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Interview with Stephen J. Ball: Analyzing his Contribution to Education Policy Research

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.2368> Este artículo forma parte del número especial Stephen J. Ball y la investigación sobre políticas educativas en América Latina de EPAA/AAPE, Editores invitados Jason Beech y Analía I. Meo.

Abstract: This interview aims to explore Stephen J. Ball's main contributions to the research field of education policy, while discussing the potentialities for researchers in different contexts, especially in Latin American countries. So firstly, we consider Ball's epistemological position, to then explore some of his main concepts and tools. This is followed by a discussion about the possibilities and limitations of transposing Ball's analytical tools and using his work in countries other than England. We then examine the limitations of the nation state as a framework in current education policy research. In doing so, we analyze some implications for education policy research of what Ball calls global education policy network, which includes the work of new actors from business and philanthropy in education. Winding up, we consider the importance of research context in education policy research, to then finish with brief comments about education in Latin America.

Key words: Education Policy; Educational Research; Epistemology; Global Education

Entrevista con Stephen J. Ball: Su contribución a la investigación de las políticas educativas

Resumen: Esta entrevista tiene como objetivo explorar las principales contribuciones de Stephen J. Ball para el campo de la investigación de políticas educativas, discutiendo las posibilidades para los investigadores en diferentes contextos, especialmente en los países de América Latina. Así, en primer lugar, consideramos la posición epistemológica de Ball, para luego explorar algunos de sus principales conceptos y herramientas. Esto es seguido por una discusión sobre las posibilidades y limitaciones de la transposición de las herramientas analíticas de Ball y el uso de su obra en países distintos de Inglaterra. Luego examinamos las limitaciones del estado-nación como marco analítico en la investigación sobre política educativa actual. Al hacerlo, se analizan algunas implicaciones de lo que Ball llama redes globales de políticas de educación para la investigación de política educacional, que incluye el trabajo de nuevos actores en la educación provenientes de los negocios y la filantropía. Para terminar, consideramos la importancia del contexto en la investigación de la política educacional, para luego finalizar con breves comentarios acerca de la educación en América Latina.

Palabras clave: Políticas Educativas; Investigación Educativa; Epistemología; Educación Global

Entrevista com Stephen J. Ball: Uma análise de sua contribuição para a pesquisa em política educacional

Resumo: Esta entrevista objetiva explorar as principais contribuições de Stephen J. Ball para o campo de pesquisa de políticas educacionais, discutindo as potencialidades para pesquisadores em diferentes contextos, em especial em países da América Latina. Então primeiramente consideramos o posicionamento epistemológico de Ball, para então explorar alguns de seus principais conceitos e ferramentas. Disto segue uma discussão sobre as possibilidades e limitações da transposição das ferramentas analíticas de Ball e do uso de seu trabalho em pesquisas realizadas em países distintos da Inglaterra. Então examinamos as limitações do uso do Estado-Nação como quadro conceitual para a pesquisa em política educacional atualmente. Neste sentido, analisamos algumas implicações das redes globais de política educacional, como Ball as chama, para a pesquisa em política educacional, as quais incluem o trabalho de novos atores empresariais e filantrópicos em educação. Por fim, consideramos a importância do contexto para a pesquisa em política educacional, para então encerrarmos com breves comentários sobre a educação na América Latina.

Palavras-chave: Política Educacional, Pesquisa Educacional; Epistemologia; Educação Global

Interview with Stephen J. Ball

As one of the most eminent scholars in the field of education policy in the United Kingdom, Stephen J. Ball¹ has published numerous books and articles since the 1980s. He has analyzed various themes related to education policy, scrutinizing them throughout different educational instances. From the micro politics of schools to the emergence of a global education policy network, his range can be seen in books such as *The Micro Politics of the School* and *Networks, New Governance and Education*. Still, he sustains an interest in the interplay between global and local in the education policy process.

With a research approach that combines modernist data collection with post-structuralist theorization, Ball challenges analytical concepts and epistemic assumptions of the social order and structure that tend to exclude complex and messy qualities of the social world and education. In doing so, he provides conceptual tools that can be worked in many different settings. They might be understood as starting points, or guiding questions, which can be steered in different directions,

¹ Stephen J. Ball is Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology of Education at the UCL Institute of Education (University College London), where he was Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education from 2001 to 2015.

rather than specific guidelines on how to do research. This essential aspect of Ball's work enables education researchers in many countries to engage with Ball's analytical tools. Amongst them, Ball highlights the heuristic separation between policy text and discourse, the policy cycle and the concept of policy enactment, all further described in this interview.

The following interview was conducted in London on May 2015[□], and it aims to explore Stephen Ball's main contributions to education policy research, while discussing the potentialities for researchers in different contexts, especially in Latin American countries. So firstly, we consider Ball's epistemological position, to then explore some of his main concepts and tools. This is followed by a discussion about the possibilities and limitations of transposing Ball's analytical tools and using his work in countries other than England. We then examine the limitations of the nation state as a framework in current education policy research. In doing so, we analyze some implications of what Ball calls global education policy network for education policy research, which includes the work of new actors from business and philanthropy in education. Winding up, we consider the importance of context in education policy research, to then finish with brief comments about education in Latin America.

Marina Avelar (M.A.): In this interview I would like to talk to you about your theoretical and methodological approaches to education policy analysis, and explore some analytical potentialities for researchers in Latin America. I would like to start our conversation by asking about the foundations of your work, or your epistemological and theoretical positions as an education researcher. What are the key authors and perspectives that have influenced your studies on educational policies? In which ways have they supported your thinking about education policy?

Stephen J. Ball (S.J.B.): That is actually a difficult question to answer, because I am an unstable epistemological subject. Historically, I started out very much as an ethnographer, a kind of interpretive/positivist who thought that I could capture the reality of the world through engagement in ethnographic practices, and I did lots of very traditional ethnographic work. My PhD was in that style of research. But lately I have become influenced, captured, engaged by a very different kind of theoretical and epistemological position, which is a post-structuralist one, mainly embedded in the work of Michel Foucault. As a result of that, I suppose, I would describe myself as holding a kind of double epistemology, and I think that is important and necessary in order to do useful analytical work in relation to the social world. We can't capture - well, I want to erase that word - we can't make sense of, create sense about the world, by using one theory or one epistemological position, because the world is more obdurately complex and difficult than what can be grappled with simply using one position, taking up one position. So I am now someone who uses modernist methods, and then subjects them to post-structural theorizing. And the interplay between data - of a modernist kind, and theory - of a post-structuralist kind, I find very productive and generative; not necessarily in a simple sense of offering clear outcomes, often creating new problems and leaving tensions that are unresolved. But that would describe where I am, I suppose.

M.A.: Drawing from Foucault, in some of your writings, like the paper "Intellectuals or Technicians?", you present strong criticisms to the epistemic assumptions of order, structure, function, cause and effect, that are all mobilised to represent the social. You say that in doing so, the mobile, complex and messy qualities of lived experience are excluded. In the case of policy studies, these "tidy generalizations" often fail to capture the realities of influence, pressure, conflict and compromise of the policy making process. So in contrast, to prevent this distortion of social complexity, which epistemic assumptions do you work with? How do they delineate your research approaches?

S.J.B.: I suppose, as you have suggested, I have been trying to move away from too much order, too much structure, too much causation in my work. One of the moves towards a more

‘messy’ political analysis of the social world - which took me eventually to the use of Foucault's notions about power and the investment of power as a fundamental, if you like, organizing principle to social relations - was the book “The Micro Politics of the School”²; which is translated in Spanish³. And I wrote that book because I was unhappy with what was available in terms of the kind of organizational theory that was then being applied to schools and to how schools work. Basically, again starting with data, it seemed to me that those theoretical materials simply failed to capture the disorder, the messiness, the incoherence of the political life of schools, and concomitant processes of struggle, conflict and compromise. It seemed to me that we needed a more political view of the world, we needed a different kind of epistemological apparatus to make sense of those messy and complex and disordered realities.

So I wanted to try and think about schools starting from an assumption of disorder rather than an assumption of order, not using order as a way of making sense of what I was seeing and experiencing. And as I say, in some ways, and these things always make different sorts of sense in hindsight, that did provide one small step towards Foucault and towards post-structuralism. And towards the erasure of many of the simple binaries that underpin modernist social thought, binaries between truth and power, structure and agency, discourse and interpretation. So I have come in a way to try and explore the gaps, tensions and relationships between those things, and not necessarily to position myself on one side or the other, but to explore the uncertainties and the irresolutions between them.

M.A.: In many of your books you are very straightforward about not wanting to offer a final account of things, or the truth, but rather a set of starting points and openings. This forthright claim has a significant position in your texts. Why disclosing this is important to you? How does it relate to your epistemological position?

S.J.B.: I think, again, it goes back for me to the problems and the origins of modern social science. Modern social science came into being essentially in its relationship to the needs of the emerging state in the 19th century, and the role of social science was to provide solutions to the problem of the management of the population. So there was an emphasis on conclusions, on findings, on definitive accounting of the world, of an accounting in a literal sense: numbers. Social scientists would then provide a basis for the work of the state, for policy, for policy solutions, the development of institutions and organizations that would identify, define and solve social problems. An arrangement of power/knowledge. And that then became invested in the basic epistemology of the social sciences, this normative pressure towards the idea of findings and conclusions and definitiveness.

In one simple sense that is totally misguided in the expectation that every single research project can provide you with definitive conclusions, but those expectations get built in the mundane practices of social sciences. They get built in to the work of research students who, until recently, were expected to produce PhD thesis that would have conclusions. To research projects, in the sense that funders would expect the researcher to produce findings that will have some kind of ‘impact’ in the world. Journal articles sometimes still have this very rigid format, which would end up with findings and conclusions. And for me those things were artefactual, they were actually a set of practices that had a history, in a Foucauldian sense, if you like; that they were the product of the history of social sciences. And, for my point of view, they foreclosed the necessary modesty of social science.

In fact, I think, most of us, most of the time can only aspire to extremely modest claims

² Ball, S. J. (1987). *The Micro-Politics of the School: Towards a Theory of School Organization* (1 edition). Routledge.

³ Ball, S. J. (1989). *La micropolítica de la escuela / The Micro Politics of The School*. Barcelona: Paidós Iberica Ediciones Sa.

about sense making, about how the world works, or how we can talk about the way it works. And that modesty has become the basis of my practice in terms of how I want to make claims. I think that most of the research I do can perhaps sometimes say some useful things, but only things that are related to the modesty of the research itself. They might help people make sense of the social practices in which they are engaged. But always starting points, or partial views, temporary possibilities for thought and for action. And again, of course, you could say that is inspired by reading too much Foucault. He said at some point, when somebody asked him a similar question, his response was to say that my work, he said, is like a series of abutments, or strings of dots - strategic knowledge. And I am very happy to make the same sort of claim. I always feel that when I get to the end of a piece of research, I know what the good questions are, rather than having any sense of what the answers are.

M.A.: In your analysis of education policy you create concepts and “analytical tools” that aim to better apprehend this complex and messy social reality. Which “tools” would you consider to be the most important ones? Can you map the key aspects of your theoretical take on policy making?

S.J.B.: Again that is a very difficult question, it is a sort of tidying up question. I don't feel that I have a coherent set of ideas or concepts that I developed which are now out there, firmly established, ready to be used, which others can then draw upon. I see myself as having trialed a set of ideas that may have some leverage in terms of making sense of policy. From my point of view, a really good thing is that some people have been able to use that leverage and been able to make use of some of the things I have trialed and explored to develop their own analysis – to move things on.

I suppose there are three things in particular: one is this heuristic separation between text and discourse, which I wrote about in the 1990s⁴, and I just revised in a paper 21 years on⁵. In that I was trying to explore this dual epistemology, which I talked about previously. I wanted to think about interpretation and discourse, I wanted to try and think about the difference between positioning the subject in the center of meaning as an interpretive actor, somebody who is an active sense maker, an active translator of the social world; over and against a view of them as a subject produced by discourse, who is spoken by discourse, rather than a speaker of discourse. And I wanted to use this heuristic binary to make problematic the way in which in policy analysis we talk about policy makers, or policy actors. To try to make policy analysts be clearer about whether we see ‘policymakers’ as active interpreters of the world who are ‘making’ meaning, or the product of discourse whose possibilities for sense making are actually constructed elsewhere. So that is one thing.

I suppose the other thing is the notion of the *policy cycle*, which was something that originally came out of the work I was doing with Richard Bowe⁶. We were thinking about policy and trying to build an idea of policy trajectories. To think about policy not as a document, or as thing, as a social entity which moves through space and changes as it moves, and changes things as it moves, changes the spaces it moves through: so it is changed by and it changes things. So we talked about contexts of policy: the context of influence, the context of text production and context of practice. Which, again, is very much a rough heuristic, but it draws attention to the way in which policies are different things in those different contexts. That work is being done on, around, with and in relation to policy

⁴ Ball, S. J. (1993). What Is Policy? Texts, Trajectories and Toolboxes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 13(2), 10–17.

⁵ Ball, S. J. (2015). What is policy? 21 years later: reflections on the possibilities of policy research. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 36(3), 306–313.

⁶ Bowe, R., Ball, S., & Gold, A. (1992). *Reforming Education and Changing Schools: Case Studies in Policy Sociology*. London ; New York: Routledge.

in those different contexts, and different sorts of people are working on and in relation to policy in those different sorts of contexts. And the questions therefore we need to ask as policy researchers depend on the contexts we are looking at, or the position we take in terms of the questions we ask about policy. Are we interested in its trajectory, or are we interested in policy simply in one point in its trajectory? Are we interested in texts or action? So again, it was trying to create problems for policy research, in the same way text and discourse was meant to create problems, which then people have to think about. So the policy cycle is meant to create problems that people have to deal with.

And then the third thing comes out of the relationship between text and action which is the idea of policy enactment. And policy enactment is again an attempt to escape from the confines of nice, neat and tidy modernist theorizing, focused particularly around the notion of implementation. And I wanted to erase *implementation* from the language of policy research; to make it a pariah because of the epistemological, empirical and theoretical assumptions that it carries with it. A policy is “*implemented*” or implementation fails, policy is fixed in texts, it is something somebody writes and designs it and that somebody else *implements* or not. What I wanted to do was to replace that with the notion of enactment and to see enactment both as a creative process, from which we should expect that what comes out of the process of enactment is something different from that which is written in text, on the one hand. But also, on the other hand, to recognize that enactment is in part produced discursively, that the possibilities of acting towards, thinking about, speaking about policy are actually articulated within the limits of certain discursive possibilities. So at the same time, it was an attempt to liberate the policy actor as this creative agent of policy production, policy creativity, but to recognize the extent to which those possibilities of creativity were at least some of the time constructed elsewhere, within discourse. Enactment is local, contingent and sometimes fragile. Policy ‘enters’ contexts, it does not destroy them – to paraphrase Anthony Giddens.

M.A.: Following that, I would like to explore more the idea of enactment. In “How Schools do Policy”, you argue that a great deal of attention has been given to evaluating how policies are implemented, meaning how well they are realized in practice, and less attention has been paid to understanding and documenting the ways in which schools actually deal with the diverse policy demands. In this sense, you work towards a “Theory of Enactment”, as you called it, a conceptual framework that accounts for the complexity and messiness of enactment. Could you identify its key aspects? In which ways do you think your perspective could contribute to policy studies? What is “new” in this approach? What are the risks of translating this perspective to other contexts?

S.J.B.: In the simplest sense, I think what is missing from implementation research is context and creativity. Policy always has to be reconstructed and recreated in relation to context. As I said, it also has to be translated from text to practice, from words on paper to actions in classrooms. And that is massively underestimated by policy makers, and to great extent, by researchers. Some policies make enormous demands on the creativity of teachers, they have to take words in texts and they have to make them into something that is viable within the complexities of classroom setting. And they have to do that often alongside many other policies, which make many other demands; and sometimes, in very demanding situations which involve working with limited resources, difficult infrastructure and challenging students. So what I am trying to do through the idea of enactment is to bring all those things into play: to bring context into play, to bring creativity into play, and to recognize the challenges involved in the process of that movement from text to practice. That is one form of the labor of policy.

So in the book *How Schools do Policy* we talk about two aspects of enactment: one is *interpretation*, the other is *translation*, and we separate them out, heuristically. *Interpretation* is a process of making sense of policy: what does this policy expect of us? What is it requiring us to do, if it

requires anything? Sometimes, luckily, policies don't require you to do very much and you don't have to worry about them, they can be satisfied or ignored. But if they do require a response, what is it? Policy makers assume that they write texts that are clear, obvious and coherent, and that contain no contradictions or problems. In fact, policy texts are often very poorly written documents, which create enormous difficulties for those who are supposed to do something with them. So we have to recognize that process of coping with the difficulties of sense and meaning and the creativity of making something sensible out of these texts. So interpretation is: "what does the policy mean?", "what is it saying?", "what are we supposed to do?". Often that is carried out by authoritative actors – principals, inspectors, head teachers – they pre-empt meaning but also sift out policy detritus.

And then *translation*, this involves the very multifarious processes that are put into place to relate expectations or imperatives to a set of practices. And that may involve things like in-service training, continuing professional development, department meetings, writing internal documents, departments working together to produce a curriculum plan, or assessment procedures, peer observations, learning walks - all sorts of activities, all sorts of practices or institutional technologies work to make abstract necessities in something workable, doable and attainable. So again, it is actually not very sophisticated stuff. It is quite simple. But it is starting from what actually happens in real settings with real people, rather than taking on board the assumption of a simple linearity of implementation, in a way that obliterates and erases the creativity, and 'development' of policy actors. And we are also suggesting here a tension between competence and compliance.

M.A.: In some of your books, like in "The Education Debate" and "How Schools do Policy", you have argued that you want to forge analytical concepts and instruments that are useful in different contexts in spite of your research being mainly focused on English education policies. What do you consider to be your contribution to the field of educational policy research beyond England?

S.J.B.: I suppose what I am trying to do is to provide conceptual tools, or identify conceptual problems, that then can be worked with or worked through in any setting. In a way, the setting doesn't matter, the setting becomes an object of enquiry, it doesn't become something that requires you to always start differently, or to start from scratch. So I was trying to develop a set of tools that were transposable, that could be used in the analysis of any kind of cultural-political setting, that make no assumption about the context or setting, tools that can be worked with in centralist, federalist, democratic, oppressive regimes - method for doing policy analysis rather than a description of policy processes. Text and discourse, policy subjects and policy actors, enactment, the policy cycle, contexts of policy, policy artefacts: these make no assumptions about context. Some people have misread the policy cycle as a description of how policy is made, but it is not meant to be that.

M.A.: Even though England has been the main empirical context of your work, you have also done research projects elsewhere, for instance "Advocacy networks, choice and private schooling of the poor in India", with Geetha Nambissan. Have you encountered any analytical or theoretical challenges caused by doing research in another country? If so, what challenges did you have and how did you tackle them?

S.J.B.: At the moment I am finishing two projects, one of which is based in Africa, in four countries in Africa. The other one is based in India, and I have done several other researches in Europe and elsewhere. But for me, it depends on what sort of issues and questions you are interested in. I am, in particular in recent years, very interested in policy convergence, I am interested in the way in which policies move around the globe and are re-contextualized in different settings. So I am interested in that process of re-contextualization, I am interested in how policies move into

and are accommodated into particular settings. But in some ways that is because I am interested in the policies rather than the settings.

So, relating to the previous question, I am interested in forms of analysis that will lead us to understand different settings, rather than being interested in understanding the specifics of those settings. So my interest in policy has expanded to this focus on the mobility of policy, and to the emergence of what I call a *global education policy network*, which is a set of relationships in relation to policy, which now extend across the globe and into different countries, through which policy ideas, policy technologies and people and money, move. So I am interested in the interplay of the global and the local. The space of analysis is not defined by geographical entities, but by the space configured through the intersection of global and situated elements. And I see this as part of a necessary move in policy analysis beyond what Ulrich Beck called 'methodological nationalism'.

M.A.: Taking into account your research experience in developing countries, how do you see the use of your perspective by researchers in these contexts? What are the opportunities and risks or limitations of translating your ideas into different socio-economic contexts, such as Latin America?

S.J.B.: I would go back to what I said a while ago, which is that I see my policy analysis ideas very much as tools and very much as starting points, as orienting points. They can be taken in different directions, they are places to start from and they are not supposed to be prescriptions about how to do research. They can be, and I hope they will be, and in some cases they have been, taken up by people and often taken in directions I had not anticipated. And part of that is to do with that application or relevance to the local setting, part of that is to do with the theoretical or research sensibilities of the research teams or individual authors. But the key point is they are not meant to direct research within a very specific, pre-specified framework about "this is how it should be done, this is the sort of questions or perspectives or concepts that have to be used". They are an initial position from which certain research problems should arise, which then have to be solved in the particular setting and its particular characteristics. So, again, sometimes people are misreading what I am suggesting, or taking the particular instances that I am exploring in relation to the specifics of my own research as models for how research could be conducted, should be conducted elsewhere.

Having said that, I think again there are certain convergences and certain connectivities in the contemporary world of education policy, which mean there is a relevance and necessity for research to be different from previously - that is the necessity of thinking outside or beyond the 'national' to take account of new global policy microspaces. For example, the proliferation in Latin America of commercial for profit higher education institutions, which are owned elsewhere, in the United States or other countries. So there is a jurisdictional aspect in that, that part of the delivery of education is now actually directed elsewhere. Or it may be that there are particular organizations, think tanks, for example, in Chile, in Brazil, neoliberal think tanks, which have network relationships to the Atlas foundations, in the United States, with a common commitment to neoliberal solutions to educational and other social problems, and those think tanks become the conduits for ideas that have currency elsewhere. And if one is looking at contemporary education policy in Chile, in Brazil, and other parts of Latin America, you can't really make sense of what is going on without recognizing the effects of policy mobility – the cross-national movement of policy ideas, and often related financial exchanges and commercial interests, notions of 'good practice', the borrowing of models of policy (inspection, assessment, data analytics, blended learning) from elsewhere. I don't think we can any longer simply focus on the nation state in itself and think about policy as being specifically a national phenomenon.

M.A.: In this sense, in Education Debate you argue the nation-state is no longer a useful analytical

framework as we are facing an “increasingly complex and increasingly significant set of global and regional influences, pressures and dynamics that impinge on and are embedded in national systems or educational policy making” (p.38). Further, you say the challenge is to understand how these global policy processes work at national level. Have you tackled this dilemma in your own research? What are the theoretical tools that help you to be sensitive to the transformations of the nation state and the increase of global and regional powers in education policy making?

S.J.B.: Well, those are things I am still thinking about, I am still writing about, trying to work out for myself. But in the simplest sense, the starting point is globalization and various globalization theories, which suggest that globalization is compressing the world in various ways. David Harvey’s notion of space-time compression is one way of representing that, the world now is a small place, that most parts of the world are very open and accessible to media, communication and travel. And as a result of that, goods, service, people and ideas move around the world very easily and very quickly these days. They always did move around, but that movement was much longer, drawn out, more difficult process in the past. Possibilities of movement have been eased and have speeded up.

And in relation to education policy, there is an articulation between the economic aspects of globalization and the education policy aspects of globalization, in particular, around the notion of economic competitiveness and the contribution of education to the participation of individual nations within the global economy. So one of the extraordinary things that you can find, if you look at the general policy statements of almost any country around the world now, is that they almost all reiterate statements about the need to produce a high skilled labor force that will enable the country to compete better in the global knowledge economy. And it doesn't matter if you look at Kazakhstan, Gambia, Nicaragua, Malaysia... they say almost exactly the same thing. So there is a discourse of policy, which now articulates education within the framework of economic competitiveness. And in relation to that, specific forms of education policy then became thinkable, became sensible, and indeed in some ways become necessary in relation to policy. And they include things like public/private partnerships, leadership, choice, marketization and privatization. And this is what Pasi Sahlberg calls GERM - global education reform movement⁷. It is actually a fairly limited set of ideas, which now has this global currency. Concomitantly other possibilities for thinking about education policy are excluded and silenced.

So, as I said, I have become interested in how policy ideas move around, and have attempted to give some literal flesh to that process of movement. A lot of people talk about policy mobility, but many few researchers are actually trying to understand how that movement is achieved. I have been using the idea of the network as one way of addressing that movement. And for some time have been trying to map policy networks, which is fine, you can describe them and represent them, identify how people are connected up. But there is a further step or a move from mapping networks to understanding how they work, the work of networking, the labor that goes into policy mobility. So at the moment I am trying to understand the human labor that goes into policy mobility. And that involves trying to trace or follow the movement of policy from one place to another. So it looks at policy in terms of the new kinds of spaces in which policy is being ‘done’ and the people who ‘do’ it. But also how those new spaces and new actors articulate both with traditional state spaces and national settings, and political actors in state settings. So it is trying to relate the local and the national to this global network and, at the same time, recognizing the interplay and mobility of things, and people, and ideas across those relationships.

M.A.: So in this sense of international connections that go beyond the nation state, how do you see the role that international organizations, such as the World Bank, played then and play now in policy making in education?

⁷ Sahlberg, P. (2011). The Fourth Way of Finland. *Journal of Educational Change*, 12(2), 173–185.

S.J.B.: In some parts of the world the World Bank is an enormously influential player. If you want to borrow money from the World Bank, the World Bank will establish *conditionalities* very often, which will require you to do certain things, make policy changes, in order to qualify for receiving the money. So several years ago, Mongolia was asking for money to develop their primary educational system. In exchange, they had to accept some form of performance related pay for their teachers, which was based on a report card system. This was not an idea that had its origin in Mongolia, it was something that the World Bank thought that was ‘good practice’, and it was attached to the loan as a condition. So the World Bank has clearly a very direct impact on education policy in some places.

It also, alongside other agencies, like the OECD in particular, has a very influential discursive impact on policy thinking. So in many countries, the framework, limits and possibilities of policy thinking are actually constrained, at least to some extent, by the language, assumptions and concepts which the World Bank and the OECD are articulating, advocating, promulgating, writing about, speaking about in conferences, and talking about with education ministries during visits and conferences. So at that level they are enormously influential as well. If you look for example at things like quality assurance in Higher Education, that is a triumph of OECD policy thinking, something which was developed in a set of documents in the OECD in the 1990s, early 2000s, and is now the world framework for thinking about how we know whether universities are functioning well or not. Quality assurance in HE is firmly established in the policy thinking in almost every country around the world.

Having said that, I think it is also important, as I have suggested, to recognize there are now a broader set of players, who are having various degrees of impact and influence on policy in both developing and developed countries around the world; in particular, various philanthropic organizations and foundations. A recent 2013 survey in the United States asked 300 educationalists who they thought was the most influential educational thinker in the United States, and the person who came up on top was Bill Gates. The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation has had enormous impact on education policy in the United States, particularly in cities like New York, Los Angeles, Memphis and New Orleans. They, together with other foundations, like the Wharton family foundation, Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and others, have fundamentally changed the educational landscape of the US. Nobody elected them, they have no authority, they have no legitimacy of a political kind... What they have is lots, and lots, and lots of money. And they are able to use that money to bring change to education policy, and bring their ideas to bear. And they are doing that, those foundations, in the USA and increasingly in other countries around the world. They crop up in India and in Africa, in the research I am doing. And there are others, both global and national foundations, in Brazil, Ayrton Senna Foundation, the Lemann Foundation for example, these organizations are really coming to the fore in terms of having a voice in policy conversations and in defining what it means to educate, to teach and learn. Edu-businesses⁸ and business foundations are also having an impact. There is a whole set of new players - social enterprises, charity global organizations, alongside the now well established NGOs, which now are playing their part in education policy writing, in service delivery and in moving policy around. So again, this means we have to think about policy differently. We can't use old concepts, old frameworks, old assumptions to research new methods of policy. Policy has changed, and we have to change if we are going to research it effectively.

M.A.: Regarding the importance of context in education policy research, in the book “How schools do policy” there is a chapter called “Taking context seriously”, where you claim education researchers often describe context but are unable to produce analysis about it. What do you mean by this statement? How do you prevent this in

⁸ see http://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/3602

your own work? And how do you assess what counts, and what does not, as “context” in your research?

S.J.B.: It is a very simple thing, if you read most policy analysis, particularly at the school level or the institutional level, you get lots of quotations of people saying things and sometimes accounts of people doing things. But you very rarely get any sense of where they are doing these things, what it looks like. It is presumably a building, or a set of buildings, but you very rarely get any sense of what the buildings look like, what condition they are in, what facilities they have, how they are structured, what color they are painted. Does it have a playground for the students to play? Are there science laboratories? We dematerialize policy analysis, we rip it out of context, we give no sense of its materiality.

And also, almost never, do researchers actually tell you about money. What is the budget? How much money is available? What salaries do the teachers get? How much is spent on the building? How much money is available for buying textbooks, or tables and chairs, or computers? Again, it is a sort of dematerialization. We talk about teachers, we talk about classrooms, we talk about teaching and learning, but we very rarely give any sense of how much these things cost, and how much money is available. And of course, policy makers in many ways don't do that either, they assume policy is immune from context. So that the school with very poor facilities, a limited number of experienced teachers and large numbers of students from deprived backgrounds, can do policy in exactly the same way as a very well funded school, with very experienced teachers and students who come from very well-off backgrounds. They dematerialize policy as well. Policy makers have in their head the sort of best of all possible schools when they write policy. And then this gets translated into the way in which they think about how policy is done, it is done well or done badly; it doesn't have a context.

So in many senses taking context seriously is very simple, it involves re-materializing policy, to give it a literal and visceral foundation in terms of facilities, people and money. How many teachers are there? How experienced are they? What is their training? What is their background? How many years have they worked with teaching? We don't know about these things! We also very rarely get any sense of policy artefacts – what posters are displayed, what technologies are used, how is the classroom arranged, what are the non-human actors within the process of enactment.

M.A.: Then, analytically, how do you make sense of context? Where do you draw the line of how far you go in your context? And also, when does it stop being context and becomes the center of the research? In a certain sense, what are the both ends of context?

S.J.B.: Well, there is another way of thinking about this, which goes back to Foucault, which is the idea of *technologies* and *practices*. The idea that policy, or more generally discourse, is manifested within practices and technologies, that is manifested in the way which people interact within institutional settings in particular sorts of social relations: teaching and learning, doctor and patient, therapist and client. So the role of context depends on the question you set out to answer, its significance depends on the frame you set around your particular research problem. But what I am trying to say is that the tendency is to frame those problems in ways that always excludes context and almost always excludes money. And at least some of the time, not all of the time, but some of the time, some people need to pay some attention to those things if we are going to come to grips with what counts as education policy. Because education policy is not just what people say and do, education policy is also about buildings and about money, and power-relations and other things. And as education researchers, policy researchers, we need to engage with these aspects of 'what policy is'.

M.A.: To conclude, I have just a final question about Latin America. You have collaborated with some

Latin American researchers through the years and have also recently visited some Latin American countries, like Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Colombia. Was there anything surprising to you regarding education in Latin countries?

S.J.B.: To a great extent I know almost nothing about education in Latin America, and what I do know, I learn through my students and through my contacts with people in Latin America. I have never had an extended period of stay where I have been involved in direct research. So I make no claims really about having an understanding of Latin America. I leave my students to do that, that is their task, I am just here to help them.

I am interested in Latin America and I am interested in specific things that go on there, and I do try to make sense of that to some extent. So, for example, I am very interested in the development scene of Higher Education in Brazil, particularly given that it is a kind of free market in Higher Education provision and there is this enormous diversity of provision. At one end of the market there are high status state institutions, universities, and now there is proliferation of other providers of different status, particularly enormous Higher Education conglomerates that have hundreds of thousands of students doing degrees in their universities. So I have particular interest in that. Argentina is interesting because it is so idiosyncratic and it kind of doesn't fit into the model of what is going on in most of the rest of Latin America, and most of the rest of the world. It hangs on to the power of teachers unions, to the role of the state, to the centrality of public education, although there is an awful lot of private provision in places like Buenos Aires. And I am very interested in Chile, because Chile is the paradigm of the neoliberal educational system. It has the most choice, it has the most private provision, it has the most assessment and comparison, of probably any country in the world. So it is a fascinating social/economic/educational laboratory for research, and I have a number of students who are doing research there. I was there recently talking to people about policy in Chile and I will be going back later this year and doing some teaching in Santiago.

So Macarena Hernández has done some interesting work on Chile in terms of the role of think tanks there and Diego Santori did very interesting work in neoliberal schooling using post-structuralist ideas. In Argentina, Angela Oría attempted an amazing genealogy of Argentinean public education. So I have a number of students doing exciting and interesting work in these countries, and they provide me with insights. And I am very aware that in some places there is a particular interest in my work. In Chile, it is around the work I have done in neoliberalism, in Brazil there is a particular interest in the policy cycle and the possibilities of using that. And I have done teaching in Argentina, in Buenos Aires, in the University of San Andrés for a number of years on an intensive masters module. So I have multiple interests in Latin America, but I would be very, very modest about the claims that I make about understanding the educational systems of Latin America.

M.A.M.: Thank you very much, Professor Ball, for this very insightful interview.

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