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Title

Foreword

Author

Andrew W. Wilkins, Goldsmiths College, University of London

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In 2017, a fire broke out in a west London 24-storey block of flats called Grenfell Tower. Owing to the presence of combustible material in the cladding panels, the fire spread rapidly through the upper floors and all four corners of the building, killing 72 people and leaving 100s injured and displaced (Grenfell Tower Inquiry 2024). Fast forward to 2025, the Deputy Prime Minster and Labour MP Angela Rayner announced at a private meeting with former residents of Grenfell Tower that the building would be gradually dismantled. This was following a consultation with 'many different people, the bereaved…survivors…local head teachers of the schools…[and] the community' (NG and Phillips 2025). While some bereaved families and survivors expressed strong support for the decision (Davies 2025), others vehemently rejected the proposals, calling for Grenfell Tower to remain standing as testimony to the criminal actions of an irresponsible government (Grenfell United 2025). In a written statement, Angela Rayner told the House of Commons (Parallel Parliament 2025): 'It is clear from conversations it remains a sacred site. It is also clear that there is not a *consensus* about what should happen to it' [emphasis added].

This tragic story neatly captures Ball's (2021) observation that policy actors do not operate from a position of perfect knowledge and unmediated access to truth, one that allows them to discriminate between facts and values or comfortably reconcile interests to achieve broad consensus on the nature of policy problems and their solutions. In traditional policy science

literature, the kind that emerged in Europe in the 1950s (Lerner & Lasswell 1951), policy was largely understood in this functionalist vein, as a problem-solving science driven by 'positivistic methods assuming a political neutrality' (Pillow 2003, 146). While the legitimacy crisis of the 1970s and 1980s produced a fractured relationship between policy makers and the policy and social sciences, the legacy of positivism as a scientific method for driving policy change has shown no sign of abating. The application of positivism to develop 'a science of policy forming and execution' and 'the improving of the concrete content of the information and the interpretations available to policy makers' (Lasswell 1951 quoted in Wagner et al. 1991, 8) is nowhere more evident than in the neo-positivist trends that dominate education research today. From impact-driven research to randomised controlled trial methodologies (Connolly, Keenan and Urbanska 2018; Torgerson and Torgerson 2001), much of education research across the globe is geared towards producing knowledge in the service of economic growth and societal improvement, otherwise known as 'analysis for policy' (Simon et al. 2009, p. 29) or 'research for policy' (Lingard 2013, p. 119).

While analysis for policy is strategically pivotal to policy advocacy aimed at social justice, the 'absurdity' of policy, according to Ball (2021), is the illusion that policy making functions as a value-free activity and problem-solving science, one in which experts define and respond to social problems indiscriminately and without recourse to values that ultimately serve some people (or outcomes) while excluding others. The question then becomes: which forms of

policy advocacy are successful at steering policy reform and to what ends is this advocacy directed (see for example Lubienski 2018 and Rönnberg 2017)? This absurdity also extends to researchers themselves who, while operating from a position of ideological critique, appear to use analysis to construct overly tidy representations of policy as consisting of elements that are internally coherent and unassailable. And by implication, these analyses of policy overestimate the extent to which subjects are captured in governmental fields of power, thus obviating the creative capacity of subjects to refuse or revise the discourses through which they are summoned. As Ball (2021, 5) explains, 'Most policy analysis work begins with an assumption of or brings to bear a perspective of coherence or rationality or planned order, in this sense the analysis works to constitute the object of its concern'.

The messy reality of policy making, as illustrated through the story above, is something more akin to a provisional settlement in which various assumptive worlds are held together through 'temporary alliances' (Gale 2021, 390) to achieve something that passes for consensus or political legitimacy. Over time, as power is captured by different governments, these temporary alliances mutate to accommodate different sets of political, economic and social objectives and vested interests. From this perspective, policy problems are held together through contingent relations and regularities (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016) since they rely on changing 'semiotic, social, institutional and spatiotemporal fixes that support the reproduction of economic, political and social domination' (Jessop and Sum 2016, 108). The implication here is

that, far from being a domain of rationalist planning and steely bureaucracy, policy making is a discursive space for the struggle over meaning (Fisher and Gottweis 2013) or what Prunty (1985, 136) describes as a productive space for the 'authoritative allocation of values'.

Education researchers are also active participants in these struggles as they vie for power to occupy or influence dominant positions and relations that can shape policy making and ultimately benefit marginalised and minoritised groups. For some education researchers, navigating and influencing these spaces is epistemologically challenging: making policy recommendations means inevitably committing to certain normative assumptions, however notional or compromised, about the (unchanging) nature or composition of publics, communities and groups. It means appealing to categorical classifications and so-called objectively determined social positions as a normative basis for policy reasoning and action. While poststructural education researchers are right to draw attention to the epistemological fallacy of these claims (Ball and Collet-Sabé 2022), since identities are emergent and fluid, other 'critical' researchers, such as those pursing policy advocacy research, are also right to warn against the excesses and risks of postmodern obsessions with impermanence and infinite difference. Postmodernist concerns with agonistic particularism and dissensus, for example, are risky for education researchers who want to engage in successful border crossing with policy makers who require more stable articulations of identity that lend themselves to tidy representation and 'fractionalization' (Newman 2007, 904). Working with and against these tidy

representations to achieve justice or equity for marginalised groups is what critical education researchers call tactics in 'strategic binarism' and 'strategic hierarchy'. Whatever concerns we may have about the epistemological status of these claims to knowledge, the ends appear to justify the means, at least for some.

In the spirit of these observations, this timely book edited by Craig Skerritt addresses some of the fundamental problems and problematics at the heart of policy engagement and policy influence. What is 'authentic' engagement in the policy process and who gets to decide what is authentic? What is the role of academics in the policy making process and how can this role be more meaningfully leveraged to achieve better outcomes for marginalised groups? What kinds of risks and trade-offs are negotiated by academics in their role as policy actors? What is considered evidence and whose evidence counts in the making and steering of policy? To what extent is policy advocacy realised through public and private agendas and how does this impact the civic capacity of local communities and peoples to influence policy outcomes? Responding to these and other urgent questions, this important book documents the challenges and opportunities of influencing policy at a time of increased centralisation of government power, changing publics and the expansion of corporate power and private influence.

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