism
- ii. 1970s-2000s: Neoliberalism
- iii. 2000s-2020s: Traveling liberalism

Each of these time periods include enough common features to make them distinctive as temporal and topographical expressions of political, economic and technological rule. There are ruptures and shifts in the development of these policy histories through which we can trace the movement from welfarism liberalism to neoliberalism, for example. Therefore, we can loosely describe these time periods as 'policy settlements' (Gale 2001, 389), namely the endurance of particular value systems and political orders within distinct temporalities and spatialities. However, policy settlements develop through contingent relations and regularities since they are the 'outcome of a process in which there is conflict, confrontation, struggle, resistance' (Foucault 2002, 457). In other words, policy settlements are the condition and outcome of specific relations, subjects and spaces being held together and constituted in particular forms, namely through 'semiotic, social, institutional and spatiotemporal fixes that support the reproduction of economic, political and social domination' (Jessop and Sum 2016, 108). Policy settlements should therefore be understood as fluid social realities bound to particular kinds of 'assembly work' (Higgins and Larner 2017, 5), making them provisional or 'temporary' (Gale 2001, 390).

Although structured in a way that make them appear discrete and self-contained, the above policy settlements echo and redeem each other through their commitment to

broader hegemonic projects, namely the expansion of state authority or appeals to nationhood, the development of advanced liberal modes of governing and the subjugation of politics to economics and the price system of the market more generally. Following du Guy (2003, 664), who warns against the 'logic of overdramatic dichotomization' that characterizes 'epochalist' readings of social change, here I want to emphasise the uneven, even volatile development of education policy histories. The suggestion here is that education policy histories should not be studied chronologically or sequentially through tidy temporal representations of 'past' and 'present', 'old' and 'new' since any simplification of time in this way leads to homogenous accounts of social change that conceal continuities in the re-articulation of policy over time and space (Wilkins et al. 2019a). However, for the purpose of navigating the reader through some very messy policy terrain, this chapter is structured chronologically with a focus on mapping the continuities and discontinuities of different policy settlements, while recognising these policy configurations to be fluid and overlapping. To help the reader make sense of education policy changes and their effects, I will use England as a historical case study to empirically trace some of the nuances attached to different policy settlements and their unique institutional logics and social arrangements within the field of education.

### *Field and/or discipline*

Education policy research can be described as a dynamic discipline owing to its distinctive contribution to policy, theory and politics. Although still in its infancy when

compared to the intellectual history of more established research traditions, education policy research is innovative through its unique combination of historical, sociological and political investigations of public policy and policy worlds. This includes a critical focus on the relationship between policy and politics, namely the role of policy in the articulation of relations of power and authority. On this description, education policy research more closely resembles a field of contestation than a discipline of subject-specific knowledge. 'Discipline', for example, implies something rigid and orderly, such as the social stratification of status or the moral classification of values. 'Discipline' might also signify a strict orientation, disposition, or 'world-view', be it mythical, religious or modern (Habermas 1976, 77). On this understanding, discipline can be equated to a conservative moral universe with its emphasis on 'fixing and enforcing meanings, conserving certain ways of life, and repressing and regulating desire' (Brown 2006, 692). In contrast, education policy research appears 'undisciplined' through its endless flirtations with theory and politics as exploratory models for describing, resisting, and transforming contingent social realities.

It is for this reason that I want to use the concept of 'field' rather than 'discipline' to describe the intellectual history and contributions of education policy research and theory. Fields are open-ended and multi-faceted, for example. They tend to have fuzzy boundaries, blurred edges and imbricated spaces. Yet fields also mark the presence of particular objects and enduring features. They can also signify combative spaces in which ideological battles are fought and competing forces struggle for the strategic occupation of dominant positions and relations. 'Field'

therefore seems like a more accurate metaphor and description for capturing the co-development of education policy history and education policy research and theory.

### *Welfarism liberalism*

Welfare liberalism can be traced to late nineteenth century Europe, particularly the Prussian state of Germany, which at the time introduced mandatory social insurances including sickness insurance and labour protection (Kuhnle and Sander 2010). It was not until the post-war reconstruction of Europe that welfare liberalism was fully realised, however. While European countries rejoiced in jubilation following the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, the post-war period brought into sharp focus the lives of the poorest members of society, without whom the war effort and victory over Nazi Germany would have been impossible. Capturing the popular mood at the time of the 1945 election in England, former British Labour Cabinet Minister Tony Benn (2014) argued: 'If you can have full employment by killing Germans, why can't we have full employment by building hospitals, building schools?'

Responding to the 'vogue for planning and egalitarianism' (Simon 1991, 88) that characterised the post-war period, the elected Labour government in England in 1945 implemented radical changes to public policy through their commitment to the nationalisation of industries, the maintenance of full employment and the creation of a welfare state. At the heart of the post-war reconstruction of England and other European countries was an ambitious social and political project that introduced macroeconomic policies to improve state planning of the economy and to offer

citizens essential forms of security and protection against the risks of capitalism (Keynes 1931). Welfare liberalism therefore signalled a decisive break from the utilitarian principles and philosophies that had dominated political and economic life during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, namely 'classical liberalism' (Kelly 2005). Central to classical liberalism, but more specifically the British strand of liberalism called 'Victorian liberalism' (see Malachuk 2005), was a commitment to reducing the role of the state in civil society and the market. Against this excessively liberal view of structures and individuals as effortlessly self-regulating under the efficient equilibrium of capitalism, proponents of welfare liberalism insisted on the moral necessity of government to safeguard citizens against the crises and conflicts naturally arising from capitalism.

Welfare liberalism therefore introduced a new relation between the state and citizen in which essential welfare provision was offered on the basis of rights rather than charity. In England, this included an ambitious project to develop a 'comprehensive' model of education to replace the two-tier system of education inherited from previous governments, namely the division between elementary schooling (free and compulsory for all children up to the age of thirteen and specifically targeted to educate the poorer classes) and secondary or higher-grade schooling (entry subject to payment or passing an examination). Known as the 'tripartite system', this new comprehensive system of education, created under the auspices of the welfare state and enshrined through the 1944 Education Act, ensured that national provision of education beyond the elementary or primary level was available through three distinct routes: secondary modern, technical and grammar.

However, the reality of the tripartite system was far from the educational 'New Jerusalem' (Lowe 2005, 281) that everyone hoped it to be. Under this new system, secondary moderns educated the poorer classes; technical schools tailored provision to meet the needs or requirements of pupils with a technical or scientific aptitude; and grammar schools continued their mission as the preserve of the most able with entry only permitted on successful completion of examination, otherwise known as the '11 Plus'. Therefore, the tripartite system in England reproduced many of social inequalities which had plagued earlier education systems, 'with identifiable social functions and a hierarchical, even elitist structure which still at the heart of the twenty-first century bears many of the marks of its Victorian origins' (Lowe 2005, 281).

Welfare liberalism also opened up new opportunities for the 'institutionalisation' of relations between citizens and the state through an expanded state bureaucracy. The moral function of safeguarding citizens against the unintended consequences of capitalism made a legal and political necessity of introducing new forms of protection and relations of control that included state administration of 'need' through different types of specialist knowledge and management tools. It is here that 'the social' emerged as a moral and disciplinary focus of state planning and intervention (Rose 1999, 98). Specifically, it introduced new activities of sorting and ranking individuals' needs and capacities according to new legal forms and measurements of 'competency' and 'entitlement'. To assist governments at this time, the policy sciences occupied a central role in producing the knowledge infrastructure required



to support a technocratic state capable of governing the social (see Lerner & Lasswell 1951).

A key impetus for the development of the policy sciences during the 1950s was a strong commitment to science in and for the service of state administration and public policy. The policy-directed focus of the policy sciences, especially its concern for policy evaluation and improvement, had a major influence on economic and social change in Europe and the US during the 1960s and early 1970s. Yet despite strong political motivations to conduct research in support of the expansion of welfare liberalism, the policy sciences remained staunchly positivist when it came to selecting research tools for collecting data. That is to say, a focus of the policy sciences during this time was the scientific method of producing knowledge that could be empirically tested and verified using meta-analysis, deductive logic and experimental hypothesis modelling.

In contrast to some of the major philosophical movements at the time – key among them being phenomenology and hermeneutics – the policy sciences held onto a strong belief in using deductive methods of reasoning for producing knowledge about society. This included the adoption of both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis, albeit the main focus was to produce ‘objective’ measurements that would satisfy the needs of policy makers to provide solutions to already defined policy problems. A pivotal text at this time was *The Policy Sciences* edited by Lerner and Lasswell in 1951. It is here that the value orientation of the policy sciences is made explicit with its emphasis on ‘the development of a science of policy forming and

execution' and 'the improving of the concrete content of the information and the interpretations available to policy makers' (Lasswell 1951 quoted in Wagner et al. 1991, 8). In this vein, the policy sciences were very much a continuation of the Enlightenment project with its emphasis on the application of a 'scientific problem-solving rationality' (Simon, Olssen and Peters 2009, 4).

Similar trends in policy-directed research can be observed in the field of education research at the time, with the rise of educational administration, comparative education and public policy studies in Europe and the US. By the end of the 1970s, however, the close relationship between policy makers and the policy sciences and social sciences more generally was fractured owing to strong disagreements regarding the nature of 'policy problems' and their solutions. Moreover, there was growing distrust of the role and value of the social sciences to public policy making, especially among a group of economic liberals and political conservatives called the 'New Right' (Gamble 1986).

### *Neoliberalism*

After the Second World War, many European countries enjoyed a relatively stable period of affluence and cooperation under the auspices of Keynesian economics. In England, for example, there was 'unprecedented harmony between Ministers, sponsoring departments, institutions and the public' (Middlemas 1986, 342). In the 1970s, however, England and many other European countries experienced severe economic stagnation and high inflation resulting in a tumultuous period punctuated

by 'crisis management and containment strategies' (Hall 1979, 15). No longer capable of maintaining consistent levels of public spending, many countries struggled to balance wages with the cost of living. Borrowing from the economic theories of Friedman (1970) and others (Hayek 1944; Stigler 1977), economic liberals (those against state control of the economy) and political conservatives (those against state interference in civil society) responded at the time by outlining blueprints for 'a new conception of the role of government in the macroeconomy' (McNamara 1998, 5), namely a 'minimal state' disciplined by fiscal responsibility, capital mobility and deflationary financial policies.

Central to the realisation of this new role of government were authoritarian and neoconservative governments who created public policies that supported the philosophical and economic views of Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, all of whom shared a strong commitment to restoring the explicitness of the price system of the market as an organizing principle for society and the economy. This included a strong appeal to the abstract figure of the atomistic subject typically found in classical liberal discourse, namely the 'individualist fiction of the disembodied or unsituated human subject' (Gray 2007, 24). Unlike welfare liberalism, with its emphasis on collectivism and nationalisation, classical liberalism recognised the individual as sovereign and therefore sought to preserve self-interested behaviour as both naturally occurring and distinctively 'private'. Implicit to classical liberalism is a view of 'the public-private distinction [seen] primarily in terms of the distinction between state administration and the market economy' (Weintraub 1997, 7).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, different political leaders, from Reagan in the US to Thatcher in England, began the process of dismantling welfare liberalism through undermining different forms of economic protection and mass social programs. As observed by Peck and Tickell (2002, 384), a strategic focus of right-wing governments during this time was 'the active destruction and discreditation of Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions'. At the same time, right-wing governments moved beyond any classical liberal commitment to laissez-faire capitalism and developed a species of liberalism that promoted the role of the state in particular ways, principally to create self-responsible subjects and market-disciplined organisations. These 'diverse skirmishes were rationalized within a relatively coherent mentality of government that came to be termed neo-liberalism' (Miller and Rose 2008, 211).

Neoliberalism is a notoriously slippery concept owing to its very complicated intellectual history and relationship to different political, cultural and economic projects, from authoritarianism to neoconservatism and Third Way social democracy (Wilkins 2018a). Neoliberalism therefore is best described as a mobile adaptive force 'that can be decontextualized from their original sources [e.g. philosophical and economic doctrines] and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relations' (Ong 2006, 13). As documented by Hall in the UK (1979) and Apple in the US (2001), neoliberalism in the 1980s succeeded in electoral terms through its combination of banal conservatism ('family', 'authority' and 'duty') and economic liberalism. The result was a strange alignment of conservative 'social'

values and liberal 'market' imperatives, or what Hall (1979, 17) calls 'social market values'.

Education policy was radically transformed during the late 1970s and 1980s to reflect and uphold the ascendancy and dominance of this new hegemony in economic and political thinking. This included a shift away from rights-based welfare, or what Johansson and Hvinden (2005, 106) call 'socio-liberal citizenship', and a shift towards neoliberal citizenship or 'active citizenship' (Kivelä 2018, 160). A focus of active citizenship is the creation of 'citizen-consumers' (Clarke et al. 2007), namely people who exercise their right to publicly funded services on the basis of consumer principles of choice and voice. Active citizenship aims to support contexts in which citizens view themselves as consumers competing for limited public resources such as school places, hospital appointments and housing options (Wilkins 2018b).

These contexts not only make certain systemic changes possible, such as increased school autonomy and private sector management of publicly funded schools. They also make rights and entitlements conditional on people exercising responsible choices as 'rational actors' or self-maximizing agents (see Dunleavy 1991; Dwyer 1998). During the 1980s and 1990s in England, education policy and practice was redesigned to complement this new model of citizenship. Specifically, active citizenship was realised through several interrelated policy levers, namely:

- i. *Consumer choice*: Parents were granted freedom of school choice by application.

- ii. *Consumer voice*: Parents were encouraged to enter into new contractual relations with schools as consumers.
- iii. *Competition*: Rate-capping was introduced on education provision so that school budget levels were linked to student intake.
- iv. *Marketisation*: League tables were introduced to compare and display schools as 'poor', 'average' and 'good' or 'excellent' according to attainment levels.
- v. *Performativity*: Teachers were compelled to engage with new forms of self-reporting and self-assessment.
- vi. *Deregulation*: Schools were permitted to 'opt out' of local government control and become administratively self-governing entities.
- vii. *Privatisation*: The introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) provided opportunities for private sector involvement in public sector organisation.
- viii. *Depoliticisation*: The emphasis on business skills and expert administration within schools marked the shift from stakeholder governance to corporate governance; and
- ix. *Disintermediation*: Local government authorities were displaced as strategic, political bases for the monitoring and improvement of local education systems.

In response to these developments, education policy researchers turned their attention to documenting the crisis of welfare liberalism and the limits of positivism to policy research more generally. Here positivism can be described as a form of knowledge that is designed to empirically test the 'technical-instrumental practicality

of specific social arrangements' (Jessop and Sum 2016, 105). The practical-strategic advantage of this knowledge is that it allows highly contextualised information to be rendered into calculable forms and therefore more amenable to statistical mapping and prediction or control. This particular approach to knowledge production and application is evident in the recent history and popularity of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in education research (Connolly, Keenan & Urbanska 2018). RCTs are used to produce measurable results that can determine the outcomes of intervening upon particular groups of peoples. Through selective sampling techniques that divide and monitor research participants within 'control groups' (those under the influence of specific interventions) and 'normal groups' (those not under the influence of specific interventions), RCTs aim to produce rigorous assessments of the effectiveness (and non-effectiveness) of specific interventions and programmes with a view to producing cost-benefit analyses that can be used to shape important policy decisions. In England, the first large scale RCT was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) under the then Labour government in 2012, the aim of which was to evaluate the Labour government's flagship numeracy policy for pupils in primary school at the time, also known as 'Every Child Counts' (see Torgerson et al. 2013).

As already noted, the rise of welfare liberalism in the 1950s and 1960s cannot be separated from the development of 'the social' as a domain of rationalist state planning and bureaucracy, namely the administration of 'need' and 'competency' or 'entitlement' through specialist types of knowledge (see Rose 1999). Much like the policy sciences that were strictly positivist and instrumental in their methodological and epistemological assumptions (Simon, Olssen and Peters 2009), RCTs aim to

produce objective knowledge based on value-free observations of controlled, patterned and universalisable environments. Moreover, like the policy sciences, RCTs serve an important political function to the state and to the development of 'the social': they provide a particular kind of knowledge, ostensibly an unbiased knowledge, which can help to support the systematic testing and application of various interventions and programmes.

Inspired by post-Marxism and poststructuralism, education policy researchers during the 1980s challenged the positivist turn that dominated policy science research during the post-war period. The impetus and inspiration for these approaches to policy research can be traced to two major theoretical movements, namely the political and emancipatory traditions of 'critical theory' developed by Horkheimer (1968) (also see Habermas 1962; Marcuse 1964) and 'critical pedagogy' developed by Freire (1970) (also see Bernstein 1971; hooks 1994). Despite the different historical contexts shaping their emergence, critical theory and critical pedagogy share a deep commitment to emancipatory grassroots movements and the development of human liberation through forms and relations of 'critical consciousness'. Through their shared emphasis on freedom from authority, critical theory and critical pedagogy reject the idea of universal truths, indefinite teleologies and metaphysical ideations, especially the kind of moral and scientific precepts underpinning the utopian language of the Enlightenment and the sovereign figure of 'rational individual' so central to bourgeois liberalism and capitalism. More generally, both critical theory and critical pedagogy 'critique capitalist society as a crisis-laden system frustrating human freedom and fulfilment' (Ingram 1990, 1).



In this vein, poststructuralism is, like positivism, a rejection of metaphysics and theism, namely abstract, religious or spiritual explanations of social reality that exclude concerns with materiality and the sensory world. Unlike positivism, however, poststructuralism views knowledge production to be intimately historical and cultural. Poststructuralism is therefore a direct challenge to the foundational ontology of positivism, namely the idea that an independent social reality can be observed using value-free knowledge. This has significant implications for policy research. From a poststructuralist perspective, policy worlds do not simply reflect social reality, but are actively constructed and transformed through the provision of meanings – meanings about the efficiency of private sector involvement in public sector management, for instance, or meanings about the effectiveness of choice and competition as structured incentives for public sector improvement. In this sense, poststructuralist researchers view research methods as meaning-making devices rather than secure channels for obtaining unmediated access to truths about self-evident policy worlds. Poststructuralists, therefore, are not convinced by claims that observations and facts can be comfortably separated from interpretations and values (see Prunty 1985; Taylor 1997; Troyna 1994b). (insert refs)

Similarly, managerialists in the 1980s and 1990s rejected the argument that policy worlds are essentially sites of rational calculus and planning. Borrowing from public choice theory, managerialists adopted a view of civil servants and local government bureaucrats as 'basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour, choosing how to act on the basis of the consequences for their personal welfare'

(Dunleavy, 1991, 3). To mitigate or influence such behaviour, managerialists promoted the use of structured incentives in the form of 'output controls...private-sector styles of management practice [and] greater discipline and parsimony in resource use' (Hood 1991, 4-5). On this account, poststructuralists and managerialists differ fundamentally on what should substitute the post-war view of policy as intrinsically 'rational'. Poststructuralists, for example, recognise the importance of language and argumentation to the policy process and therefore insist on post-positivist epistemologies that use interpretative frameworks (frame analysis, rhetorical analysis and policy narration, for example) to understand policy as symbolic arenas and combative spaces for the struggle over meaning (Fisher & Gottweis 2013). Interpretative and post-positivist approaches to policy are therefore more closely aligned with a 'policy scholarship' approach that emphasises the 'historical, theoretical, cultural and socio-political setting' (Grace 1995, 12) guiding formulations of policy problems and solutions.

In contrast, managerialists view policy problems and solutions as emergent properties of systems and individual behaviour that require measurement, comparison and discipline through structured incentives such as choice and competition (see Le Grand 1997). Yet, despite rejecting a view of individuals as intrinsically rational, managerialists labour under the presumption that a rational order is knowable and universal. In essence, structured incentives are designed to produce such a rational order through reducing human behaviour to expressions of efficiency, quality or effectiveness. Managerialism is the scientific application of a standard rationality of human behaviour. Therefore, managerialists are not dissimilar to positivists with their epistemological commitment to policy-making and policy

change as a problem-solving science. Similar to Laswell's (1971) 'policy science' approach, managerialism (or New Public Management, NPM) appears to undermine a view of policy worlds as the outcome of political influence, agitation or control; or at the very least, they insist on interventions that aim to mitigate the possibility of such politicisation. Moreover, managerialists do not share the poststructuralist view of policy problems and solutions as historically contingent or socially constructed (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). Instead, managerialists appear to favour a functionalist view of policy problems and solutions as technical achievements and failures of structured incentives.

Poststructuralists, on the other hand, reject any assumption that a rational order is knowable or even desirable. Rather, they tend to view structured incentives as 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change' (Ball 2003, 216). The opposition between managerialists and poststructuralists therefore echoes and redeems 'the distinction between policy science and policy scholarship and refines the general opposition between analysis for policy and analysis of policy' (Simon, Olssen and Peters 2009, 29), where managerialism is analysis for policy and poststructuralism is analysis of policy.

Influenced by these and other key insights, education policy sociologists during the 1980s and 1990s turned their attention to the politics-policy relationship, namely the ways in which power and claims to knowledge are inscribed in policy decisions and policy effects (Prunty 1985; Popkewitz 1991). These critical analyses were

designed, first, to refute previous understandings of policy as a privileged space of rationalist planning. Instead, policy was reconceptualised as a contested and productive space for the 'authoritative allocation of values' (Prunty 1985, 136). Here, policy decisions are captured at the level of ideology or discourse as the residual effect of hegemonic projects and power relations. Second, these critical analyses were a direct challenge to the policy research of the post-war period, which assumed that the optimisation of policy goals and outcomes was intimately linked to the democratisation of policy and society. This includes the notion that policy texts automatically function as equality-producing mechanisms in serving equitable and socially just outcomes. On this view, 'critical' or 'sociological' education policy research deviates from any assumption that 'the optimal solution for policy problems is a value-free activity' (Simon, Olssen, and Peters 2009, 10). This includes a rejection of any naïve assumptions concerning the nature of 'policy problems', namely that it is possible to define policy problems indiscriminately and without recourse to certain value judgements or hierarchies of knowledge (see Bacchi and Goodwin 2016).

Using the same discursive logic, education researchers during the 1980s and 1990s highlighted the ways in which education policy history and education policy research are complicated and enriched by distinctive geo-political shifts in what Lingard and Ozga (2007, 1) call 'the education policy/politics relationship', namely the ways in which politics shape and inform the development of different approaches to policy research. The emergence of 'education policy sociology' (Ozga 1987) during the 1980s and 1990s in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, for example, can be viewed as the expression of a movement against the prevailing political and

economic orthodoxy of that time, namely neoliberal rule. The relationship between policy and politics is therefore a useful lens for exploring how specific orientations to policy research, be they a reflexive disposition (Ball 1994) or a commitment to anti-oppressive struggles (Troyna 1994b), arise as political and cultural responses to historically specific policy regimes. In effect, policy regimes produce the conditions of possibility for new 'genre[s] of policy studies' (Troyna 1994a, 3).

In this section I have outlined the rise and influence of neoliberalism on different political and economic systems during the 1980s and 1990s, with a focus on the relationship between neoliberalism and education policy making and research. Here neoliberalism is used as a reliable shorthand for capturing a specific mentality of government or 'thought collective' (Mirowski 2009, 428) that was designed specifically to reimagine the role of government in the macroeconomy and undermine welfare liberalism and its various philosophies and programmes. In the next section I trace the continuing influence of neoliberalism on policy making and policy change, albeit with a focus that explores the contradictory movement and expression of neoliberalism as a traveling ideology and the subsequent development of education policy research and theory.

### *Traveling liberalism*

As previously noted, there are various strands of liberalism that have shaped the development (and non-development) of different policy histories and policy worlds, from classical liberalism to welfare liberalism and neoliberalism. More recently,

researchers have introduced new concepts to capture the complicated distribution of liberalism within different national and regional spaces. These concepts include 'postneoliberalism' (Springer 2015), 'after neoliberalism' (Rose 2017) and 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bruff & Tansel 2019), all of which are attempts to locate social change both within and against understandings of neoliberalism. The result is a nuanced view of how discourses and practices of liberalism 'travel' and are mediated and transformed through the 'inherited institutional landscape' (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010, 3) of different nations, regions and local spaces. In Latin America, for example, many countries have re-nationalised public utilities and entities, albeit continued to uphold the price system of the market and the circulation and influence of global private capital as drivers for their national economies (Houtart 2016; Lewkowicz 2015). The suggestion here is that different and adapted forms of liberalism, from welfare liberalism to neoliberalism, evolve in tandem with each other, albeit develop through problematic alignments and contradictory tendencies.

Using the same discursive logic, it is possible to challenge the widely held belief that neoliberalism and competition are mutually supportive of each other. According to Birch (2015), what is new and distinctive about global financialisation is the rise of monopoly and anti-competitive arrangements in which the state fails to protect the sovereign space of free markets. Similar anti-competitive trends can be observed in the field of education. Across the globe there is strong support for decentralised education systems that promote school autonomy and competition. Yet at the same time, school systems that engender school autonomy and competition can also be observed promoting specific forms of private monopoly in which large numbers of publicly funded schools are brought under the legal and management control of

commercial and non-commercial entities. In England, for example, there are many publicly funded schools that are absorbed into single management groups called Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), who run schools subject to a funding agreement with the Secretary of State. These developments are indicative of new forms of producer capture and private monopoly that effectively undermine concepts of school autonomy, choice and competition (Wilkins 2017, 2021). Similar trends are evident in many other countries around the globe, particularly the US (charter schools), Australia (independent public schools), and Sweden (free schools) (see Gobby 2013; Lundahl et al. 2013; Stahl 2018). On this understanding, it is important to observe the ways in which seemingly conflicting and contrasting tendencies are held together or fall apart within different contexts.

To this end, a key focus of contemporary education policy research is its attentiveness to the unevenness and variegation of neoliberal projects across the globe, specifically the ways in which policy 'moves' and 'travels' and comes to be revised and inflected within unique historical and geo-political settings. This means paying attention to the normative and political construction of policy making and policy change and how education policy emerges as the unique product of subnational and national politics and projects and their institutionalised landscapes and shifting normative commitments.

As indicated earlier on, contemporary education policy research is a field that articulates and combines a number of unique positions and orientations where methodological and epistemological assumptions are concerned. The continuous

application and testing of theory as exploratory models for describing, intervening upon and contesting social realities is one expression of this trend. Another expression can be located within contemporary education debates that concern the movement and expression of policy both nationally and globally. On the one hand, there is an established body of education policy research that shows that national education systems are strongly influenced by global policy agendas and reform movements. At the level of the global are international bodies and philanthropic foundations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Bank Group, among other supranational organisations, that are clearly engaged in private and charity finance initiatives to promote the use of global standards to compare levels of student attainment and school improvement across different countries. These initiatives include the development of performance indicators and output measurements designed to calculate teaching quality, school management, inputs and infrastructure, and learner preparation. Such initiatives contribute significantly to the development of new global spaces of 'networked governance' (Srivastava & Baur 2016), namely the expanded role of multilateral, transnational and non-governmental organisations in national policy making. This includes the creation of new international capital flows and profit-making ventures with increased opportunities for private and charity organisations to package and sell 'policy solutions' to different national governments, especially those in developing countries (Bartlett & Vavrus 2016; Bhanji 2016).

These studies typically make good use of concepts of 'policy transfer', 'policy convergence' and 'policy borrowing', all of which helpfully situate the development of



national education systems within wider global education spaces and movements. This includes moving beyond a focus on methodological statism and nationalism, namely 'limiting one's analysis to state policies and politics within the state and assuming a fixed linkage between government and territory in a single nation' (Simon, Olssen and Peters 2009, 38). The move away from methodological statism and nationalism can be traced to the 1990s with the rise of trade liberalisation, transnational capital accumulation, and technologically driven social connectivity across the globe. It was during this time that social and political scientists recognised the impact of globalisation on the changing formation of state practices and citizenship, with the implication that politics and authority could no longer be studied from a single vantage point or isolated entity such as the nation state or government. Instead, education policy research adopted the lens of methodological globalism (or 'regionalisation' and 'Europeanisation') to help situate policy processes within multi-causal and multi-directional relations as translocal, mobile and networked (Ramirez, Meyer & Lerch 2016; Robertson 2016; Verger and Parcerisa 2018). Bartlett and Vavrus (2016), for example, demonstrate how early grade reading among children in Zambia has been profoundly altered by a network of global education policy actors. Similarly, Srivastava and Baur (2016) trace the role of philanthropic organisations in the promotion of market-based solutions and privatisation in education in the Global South.

At the same time, there is an emerging body of education policy research that is circumspect of the value and application of these approaches to policy research because they sometimes give the impression of a unidirectional flow of global policy processes fitting seamlessly with practices of self-governance within subnational and

national policy contexts (Silova 2012). The linear view of policy flowing uniformly in space and time, as is sometimes implied by concepts of policy transfer and policy convergence, can be considered too deterministic or reductionist given its lack of attention to the historically contingent formation of policy making and policy change (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996). In response, education policy researchers highlight the complicated distribution of global patterns of rule within 'increasingly complex, pluri-lateral and cross-scalar flow of ideas' (Mundy et al. 2016, 7).

Therefore, while there is a tendency in some Anglophone literatures to assume that national education policy developments are increasingly overdetermined by transnational agenda setting by supranational organisations, be it the OECD (and PISA) or the World Bank Group, there is a productive counter-tendency in these literatures to highlight the challenges to global interconnectivity and interdependency given the recent rise of nationalism, populism and anti-immigration and anti-globalisation sentiment (Peters 2017). Moreover, the inability of international large-scale assessments developed by OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to fully influence some national education systems, especially some Nordic countries that have historically embraced 'teacher-friendly' models of self-evaluation (Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019), points to the limits of global policy influence and interconnectivity.

Contemporary education policy research therefore flits between two readings of policy change as 'embedded' and 'travelling' (Ozga and Roberts 2006, 1). On the one hand, the embedded approach seeks to understand how policy change is

constrained or enabled by national, regional and local politics and projects. This includes a focus on how policy is mediated and transformed through changing path dependencies, regulatory structures and value systems, all of which are evidence for the resilience of national structures and processes. On the other hand, the travelling approach shifts the focus towards contextualising policy change at the intersection of national and global influences, from international comparative assessment (Schleicher and Zoido 2016) to transnational advocacy networks and global business communities (Macpherson 2016). Neither approach presumes a static relationship between policy and practice but offer a useful set of vantage points through which to study education policy at different levels and different sites.

When combined, these approaches help to sufficiently 'parochialise' education policy research so that historically contingent and culturally relevant contextualised readings of policy enactments are possible. At the same time, these combined approaches allow for innovative forms of 'deparochialised' education policy research (Lingard, 2006, 291), namely analyses that situate policy change within a global field of interconnections and influences. Oscillating between a view of policy as embedded and a view of it as travelling therefore helps to avoid fashionable and often untested 'assumptions of universally shared global orientations and criticism' (Simon, Olssen and Peters 2009, 39), namely those borrowed from Giddens's (1999, 21) observation of the globalising effects of modernity, in which social relations are thought to be 'lifted out local contexts and restructured across indefinite spans of time and space'.

Moreover, a view of policy as both embedded and travelling challenges the idea that education systems are in some sense comparable with identifiable sets of characteristics that can be systematically reduced to each other. In other words, assuming a natural fit between policy, state and territory implies a structural coherence and unity to policy formations. Instead, there is a need to reconceptualise policy as mobilised and translated as it travels through different territories of government and multi-levels of governance, networks and flows of influence. This does not assume that policy takes on a post-national form or that it remains uniquely national. Rather, it means tracing the 'specific semiotic, social, institutional and spatiotemporal fixes' (Jessop and Sum 2016, 108) that enable and constrain the formation of policy in different spaces and contexts, with a focus on the 'creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation' (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012, 3) that shape policy configurations and performances. On this account, policy can be conceptualised both at the level of post-national dynamics, be it Europeanisation, regionalisation or globalisation, while at the same time intimately linked to contingent relations and regularities that are uniquely cultural and political. From this perspective, the policy process can be understood as always messy and ambiguous. The movement from policy articulation to policy text to policy enactment to policy effect is a situated negotiation that is constructed and contested at different levels and different sites, in effect producing different national and local responses and adaptations.

In this section I have captured some of the unique positions and orientations shaping contemporary approaches to education policy research and theory and their relevance to making sense of policy making and policy change in the context of

globalisation and resurgent and resilient nationalism. However, these approaches should not be taken to be definitive or exhaustive of what is a very crowded field. As indicated in the introduction, to document such a totality is beyond the scope a single chapter. Instead, the above should be treated as selective readings of some popular or emerging research trends whose key influences span disciplines of political science, geography, sociology, and social policy. At the same time, the research trends outlined above should not be read as exclusive to the time period 2000 to 2020 since education policy research in the 1980s and 1990s held a similar interest in documenting the interplay of local and national interactions in the formation of policy making and policy worlds together with an examination of the state/civil society relationship (see Ball 1997; Halpin & Troyna 1995; Popkewitz 1996). However, what is distinctive about contemporary education policy research is the sustained interest in oscillating between a view of policy as embedded and travelling and the application of that analytical framework to the study of national and international connectivity, co-influence and co-development at the global level.

What is also evident from the above research trends is that poststructuralism and anti-foundationalism continue to exert a strong influence on the direction of travel of contemporary education policy research and theory. Similar to the critical and sociological education researchers of the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary education policy researchers insist that policy problems and solutions cannot be read independent of the discursive and concrete realities that produce them, including the role of theory, methodology and epistemology. The implication here is that policy worlds captured through different research methods, themselves the product and design of specific histories of thought and competing epistemologies, convey at best

a pseudo-objectivism and first approximation of a changeable and unstable social reality. On this basis, poststructuralists undermine the view of 'so called 'objective', value-free methods for the writing and reading of policy' (Olssen, Codd and O'Neill 2004, 2). Similarly, there is a strong emphasis within contemporary education policy research on geo-political readings of policy movement and policy change as translations and accommodations of contingent social and economic histories, including the role of political agenda-setting, problem-setting and problem-framing within those contexts. Hence the combined reading of policy change as embedded and travelling outlined above. Here poststructuralism and anti-foundationalism can be traced to the contemporary view of policy texts and arrangements as dynamic and productive spaces in which policy problems (or ideological dilemmas) are negotiated through the provision of meanings. Poststructuralists working within different disciplines of policy research, from social policy to education policy, therefore share a deep political and epistemological concern for the different potentialities and projects made possible by meanings:

Meanings are inextricably linked with forms and relations of power and authority and are implicated in the making and remaking of social worlds. Policy, then, can be conceived as a particular setting in which meanings are made, installed, naturalised, normalised, and, of course, contested (Clarke et al. 2015, 20).

## *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have traced a short provisional roadmap of the intellectual history and contributions of education policy research and theory from the 1970s to the present. A focus of the chapter has been 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. This has included identifying some of the major research paradigms and analytical strategies guiding education policy research and theory, from positivism to poststructuralism.

At the time of writing there continues to be a long-standing and influential positivist tradition in education policy research, which claims that an objective reality can be observed and rigorously tested through the statistical power of unbiased research instruments. The proliferation of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in the UK and US (Torgerson & Torgerson 2001) point to a pervasive positivist tradition in contemporary education policy research. These statistically driven empirical investigations of the causal impact of policy interventions and programmes reflect attempts to explain the necessary and sufficient conditions for realising policy goals and effects. While some contemporary proponents of positivism appear less enthusiastic about any general claims regarding the accuracy of using statistical methods to arrive at causally determined social facts, preferring instead to emphasise concepts of probability and partial objectivity, there is a continuing global trend towards education policy research that embraces positivism.

Alongside these orientations to education policy research are post-positivist, anti-foundationalist and poststructuralist traditions that are more 'critical' of the strategic use of knowledge for furthering and strengthening educational policy and outcomes. Rather than serve as models for testing the efficacy or impact of different policy arrangements and proposals, these approaches are more likely to interrogate the assumptions and values underpinning the construction of policy problems and their solutions. From this perspective, poststructuralist policy research continues the important work of providing important spaces for thinking through alternatives to the status quo, with a strong emphasis on progressive change (Troyna 1994b). This includes commitments to antiracist, indigenous, queer, and feminist perspectives in efforts to democratise and pluralise policy spaces, policy texts and policy processes (Cortina 2017; Martino et al. 2018; Pillow 2003). Moreover, it extends to moral and political commitments to rethinking education and schooling as sites for promoting 'critical literacy' and 'cultural power' (Aronowitz & Giroux 1994, 127; McLaren 1989).

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