Researching Education Elites twenty years on: Sex, Lies and … Skype[1]

WORKING PAPER -DRAFT 1

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Introduction

The year was 2007 and I was spending my first few months as a research fellow at the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES), University of Edinburgh (UoE). Thirteen years later, I can recall the moment vividly: the Centre had received a phone call by two officials of the Scottish Government; they wanted to visit the Centre to discuss our research and 'search for new ideas'. There was no specific purpose to the meeting, no central topic to focus upon; we -the researchers- had not requested it. The 'coffee' would be a way for these officials to 'get a sense' of what we were working on. CES, the longest-serving education research centre in Scotland, was at its prime: we were working on numerous externally funded and international research grants; the Centre had its highest number of staff and visiting fellows; its European networks of collaborators were expanding and strengthening; its reputation was international.

The visit took place and a fairly broad discussion was held with the promise on both sides to continue conversing. However, more important than what was actually discussed, the fact that the roles were momentarily being reversed, represents a glimpse of a significant change. Rather than make decisions on the basis of individual judgement, path dependency and a -common in education- kind of 'connoisseurship', these policy makers aimed at accessing new, evidence-based and international knowledge – or 'best practice', as they called it. It is not that these officials began associating with CES closely. However, their somewhat unanticipated request to have insight on the international projects we were conducting was evidence of change: of an enhanced value of research data, of policy learning from other countries (especially the Nordics) and of a desire for horizon scanning for new, modish ideas for governing.

The years that followed accelerated the shift. Although national translations and trajectories of global policies may often be divergent (Maroy and Pons 2019), there has been a strong recalibration of education governance to adhere to international knowledge and evidence-based, best practice research. Does this increased dependence on externally produced knowledge suggest that education policy elites are on their wane? The answer, as this chapter will show, is that this is not the case. Instead, the central focus of this argument will be to discuss how both policy elites and research about them have changed. It will do so by examining what it means to research powerful education actors '20 years on', after Ozga and Gewirtz's seminal, and arguably radical in its honesty and reflection, account of their experiences in interviewing permanent officials in both central and local government of education in England in the early 1990s.

In 'Sex, Lies and Audiotape: Interviewing the Education Policy Elite' (1994), Ozga and Gewirtz are 'concerned with problems and issues which arise in the gathering of life-history interview evidence from polished and experienced policy practitioners in the context of a strong theoretical framework'

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(1994;121). In their account, they foreground ethical dilemmas in conducting this research, given than that their 'strong theoretical frame' was a Marxist adherence to research that aspires to social transformation, in addition to their feminist agenda (hence the 'lies' and 'sex' in the title). Their discussion of their experiences goes into depth in the relationship between theorizing and fieldwork, focusing explicitly on the 'embeddedness of theory in values' (1994;122). They highlight the 'antithesis' of critical theory with what they call 'problem-solving' theory. Finally, they eloquently discuss the challenges and experiences of (primarily female) researchers in doing research with elites. Here, in a beautifully written extract:

> 'Perhaps each 'side' colluded in the self-conscious self-representation of the other. We offered an unthreatening, interested and sympathetic version of ourselves; they offered us their smooth and polished self-presentation, which incorporated gentlemanly hospitality and courtesy. We each had a purpose in view, and there was even a degree of gentle mockery of us (as innocent inquirers) and of themselves (as harmless old codgers whose day was done)' (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994; 131).

Following this brief reminder of the challenges and opportunities that interviewing education elites presented to Marxist feminist researchers in the early 1990s, this chapter asks if and how policy elites might have changed over the last few decades. With the move away from government to governance and the perceived flattening out of hierarchical structures and power asymmetries, do the contemporary elites of transnational education governance, for example, have similar qualities with the actors occupying positions of power in the 1980s/ early 1990s? In other words, how elite is the elite and how have new accountability and governance structures changed the ways 'we' and 'they' conceptualise the authority that they hold? What are the qualities of contemporary education elites as opposed to those that Ozga and Gewirtz met and 'broke bread with' (1994:130)?

Arguably the current socio-historical context is different from the one Ozga and Gewirtz (1994) inhabited. Twenty years is not a very long spell of time; the effects of New Public Management and Thatcherism were very much still felt in the early '90s. Indeed, those precisely were the years of the 'Third Way' and its peculiar mixing of neoliberalism with social democratic values (Giddens 1988), alongside the emergent tight grip of performance-based accountability in education (Grek et al 2021). This chapter will argue that, rather than a radical shift of political values, it is the production of knowledge that has changed dramatically over this period. This, consequently, has led to a further flattening out of national policy bureaucracies, whilst new actors, such as large international organisations, philanthrocapitalists and the global education industry are tightening their grip on education policy directions. Therefore, it is not that elites do not exist and that governance has led to more horizontal distributions of power; rather, researchers today face a much more complex and slippery elite formation of actors, who are simultaneously national and transnational, experts and brokers, interdependent and in conflict, and visible and invisible in equal measure.

Therefore, this chapter will primarily focus on the role of knowledge in the evolution of education elites: if there was a time that policy elites were formed on the basis of their social status and intuition (a certain form of 'connoisseurship' of government), what has changed with new policy elites whose good grasp of evidence and international networks have become the preferred tools for decision making? How prominent national education policy elites are and how much of their policy work is already predicated by expert, elite knowledge producers at the transnational level? How are the epistemic and the political enmeshed in this knowledge and policy relationship and what does the rise of transnational education governance show us? Finally, what does this changed knowledge production landscape mean for researching education elites? These are some of the questions this chapter will attempt to grapple with, in an attempt to make sense of the contemporary education governing elites and the challenges of researching them. Before we discuss some answers to the

numerous questions posed, a brief overview of the state of knowledge production in education policy and research will follow.

Education transformations in England, 1970s to late 1990s

Ozga and Gewirtz' account builds on a tradition of education research in England that sprang around the mid 1970s, and moved away from the earlier 'problem-solving' mode towards a much closer alignment with the sociology of education. Issues around gender, class and race inequalities became pronounced in education research in the 1980s and early 1990s (Stanworth 1983; Troyna 1982) and hence the previous close relationship with the education policy world became much more strenuous and fragile. The Marxist/ feminist ideological standpoint that the Ozga/Gewirtz article openly takes, is further proof of a class of researchers that did not see education governing elites as allies in their struggle for 'social transformation' (1994; 123). As Young (2004) has commented, the tendency in this research tradition was to view policy as a means by which power and control operated; thus, the elite policy circles were seen as a close-knit group, complicit in the maintenance of unequal power relations. Ozga and Gewirtz' piece follows, in this sense, a longer trajectory of the continental sociology of education which underlined the inability of education to 'compensate for society' (Bernstein 1970) and explained education's role in social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976).

At the same time, the rise of the sociology of education in UK education research was coupled with increased dissatisfaction of policy makers in relation to the effectiveness and professionalism of the teaching profession. The breakdown of 'consensus' about education was accelerated by the economic crisis from the late 1970s onwards. This led to the rise of New Public Management, an expanding mix of deregulation and re-regulation, through which public bureaucracies were displaced by new agencies, and tight controls over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment were instituted, in order to enable competition between schools and parental choice (Whitty et al. 1998). Such interventionist approaches led to yet another shift in education research in the UK, which was faced with increased hostility by the government and accusations of being too theoretical, and perhaps too radical to 'speak to' classroom practice and relate to real-world policy making (Hargreaves 1996). The '80s and the early '90s is the period of the sharp economization of the education policy discourse in the UK, as well as the rise of a discourse around the need to raise 'standards' in schooling (DES 1985). Therefore, in some sense, at the time that Ozga and Gewirtz were conducting their fieldwork, the policy elite they were investigating were already representing the 'old guard' in a rapidly changing environment.

However, how did these changes come about? In the UK, and specifically in England, we can trace the simultaneous development during the various Conservative administrations from 1979-1997 of new regulatory forms: deregulation accompanied by tighter specification (for example in the field of education in a centrally-prescribed curriculum and testing regime); the growth of technical accountability; the devolution of management; and the growth of new public management principles applied to public sector services. There has been a steady growth of governing through performance management around principles of decentralisation, devolution and deregulation as key principles of system restructuring (Whitty et al 1998). Those key principles were not challenged – indeed their performance management elements were reinforced – by the change in political control in the UK government to New Labour in 1997: the new government proved itself to be highly expert in and engaged with the creation of 'imaginaries' (Jessop 2008) through the propagation and circulation of a discourse of knowledge production for economic and social ends (Mulderrig 2008).

The production of new knowledge regimes and their impact on education, 1990s onwards

In this section, we will turn to the transformation of knowledge regimes in the field of education research and policy. We suggest that changes in policy-making, as described above, can be

summarised as a shift from government to governance; on the other hand, there have been significant changes in knowledge, which have been summarised as a shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001) -the focus of this section. Importantly, changes in both the policy-making and the knowledge-producing fields are not separate or even simply parallel developments. Rather, they come together and work *symbiotically*, continuously feeding in and sustaining one another: changing governance practices create the conditions of Mode 2 knowledge production, whilst Mode 2 knowledge is a vital resource for governing in the new networked, transnational policy world.

The first 'phase' in the increasing centrality of knowledge in policy was the emergence, in the 1990s, of the idea of the knowledge economy (Hughes 2004). In this frame, knowledge was seen as having to become part of -rather than external from- the economic process; growth was dependent on maximising the outputs of knowledge workers and the productivity of knowledge resources. In these new discourses, national systems sought to ensure competitive advantage through the commercial exploitation and application of knowledge. Technologies enabled the instantaneous exchange of information, and the exchanges transcended national boundaries, so the constraints of national economies gave way to an interdependent global economy. Because of the primacy of information as the new currency and the creator of wealth, world regions prosper or decline 'not so much because of natural resources, but because of the capacity of their managers, engineers, scientists, and workers to harvest knowledge as raw material' (Hughes 2004: 105).

At the same time, another significant phenomenon in knowledge production emerges, with large socio-political implications for education governance, perhaps even greater than those emerging after the 'knowledge economy/society' wave of change: this was the explosion of quantification. The production of quantitative information has transformed the way societies are governed. Although some might suggest that the rise of statistics was always central to the making of the nation, education policy has gone through a paradigmatic shift due to the unprecedented penetration of the logic of quantification in both the social and the personal spheres (see Hansen and Porter 2012; Merry 2011; Sauder and Espeland 2009). If governments once needed statistics to govern, it appears increasingly that governing by numbers has acquired such pervasiveness in the organizational structures and logics of education ministries and their agencies that numbers now comprehensively govern *them*. There is no planning, no understanding, no system, no forecast, no accountability mechanism, no overview and no budget, that has not been conquered by the allure of numbers in order to make sense of organizations and their purpose (Gorur 2017; Piattoeva 2015; Addey et al 2017). Powered by high technology, the rise of a transnational expertocracy and the increasing dominance of large international comparative assessments (Grek 2013), quantification has multiplied the effects of commensuration, comparison and national competition over improved education performance. Whereas once nations could be voluntary teachers or learners of best practice from elsewhere (Rinne 2008; Grek 2009), such privileged positions are now spared; although in legal terms education policy remains a national policy arena, in reality national education systems are tightly interdependent with global education agendas and priorities, as well as other public policy arenas, such a health (as the recent pandemic crisis has evidently shown), migration and sustainable development. Finally, and perhaps as a result, knowledge has further been commodified, through the emergence of a large global education data and learning analytics industry, which is described by education policy makers as promising greater efficiency, transparency and hence quality for education (Ball 2007; Williamson 2019; Fontdevila et al 2019).

This increased significance of knowledge means that in this brave new world, information and expertise are now more widely available and distributed than ever before. At the same time, new governance forms promote the idea of transparency and public accountability as part of their strategic positioning. Knowledge is drawn into supporting the legitimacy and authority of the social

and political processes of networked, new governance forms. Discursively, knowledge and policy are produced as a form of cultural political economy (Jessop 2008) which combines semiotic and material elements in changing the nature of research and its role in governing. Previous powerful policy elites are now dependent on the advice and policy recommendations of international expert actors who work tirelessly to enter national policy spaces and be relevant (see, for example, Grek 2020).

After this sketchy overview of the fundamental changes that have occurred in education governance and knowledge production over the last four decades, we are going to turn to the present situation and to what researching elites in education might involve today. In doing so, we are going to explore the many similarities with the challenges Ozga and Gewirtz faced in the early 1990s, but also examine the differences that researchers have to deal with, especially in relation to the fuzzy and fluid spaces that elite actors inhabit, as well as the changing research funding realities and academic cultures that 'we' are part of and complicit in.

Elites then, elites now

This section discusses who constitutes the 'elite', and how methodological literature has so far examined and defined it. According to Valentine, it is the concept of power that distinguishes 'elite' actors from 'non-elite' ones (2002). Ralston suggests that 'in this context, the 'elite' individual is characterised (and to some extent, caricatured) as possessing an embodied power that can be exercised by virtue of profession and/or societal position' (2020; no page numbers). Ralston cites different authors who discuss elite interviewing as the type of interview where 'the power associated with professional position (for example, politicians or civil servants) is transferable across boundaries in ways that work to maintain and reinforce power differentials between the 'elite' interviewee and the researcher' (2020; no page numbers).

Closer to home, in the field of education policy, we observe that a number of important works during the '80s began to 'relate individual identity and the micro-politics of personal relationships to a wider analysis of power' (McPherson and Raab, 1988; p:xii). For example, Salter and Tapper (1981), through a 'socio-political' study of the governmental machinery relating to education, pointed to the increasing power of the Department of Education in the influence and direction of education. Similarly, McPherson and Raab's (1988) 'sociology of policy' built on a combination of elite interviews and life histories to evidence the complexities of education policy-making in Scotland since 1945. Ball, in another seminal book in education policy research, used data generated from elite interviews to 'explain policy making via what it is that individuals and groups actually do and say in the arenas of influence in which they move' (1990). It was the emergent context of the increasing centralisation and bureaucratisation of education policy in the UK in the 1980s that created the breeding ground for this kind of elite-based research. In the same vein, one of the most influential research in this field was Ozga and Gewirtz' (1994), which stemmed from their desire to 'know more about these people':

> We take it as axiomatic that any education policy must have a source (or sources), a scope and a pattern. That is, any education policy has to originate somewhere…education policy can be made by only three major groups within the social formation: the state apparatus itself (including the professionals in the state service), the economy and the various institutions of civil society (1994;189).

One of the most comprehensive accounts for the reasons elite interviewing is essential for understanding the workings of education policy-making was offered by Fitz and Halpin (1994), who suggested that speaking with elites is the only possible way to obtain information that is not publicly available. They suggested that elite interviews allow the uncovering of the complex webs and networks of actors involved in policy-making; and that, even more importantly, they allow

researchers to familiarise with the 'assumptive worlds' (McPherson and Raab 1988) of policy-makers. Fitz and Halpin were therefore keen on 'exploring the ideas and values of key actors who were involved in setting the policy in motion and who had influenced its substance and the course of its progress' (1994; 33).

Of course, elite interviewing is not only the privilege of the education policy research world, nor writing about it was confined only to the 1980s and early 1990s. A lot of interesting work in interviewing elites in policy settings has been -and still is being- produced, especially within the feminist paradigm (see for example Boucher 2017; Mason-Bish 2018). Nonetheless the literature discussed above is helpful in order to describe the policy and research context within which Ozga and Gewirtz wrote their account of the experiences and dilemmas of interviewing powerful male actors of the English education system. This chapter reviews that methodological analysis 20 and more years later, in order to explore what interviewing education elites in contemporary times entails. What are the similarities and differences? To return to some of the questions posed in the introduction: have elites disappeared? Has the move from government to governance, in parallel to the rise of evidence-based policy, resulted in a shift to more horizontal and evidence-led governing practices, thus negating the concentration of power to fewer actors in key positions (ie. elites)? The answer would be negative. Instead, what research experience gathered over the last ten years, and especially through the project METRO has shown, is that education elites are now much more fluid and changing actor formations, existing in-between national and transnational spaces, being state and non-state, and deriving their power from their key position in relation to knowledge production and expertise, as well as their influence of funders, philanthropists and the education industry. Indeed, it appears as if the primary capital contemporary education elites hold is not state power, upheld through traditional, bureaucratic and legislative tools, but the ability to move swiftly in and out of national and transnational policy making spaces, armed with the epistemic and symbolic capital that they master (Grek, 2020).

Indeed, as the experience of METRO and previous research projects have richly shown, the role of a 'meso-level' between the national and international has to be properly identified and examined in researching and understanding the changing circumstances of elite formation. Since the turn of the century, education scholarship has eloquently described the complex and increasingly close relationship of nations with large international organisations like the OECD, or with political projects like the European Union (Grek 2008; 2009). Research has also shown how these relationships are continuously mediated and 'massaged' by a range of third parties, from think tanks and the various experts, to data agencies and private education and research contractors (Fontdevila et al 2019; Williamson 2019). Nevertheless, this complex governing web that brings together national statistical agencies, international organisations, philanthropists, the civil society and the education industry, is not a flat field of power, distributed equally amongst different actors and organisations; instead, we see time and again a powerful elite of transnational actors organising this political work from the centre, and carrying not only the scientific and epistemic credentials to do so, but also increasingly claiming the moral and ethical dimensions, too (for a more in-depth analysis of this kind of education elite, please read Grek 2020). Thus, we see that contemporary education elites mostly derive their power from three important sources: expertise, networks and values. In order to give a visual example of the ways these education elites manage to occupy central importance in large networks of current education performance monitoring projects, here is an example of what the making of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (the education one) looks like:

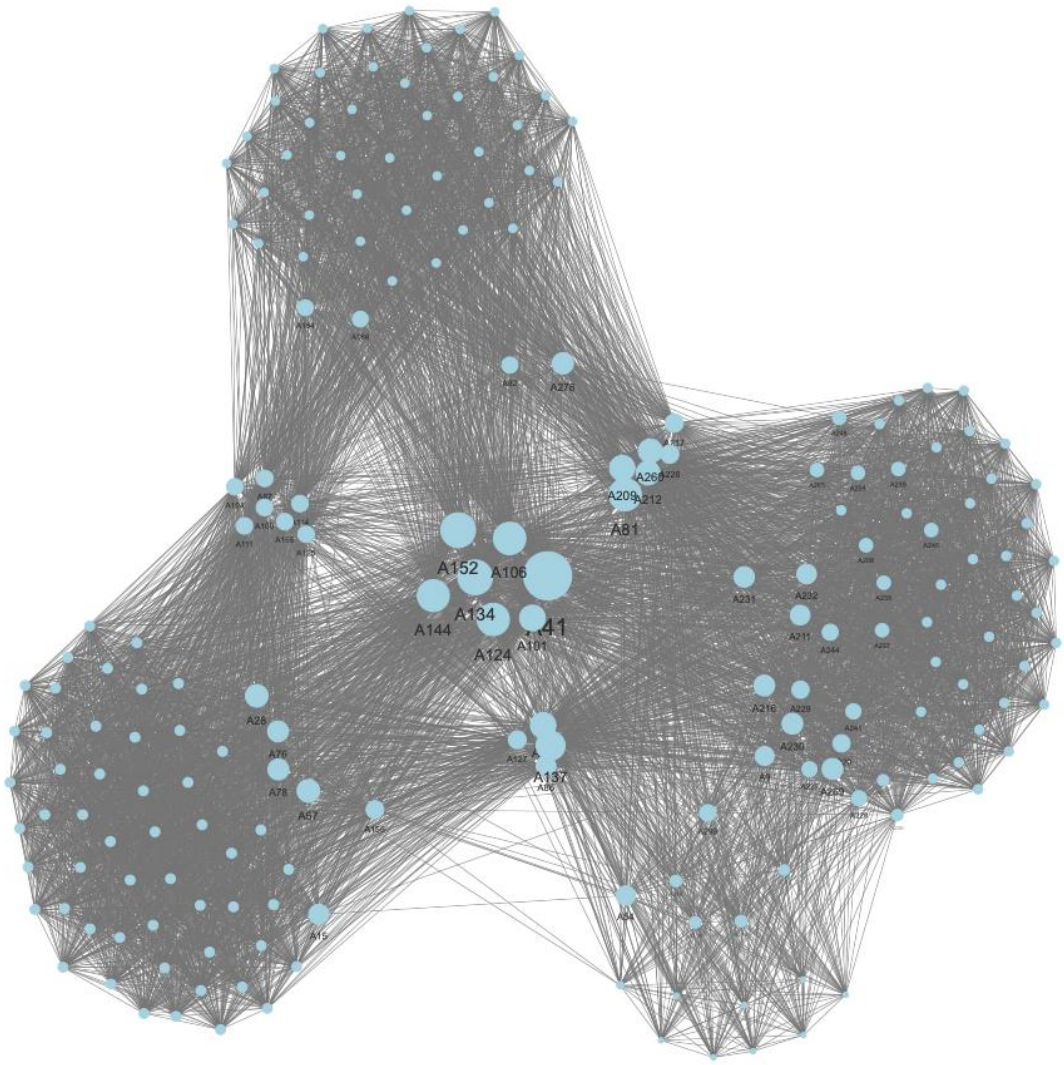

Figure 1: Social Network Analysis Visual of SDG4 actors

The visualisation above presents social network analysis data of all the Technical Cooperation Group (TCG) and the Global Alliance for Monitoring Learning (GAML) group meetings on the SDG4[2]: these are the two main indicator working groups, set up by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) in order to do all the methodological validation work required for setting targets and achieving the goals of the SDG4 (for more details on both the SDG4 and the workings of both these groups, please read Fontdevila and Grek 2021). According to METRO's data, there were 399 participant actors, belonging to 218 organisations and attending 15 meetings in total in the period 2016-2019. Although a detailed analysis of this SNA diagram and the role of these groups and actors in the making of the SDG4 is well beyond the purposes of this chapter, it is immediately obvious that it has only been a very small pool of actors (A152, A41, A134, A144 amongst others) who are located at the centre of influence, connected closely to one another and also bringing together many others. These actors represent a transnational education elite, as they have been clearly in a position of power to organise such a complex and

[2] With thanks to Dr Jennifer Ferguson, METRO Research associate, who has been in charge of the SNA component of the project research design and analysis.

aspirational transnational education agenda, that has multiple effects on countries of both the global North and the global South. Interestingly, these central elite actors are IOs' workers, but also representatives of national statistical agencies; members of civil society organisations; research agencies' workers and even volunteers; and government representatives. Although the majority of them come from the Global North, there are actors in the central elite grouping that also come from the Global South. Although some of them are well-known figures, many of them are less eminent, but no less key. The challenges of locating and accessing these actors are plenty. Many of these actors are well-trained in being at the spotlight, travelling around and 'proselytising' in following specific agendas; some of them appear to have reached almost religious status at least in some countries, with every word that they say representing (quite literally in data management terms) the 'single source of truth' (Bandola et al 2020). However, the majority of them are much more subtle; their work is to broker knowledge and construct consensus. They can never be very prominent in one place, for their role is to move and adopt different identities depending on their context. They travel a lot and are cosmopolitans. They share a faith in numbers to bring fundamental positive change, but they are also acutely aware that their work is mostly political. This is a process that requires a different set of qualities: an understanding of data but also of the local contexts they aim to take with them; a certain humility and perseverance in the face of lack of funding and the diversity of interests and value-systems; and an ability to foresee change and place themselves at the best possible place to tame it (Grek 2020).

Thus, how are the METRO interviewees similar and different from the elite actors Ozga and Gewirtz met and interviewed 20+ years ago? Contemporary elite actors use their accumulated epistemic, economic, social or other capitals in order to transform them into symbolic capital that determines their (in)visibility, authority and legitimation in the field. More often than not, interviewees cite own career trajectories, values, frustrations or aspirations to justify the reasons they take the positions they have and for the choices they make; these positions are not permanent and solid. They often change in the face of developments in the 'field' (in the Bourdieusian sense), ie. the positionality, advancement and withdrawal of other actors in it (Grek 2020). They often talk about internal organisational struggles and contradictions; they do not describe a polished world but one ridden with conflict. In these ways, they can be seen as quite different from the characteristics of the people interviewed by Ozga and Gewirtz. Instead of representing the State and its historical and political contours and trajectories, the METRO actors are neither solely 'national', 'international', or 'global': they assume multiple identities, moving in and out of countries, connecting them to one another, and linking nations to global developments. Indeed, it is precisely their insistence on commensurating on a global scale whilst also doing local, contextual work that renders them so powerful in both mastering large comparative assessments and the statistical complexity they require, as well as executing detailed, 'nitty-gritty' work at ground level, together with national and local actors (for an in-depth analysis of this kind of work, please read Grek 2019).

Have transnational actors and their expert networks replaced national education policy elites? That would have been a very bold claim to make, although there are more and more examples of an increasing reliance of the key decision-makers of previously strong and confident systems (like Sweden and Scotland, for example) on external actors, such as the OECD, through its influence not only generated by PISA but also of the much more longstanding country reviews. Rather, what this chapter claims is that the rise of global education governing class -the meso-level, as described above- has diluted and impacted on the education elites grown at home, to the extent that much of their former grandeur and connoisseurship has been replaced by evidence-based policy making and the dependence on quantification for decision-making.

Finally, if education elites have changed, how has research about them transformed? How does their -usually quantitative- expertise come to terms with academic -usually qualitative- research that aims to study them through a sociological and/or anthropological lens? The experience from METRO, as well as

from other previous projects, is that, although access is not always easy and often only comes after securing access through a gatekeeper, the interview atmosphere is quite relaxed. During the last ten years, I have interviewed a high number of these elite actors; during the last two years, most of these interviews took place online, via Skype or similar online meeting platforms. If there is an interview effect brought about by the fact that Skype does not involve any of the usual -in the past- rituals of meeting an interviewee (ie. interact with a PA several times, travel, wait outside someone's office, enter and be told where to sit – many aspects of interviewing that Ralston [2020] calls the 'dramaturgy' of the meeting), this 'Skype effect' is even starker when interviewing elites. The global pandemic of Covid-19 in the first half of 2020 (and probably extending far beyond that) meant that many of the interviewees were connecting for the interview from home. Not only there were none of the rituals described above, but the intimate surroundings (interviewees' partners or pets were also often present at the background) would give the occasion an almost surreal atmosphere.

Although some 'posturing' often takes place at the start of the interview, interviewees quickly appear not only interested, but almost flattered; this is because rather than them collecting data on others, this time it is someone else who researches and tries to understand *them*. Although the innocent, female sociologist appears to always be the identity I adopt - or, in reality, be given to- by my mostly male interviewees to start with, the tables soon turn: I confidently exhibit my knowledge of the policy spaces they work in; I ask them about the challenges of their work and their organisational cultures and share my own frustrations with mine; I discuss my work and offer them analysis of theirs; I sometimes ask provocative questions and perhaps push them a little more than I normally do with other actors, especially when I see that they appreciate it (they often do). The interview becomes a space of mutual sharing and revealing, of reciprocally attempting to understand how 'our' work shapes that which we study, try to understand and, admittedly, built a career upon. The academic research we as sociologists do, doesn't live outside the institutions we work in and promote us for; it is precisely these same institutions that suggest they belong to the 'elite' in the academic field, and describe their staff (us) as world-leading researchers, using their research to achieve maximum positive social impact – in fact, when we write applications for grant funding or career promotions, this is precisely the 'elite' language we ourselves use. In this sense, playing the ignorant card would be disingenuous, since interviewees are well aware of these realities: on the contrary, a more open, introspective interview practice has been truer to both parties, and hence more productive.

Last, but not least, perhaps the most unexpected 'finding' from these elite interviews is the level of reflexivity showed by these actors. The education elites that I met and interviewed, are not data 'geeks', uninterested and pejorative about qualitative research; instead they showed high reflexivity in thinking about and sharing their work practices. They often openly discuss a lot of the quantitative research they perform as deeply political, but they also have a strong, almost religious, faith in numbers and in their ability to bring on sustained and positive change. They are not defensive about their work; instead, they appear very reflexive about its complexity, its unintended effects and -sometimes- even its futility. Above all, they are cosmopolitans; they believe in the need to learn from and work with others, and they share an unwavering belief in the value of education – of course, ideologically, they represent different, and often opposing views, of what this value might be, but this has always been a point that, like Ozga and Gewirtz (1994) remained muted in these interviews; I never felt obliged to challenge some of their ideas. My intention has always been a desire to understand elites' work: how and why they do what they do. I reflected upon my own work and challenged their ideas to the extent that it led them reflect further. Questioning or openly critiquing their work would have been unethical; it would have jeopardised access; and it would have damaged the accounts of their 'assumptive worlds' which I aimed to record and understand.

Conclusion: knowledge, policy and researching education elites

To return to some of the questions posed at the introductory section, this chapter has shown both the similarities and differences of the elite policy world of the late 20th century versus now. Ozga (2011) distinguishes 'post-bureaucratic' from conventional 'bureaucratic' regimes, by suggesting that each presupposes a specific kind of knowledge and a specific way of using it. While bureaucratic modes of government require 'established' bodies of knowledge to be translated into 'vertical' relations, post-bureaucratic modes of governance consist rather in attempting to turn actors' autonomy and reflexivity into means of governing. Therefore, instead of placing the state at the centre and consider the national as an autonomous entity (as subsidiarity rules might have defined it in the past, and as Ozga and Gewirtz researched it in the early 1990s), where knowledge is produced by few professionals and academics for the benefit of the 'nation', post-bureaucracy – and its elites- is rather polycentric, by being simultaneously international, transnational, subnational *and* national. As a result, it is made up by a multiplicity of actors taking part not only in the policy process but – crucially for the focus of this paper – in the production of knowledge. Under post-bureaucracy, 'knowledge is pluralistic; it is flexible, provisional and it is always policy- and future-oriented' (Ozga 2011). Above all, it is comparable and can travel fast; it derives its legitimacy not only from scientific knowledge, but also from know-how and experience (Grek and Ozga 2010). The education elites discussed in this chapter reflect all these characteristics closely.

Thus, to conclude, education elites do exist; they might not be the data crunchers and the data geeks, although in most cases they have a strong statistical background. Instead, they are the mediators and the knowledge brokers; they are the ones who bring actors together, move knowledge around and slowly and steadily move the data juggernaut forward one notch at a time. I would suggest that if one was to highlight one key issue from this paper, that it would probably be the evolving relationship between the production of knowledge and policy. In previous work, we suggested that if one wants to predict and understand why and where policy is moving towards, then one should be looking at the management of knowledge, rather than policy itself (Grek and Ozga 2010); this is largely confirmed from the description of the shifting weight from national to transnational elites, who find themselves in positions of privilege, as they can expertly consult national education ministries on ways forward, allowing enough space for local adaptation, whilst ensuring continuous relevance and dependence (Grek 2019). Although there is vast literature on the knowledge and policy continuum, I would contend that this is a new governing reality altogether. What was discussed in this paper is not simply a case of elite knowledge producers *informing* education policy; rather, contemporary education elites represent a fusion of knowledge and policy and of the national and transnational levels in a conscious, strategic and largely -given their level of influence- successful manner. In a way, the discussion of researching education policy elites points towards the shift from previous accounts of 'knowledge *and* policy' or 'knowledge *in* policy' to almost a new reality, where knowledge *is* policy – it *becomes* policy, since expertise and the promotion of undisputed, universal policy solutions drift into one single entity and function. It is precisely in this regard that we, as academics of self-proclaimed elite institutions, need to be particularly alert to and reflexive of the knowledge about these elites that we produce.

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