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

Nicola Ingram

Geoff Whitty's new book is a major contribution to the field of sociology of education policy. *Research and Policy in Education* showcases his extraordinary breadth of inquiry, intellectual rigour and command of his argument, along with a marvellously lucid prose style.

In the book, Whitty revisits and updates six articles and book chapters addressing a range of themes, previously published between 2006 and 2015. Structurally, Whitty's premise for the book is that it is intended to guide the reader from a wider focus on the macro of the policy–research relationship, through exemplar policy case studies exemplifying how this has played out in practice, to the micro of Whitty's personal roots in sociology (and how that tradition may illuminate the field). Whilst the book's disparate origins are never entirely transcended (this impression is reinforced by the author's occasional reference to its constituent parts as papers rather than chapters), it is nonetheless true that the book's somewhat episodic structure matters less than the contribution the chapters collectively make. In fact, the book is equally usefully understood as a curated oeuvre that highlights and exemplifies the latter third of a career of important and wide-ranging contributions. As Whitty explains in the introduction and field members will know, this is his third such collection, with *Sociology and School Knowledge* (Whitty [1985](#)) and *Making Sense of Education Policy* (Whitty [2002](#)) covering the first two-thirds of his career.

In the first chapter, Whitty (with Wisby) returns to his 2005 presidential address to the British Educational Research Association, later published in the *British Educational Research Journal*. The chapter is a forensic deconstruction and problematisation of the relationship between education research and policy-making and/or practice. This was understood as a pressing issue in 2005 and, as Whitty argues powerfully and readers will recognise, is still a concern today, where the discourse of 'what works' has been reinforced by economic austerity. Whitty's analysis is guided by a concern to map out the complexities in many aspects of this relationship, from definitions through assumptions to objectives. He exemplifies these complexities through several cases under New Labour and Coalition governments. These include the turn to impact in assessing research quality and the rise of think tanks, which are '[r]elatively unencumbered by the inhibitions of the canons (and cautions) that academic research properly requires' (16) in responding to the need that policy appears research informed. That said, Whitty is careful not to impugn policy-makers' good faith or intentions: what this chapter particularly reveals, as Whitty intends, is 'the messy real world of educational politics' (18). Whitty's careful

explication of the sometimes purposeful misuse of research, as in New Labour's support of the Academies Programme, leads me as a reviewer in the dawning Trumpian era to ponder ruefully whether he was actually identifying proto-post truth, where through carelessness or a misguided privileging of ends over means, truth, or at least a position justifiable through research, has been lost or greatly diminished in politics and policy-making. The Atlantic is only a pond, after all – a point which Whitty makes strongly in Chapter Three.

Chapters Two to Five provide case studies of that 'messy' policy/research relationship in action. Whitty explores how research has been (mis)used in English teacher education; in policy borrowing from other national contexts, particularly the USA; in addressing the 'achievement gap'; and in policies concerning students' access to higher education. Teacher education has been the focus of ideologically inspired reform particularly since the establishment of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education in 1984. It is ideological because, as Whitty argues, the evidence to support the view that reform is required is conspicuously lacking. He supports this argument through assiduously setting out chronologically the government interventions and policy statements through which the state has sought to reduce the role of HEI in the education of teachers. Whitty draws on his origins in this field as well as the evidence to mount a devastating critique in this chapter of policy-making in teacher education and how it has been aligned with market ideology and explicitly against research findings.

Teacher education is the ideal site to explore the policy/research tensions at the heart of this book, since it is where the struggles concerning knowledge production set out here implicate most strongly the knowledge producers as competing players in the game. Researchers critiquing policy-makers' plans for, or evaluations of, the achievement gap, for example, are not positioning themselves as providers of alternatives, where they become susceptible to characterisation as 'The Blob' and 'enemies of promise' (Gove [2013](#)). Here, the book's origins in diverse papers become apposite: Whitty does not engage particularly in this trans-thematic mapping of positions and actors – that the contestation of knowledge has different consequences in different areas makes some debates in the book of a different order than others. Acknowledging and exploring this in an overarching analysis would, I think, have contributed usefully to the book's thesis.

Policy borrowing is addressed in Chapter Three, where Whitty's talent for perspective is illuminative. He draws skilfully on sources ranging from Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in the 1840s, through Chubb and Moe and Gene Glass to Barack Obama in order to provide the long view of how similar (or similar-

sounding) policies are not so much the result of borrowing between the United Kingdom and the USA, although that does happen, as of policy landscapes which are mutually intelligible, literally as well as metaphorically. Whitty points out how this is operationalised through networks of key policy actors and derives from a shared commitment to neoliberal (i.e. market-inspired) solutions to educational problems, and so may ultimately simply be a manifestation of globalised education policy-making. Here, Whitty picks up a key theme from Chapter One in highlighting the 'dangers and limitations' (52) of both countries' focus on 'what works'. This chapter exemplifies one of Whitty's great abilities, which is to be able to construct a meticulous and, from policy-makers' points of view, perhaps subversive argument and communicate it in the most beautifully clear and reasonable-sounding language. Whitty nonetheless presents here a forceful critique of how policy has been made often in the face of or through the misrepresentation of research findings, yet he does so in full acknowledgement of the constraints and obligations of power.

Whitty's argument that researchers do and should consider 'what works where, with whom, and why' (51), and its variously implicit or explicit acknowledgement of relevant structural issues, can be identified as a strong motif in all of the chapters except Chapter Four. This chapter, on closing the achievement gap, is somewhat dissonant, where Whitty (with Anders) largely accepts (although with stated caveats) a particular framing of this issue in which educational achievement is understood as attainment in standardised tests and examinations. The reasons he gives are perfectly sound – that these measures are meaningful and so should be engaged with; and that social class does indeed impact on life chances. I confess that I felt impelled to pick up again my copy of Gutiérrez (2014), where the fundamental premises of this debate are challenged to invigorating effect. She reminds the field how, in this 'gap' framing, a static and one-dimensional view of pupils' identities is privileged over an intersectional one, and how a focus on class occludes the ways in which this process is racialised. Whitty echoes in his conclusion to the chapter Gutiérrez's third major point – how a principally structural issue is constructed in 'gap' thinking as susceptible to school-level interventions, with culpability for failure similarly at this level. Despite Whitty making this important argument in the conclusion, I did feel that in the first three chapters, on the whole, he had adopted a different and more critical approach to the issue of policy-making, its context and how it should be evaluated. This is an instance where more work to ensure the book coheres in framing as well as content would, in my view, have borne fruit.

In Chapter Five, with Hayton and Tang, Whitty addresses access to higher education in England. He follows the structure of the previous chapters in guiding the reader carefully through an overview of

interventions by governments from the New Labour era to the present, showing how policy objectives have changed or persisted and also how effective actions taken to achieve them have been. The focus here on differences between more or less advantaged actors and how they access educational goods means that this chapter might have closely resembled the previous one in framing and perspective. In fact, here Whitty and his colleagues use the Bourdieuan concept of capital to problematise the deficit thinking underpinning much of the debate, particularly in policy-making. This is precisely the sort of framing that was present in the first three chapters and, for me, missing in the fourth.

In the final chapter, Whitty argues for the 'continuing importance of the sociology of education' (97), drawing on a career-long engagement with sociological thinking and thinkers to locate himself and his work within this discipline. Whitty here gives a fascinating insight into key field developments as he experienced them through his relationships with the most eminent sociologists of education the field has produced and through his own membership of that group. This chapter, and its placing at the end rather than the beginning of the book, is a reminder to readers of Whitty's quality and legacy as much as where he locates himself as a researcher and thinker: his is an integral chapter in the history of the sociology of education in the United Kingdom. Certainly, from the evidence in this excellent book, this important scholar is at the top of his game.