



ANALYSING EDUCATION POLICY THEORY AND METHOD

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RESEARCHING POLICY ELITES IN EDUCATION

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Introduction

Much policy sociology research that deals with contexts of policy influence and text production in education involves conducting interviews with elites, who can be defined as those 'with vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource' (Khan, 2012, p. 361). Following Pareto and Michels and early theories of elites in political science, the genesis of elite sociological studies can be traced to the classic work of C. Wright Mills (1956) in the USA, with his depiction of a power elite consisting of industrial, political and military elites. There has been fluctuating interest in elite studies since that time (Savage & Williams, 2008; Khan, 2012; Howard & Kenway, 2015). The growth of inequality across the past couple of decades (Piketty, 2014; Savage, 2021) has witnessed renewed interest in the sociology of elites and in the education of elites (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015; van Zanten et al., 2015; Koh & Kenway, 2016). Yet, despite this recent interest, Howard and Kenway (2015) suggest that there has been limited focus on matters of methodology – defined as 'theoretically informed analysis of research approaches and techniques' (p. 1005).

In the field of policy sociology in education specifically, there is limited literature that addresses questions of methodology (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022), and even less that engages with the particular issue of researching policy elites in education (Grek, 2011, 2022; Ozga & Gewirtz, 1994; Selwyn, 2013; Walford, 2012; Savage et al., 2022; Ozga, 2022). Two decades ago, Batteson and Ball (1995) pointed to the paucity of research in this area, calling 'for a more thorough-going methodological and theoretical reflexivity' (p. 214). Elite interviews are important in policy sociology in education because they offer

the potential for access to knowledge in and about policy processes that is not by and large publicly available. The aim of this chapter is to extend this literature through a comparative analysis of elite interviews in three separate policy studies that each involved elite interviews, but in quite different contexts.

This chapter proffers a comparative analysis of three cases to highlight common and distinct concerns, challenges and issues, including questions of access, social relations in the interview situation, the veracity or warrantability of interview data and representation of the data by both the interviewee and the researcher. A central concern is thus the role of the researcher and their positionality in recruiting and accessing participants, conducting interviews, and analysing and representing interview data. In what follows, we introduce the three cases and discuss the literature on interviewing elites and issues to do with power. We then move to consideration of the three cases, followed by a synthetic and comparative analysis derived from the insights of each. The argument of this chapter demonstrates that issues involved in interviewing policy elites often provide as much useful data for our research as the actual content of the interview. Addey and Piattoeva (2022) refer to the messy, subjective, provisional and deeply embodied hinterland of research in education policy, a reality very evident in researching and interviewing policy elites. Reflections about such matters are productive, as Ozga (2022) suggests, for policy sociology in education research.

Theoretical considerations when researching policy elites

Work on the policy cycle in education, involving contexts of influence, text production and policy enactment (Ball, 1994), can at times be read as emphasising processes and relationships in a somewhat abstract way, and often it is not explicitly acknowledged that these processes are constructed, framed and practised by individuals, thereby prioritising structure over agency, or in Bourdieu's frame, emphasising field over practice. In this chapter, we seek to bring the actors back into the analysis, but as situated within the imbrications of structure and practice, and not simply as free agents. As Khan (2012) argues, studies of elites need to acknowledge individual and collective actors, as well as the structural relationships in which they are situated. In contexts of policy influence and policy text production that are relevant to our three cases, the actors are policy elites in government, an intergovernmental organisation and an edu-business. Using Khan's (2012) definition of elites, it is particular knowledge capital (or ready access to it) that these policy elites possess and which defines them as such. If we think about the context of policy practice or policy enactment in schools, school principals might also be seen as policy elites, given their significant role in mediating the uptake and enactment of centrally developed policies.

In terms of power, Khan's (2012) definition of elites emphasises structural location and access to or control over resources that grant elites power over others. However, we want to emphasise that the power relations that give shape to elite interviewing are not limited to power vested in a particular structural location or as possessed by an individual or group. It is necessary to also analyse elite interview situations in terms of a conception of power as a relation between forces – a conception that has been developed from Nietzsche by scholars such as Foucault. A relational conception of power draws attention to how the interview situation will be affected by the presence of those involved and the relations between them: the power of a senior bureaucrat that inheres in their position within the State will manifest differently in relation to a doctoral researcher, on the one hand, and a senior professor on the other. Moreover, the differences in this case may not simply be due to the way that the senior bureaucrat acts towards different researchers, but may result from what the doctoral researcher feels can be said or done compared with the professor.² As Ball (2013) writes, from a Foucauldian perspective '[p]ower is not . . . a structure but rather a complex arrangement of social forces that are exercised; it is a strategy, embedded in other kinds of relations' (p. 30). Each of the three cases discussed in this chapter exemplifies different strategies at work in the interview situation.

It should also be noted that while policy elites are powerful because of their positions within influential policymaking organisations, such as a department of education, their authority, the legitimate right to exercise power, also flows from the capitals they possess. With the enhanced significance of data, datafication and the digitalisation of data in education governance, Grek (2022) argues that their power also now stems from their expertise as knowledge brokers, their powerful capital.

Three cases of elite interviews in education policy sociology

The first case discussed is from a study conducted with elites located in a national government (ministers, undersecretaries, State Council members, Education Council members, University Vice-Chancellors) and focused on understanding the Omani higher-education (HE) policy architecture and its operations in respect of policy production (Al'Abri, 2016). Semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 43 policymakers and others involved in Omani HE were used to generate data. This study was framed *inter alia* by Offe's (1984) insight that state structures mediate the processes of policy production, with potential impact on policy content, and it investigated the complex interweaving of national, regional and global factors that affected and framed the policy architecture, policy processes and policy content in Omani HE. The study was undertaken in a specific political structure, namely

a Sultanate. In the case of Oman, this structure is a type of constitutional monarchy with small shoots of democracy.

The second study focused on the education policy work of the OECD, paying special attention to the role of the Directorate for Education and Skills inside the organisation and the enhanced influence of the OECD's education policy work globally (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2016). This study included more than 50 interviews with senior policymakers, including three visits to the OECD headquarters in Paris and a seminar presentation to members of the Directorate for Education and Skills on the research in progress. The study thus involved relationships with policy elites located in an international intergovernmental organisation. Some analysis of the habitus of the policymakers and the professionals working in the Directorate, derived from reflection upon relationships and positionings in the research interviews, has already been undertaken (Lingard et al., 2015).

The third study focused on the increased role of edu-businesses in education policy and practice and involved interviews with elites in a multinational corporation: Pearson plc (Hogan et al., 2015). The recent literature suggests that elites today have become more global in character and reach (Khan, 2012). Grek (2022, p. 22) observes that 'education elites are now much more fluid and changing actor formations, existing in-between national and transnational spaces, being state and non-state actors, and deriving their power from their key position in relation to knowledge production and expertise'. This study of edu-businesses proceeded from the assumption that policy analysis today must consider the relationality between global and national scales, relations between national and transnational spaces and between corporations, governments and international organisations. Employing a network ethnography methodology (see Howard, 2002; Ball & Junemann, 2012), ten semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype with edu-business participants.

The three cases enable a comparative approach that acts as both a method of inquiry and a frame for analysis (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003). While each case is contextually different, all three organisations function as significant loci of action in the field(s) of education policy. The OECD, for example, tends to influence global policy debates and national reform agendas (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2016). The Omani government, like all states in nations, is responsible for developing and enacting national education policy (Al'Abri, 2019). Pearson is increasingly powerful in how it works to establish a global policy consensus in education and how it seeks to influence education policy by selling products and services (see Hogan et al., 2015). We argue in what follows that all three of these organisations provide policy advice and seek to produce policy, and as such, contain various levels of policy expertise (Fisher, 1994). Furthermore, elites within the three organisations contribute to the policy cycle in education in these different contexts.

The Omani case

Elite interviewing takes on greater salience in an idiosyncratic political structure such as that in contemporary Oman, one of only two extant Sultanates along with Brunei, and where policy research of the kind referred to here is not common. Oman is a state-centric polity with some emergent democratic practices. In terms of the context of policy text production, agenda setting comes either from the Sultan or from inside the interstices of the state, unlike in a more democratic polity, where some policies result from external public pressures or from democratic elections. Researching policy and interviewing elites are thus still sensitive in this political system. As such, elites are not easy to access, given the closed and hierarchical nature of politics and decision-making. This case involved research interviews with significant policymakers in agencies where HE policy is developed and enacted, such as councils, Ministries and universities. The interviewees were purposefully selected due to their powerful leadership positions (e.g. ministers, undersecretaries, general directors, university vice-chancellors) in the Omani HE policy architecture.

Many of the policy elites interviewed had PhDs from high-status universities in the Global North, making them elite in multiple ways, and perhaps more open to being interviewed by a doctoral researcher. Indeed, a majority of interviewees commented on, and approved of, the researcher's enrolment at a globally recognised Australian university, given their own experiences attending high-performing Western universities. However, access was not always straightforward. These policy elites were surrounded by multiple gatekeepers who were cautious about what would be done with the data collected. As Al'Abri (2016) argues, studying policy and politics in a developing nation is not an easy task, as demonstrated by the paucity of research in the area and, in this case, gatekeepers' lack of familiarity and trust regarding such research agendas, including the place of research interviews. Accessing elite policymakers was difficult in this context with gatekeepers rather than the policy elites at times prohibiting access. However, once the researcher had gained access to elite interviewees, his status as a young student researcher became less of an issue.

Establishing trust and rapport in the interview situation was another challenge in the data collection process. Grek (2011) states that researchers have to demonstrate that they are trustworthy by evidencing familiarity with the context being researched – here HE policy and policy architecture in Oman – as well as accepting the account provided by interviewees. This of course raises issues regarding the warrantability of the data. Given the Omani Royal political system and the sensitivity of researching policy there, it was not an easy task to gain trust immediately from interviewees. There was some questioning of the study and about the data that were being collected. During the course of the interviews, the researcher developed techniques to build trust, from the

presentation of information and informed consent sheets to talking about the importance of the study for developing the Omani HE system. Indeed, follow-up invitations were received from two ministers and other policy elites to give presentations about the findings of the study when it was completed. These might be seen as requests for an ethical 'giving back' to participants, but these requests were also perhaps an attempt to reconstitute the study as 'research for policy'. Positioning the study according to this 'research for policy' stance, rather than a more critical 'research of policy' (Lingard, 2013) approach, appeared important for gaining access, generating useful interview discussion and creating trust in the interview situation.

Researching policy elites raises specific ethical issues. For example, Ministers could not be guaranteed anonymity because of the positions they held and the timeframe of the research. Ministers may not have been divulging information that was not already public or resonant with official government positions, or may have been representing the topics discussed with a public audience in mind.

Warranted claims from the data were thus a concern. As is the case with most political systems in the Gulf area, the Omani government is not publicly open and lacks transparency. The elites that participated in this study often spoke of how policy *ought to be* produced in relation to policy development, rather than discussing the 'reality' of current policies and processes. Interestingly, in two different interviews, interviewees had their advisers with them and they regularly checked and verified their answers with them. The interview situations in which advisers attended and assisted in answering research questions reflected Grek's (2011) point that sometimes interviewees simply use researchers as an 'audience' and provide official accounts, rather than revealing anything in the interview about tensions, behind the scene compromises, the messiness involved in policy production and so on.

These issues regarding access and the veracity of data cannot be understood without comprehending the political context and characteristics of the Omani Sultanate. These potential problems with the interview data provide further insight into the workings of this system. Issues of access to elites and the experience in the interview situation, including attempts to control the representation of policy and processes, became important data for the research, telling us about the actual workings of the political system and its modes of policy production. This experience confirms Offe's (1984) argument that policy architecture mediates what gets onto the policy agenda, how it is dealt with and represented and the policies that are produced.

The OECD case

In this second case, we consider how critical sociologists of education policy might engage with elite policy analysts in contexts increasingly dominated by

the generation and analysis of large data sets and the analysis of this data within the analytical frameworks of economics. Since the 1990s, we have seen a rapid acceleration in the production of data and accountability infrastructures in education (Lingard et al., 2016; Gulson et al., 2022) and the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is the most prominent international example. As Burrows and Savage (2014) have argued, the rapidly growing capacity to generate and analyse large social data sets challenges 'the predominant authority of sociologists and social scientists more generally to define the nature of social knowledge. It permits a dramatically increased range of other agents to claim the social for their own' (5). Given Khan's (2012) definition of elites as being those who have disproportionate control over a resource, and Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier's (2013) prediction of the rise of a professional class of 'algorithmists' who have access to the 'black box' of big data analysis, we are concerned with a new type of policy elite: symbolic analysts for whom large quantitative data sets have become the primary form of social knowledge and who may not see the value of critical and qualitative policy sociology. The status of these elites derives as much from their positionality in new social research hierarchies and their knowledge capital as it does from their institutional location.

In the study that forms the basis for this case, the researchers conducted interviews with staff working at the OECD in Paris and were invited to present on research-in-progress to staff from the Directorate for Education and Skills in October 2014. This presentation was an illuminating experience. Since beginning the study, the researchers had discussed critical views of the OECD that were encountered when talking with other academics or reading research articles discussing the role of the OECD in education policy. Often, the organisation is represented as a monolithic entity imposing an agenda of neoliberal reform on nations and test-based accountabilities in education. However, the OECD is an intergovernmental organisation that responds to the direction and oversight of member nations. This is often a messy and contested political process that is belied by the Organisation's glossy published outputs.

When visiting the OECD headquarters in Paris, the researchers were struck by the feel of the space, which is not dissimilar to a university and indeed we have heard it described by staff as a non-academic university with a focus on policy. As with any large organisation, OECD staff hold a spectrum of political and professional views, and we have become aware of internal political and professional contestation in relation to the current directions of the Organisation's education work, particularly the strengthened focus on quantitative as opposed to qualitative data. Many staff have PhDs from prestigious institutions and are engaged in demanding intellectual and research work. In some circumstances, this lent a collegial air to interviews and aided with access and the quality of data, just as the presence of elites with PhDs enabled interviews in the Omani case.

Importantly, relationships in the interviews with elites at the OECD worked differently when the researchers were interviewing staff with an outward focus on policy and engagement with member nations and staff with a more internal focus on technical analyses (see Lingard et al., 2015). The policy people, particularly those who interact with member nations, work to represent the institutional account and saw us as another 'audience' for their policy messages (Grek, 2011), while the technicians spoke to us in a more egalitarian register, researcher to researcher, and were often more open concerning issues and problems in respect of international testing.

Savage and colleagues (2022) have also commented critically on the capacity of some academic researchers, whom they refer to as academic elites, to travel to access such policy elites for research interviews and have suggested this might result in '*research of elites, by elites and for elites*' (p. 313). When sitting face to face with a group of OECD staff members during the seminar presentation the researchers were asked to give, they felt acutely aware of how easy it is to write critical polemics that will be appreciated by a group of like-minded academics; however, when talking to a group of clearly intelligent, highly educated and well-informed insiders, we felt the impotence of critiques that serve to further disengage critics from new modes and spaces of policy analysis and production. We would argue that such a disposition affects the interview relationship and the data so derived.

At the end of the presentation, a staff member approached the researchers and asked whether they would write a short 'executive summary' style report expanding on the finding that the work of the Directorate for Education and Skills may risk becoming unbalanced in favour of large-scale assessments, at the expense of its policy reviews that draw on both quantitative and qualitative data. This staff member saw possible allies with whom to strengthen the case, particularly inside the OECD, for the importance of sustaining the Directorate's reviews of policy, both national and thematic. This was an important moment of potential enrolment into the politics of an elite policy space that indicates how elite interviews can create opportunities to actually influence the policy process.

This incident provoked much reflection about the researchers' role when interviewing elite policy analysts. First, a cynical critique was not offered in the presentation and clearly the representation of data generated through conversation with these elites was relatively well received. This was important for a presentation of research-in-progress because the researchers needed to ensure continuity of access, which Grek (2011) suggests sometimes leads to 'capture' of researchers by the research participants' accounts of policymaking. However, this was not simply a matter of conceding to an uncritical position for instrumental logistical and access reasons. Rather, the attempt to provide a carefully nuanced critical account enabled better analysis and opened up possible alliances with certain staff in the organisation, providing opportunities for

the analysis of elite interviews to be folded back into the shaping of contexts of policy influence and production.

To conclude this case, we want to emphasise two points. First, the researchers sought careful engagement with the complexity of the practices that traversed the multiple policy contexts they were researching. This meant reflecting on the different kinds of institutions, political agendas, scientific practices, education policies, policy enactments and so on that are involved in the policy work of the OECD. Second, as Stengers (2005) has argued, it is important to resist the ‘belief in the power of proofs to disqualify what they have no means to create’ (p. 82). Instead of practising disqualifications across old divides (quantitative/qualitative, academic/government, academic/intergovernmental organisation, academic policy researcher/policy elites), this case suggests the value of finding new ways to think with the practices of others in elite policy spaces, including in the research interview. This is particularly the case for critical policy sociologists who are primarily versed in qualitative methodologies and who will need to find new ways of relating to the proliferation of large social data sets in social policy. As Muecke (2012, p. 55) reminds us, politics is a matter of alliances and calls for a ‘criticism without judgment’, which would be a mode of criticism that involves establishing ‘real relations . . . and robust pragmatic connections across an array of different modes of existence’. To be clear, this is not a matter of simply going with the flow and accepting the status quo and its dominant representations. To the contrary: we would argue that elite interviews, under the right circumstances, can provide opportunity not simply to generate verifiable data, but also to influence the unfolding of policy across various contexts.

The Pearson case

The third case deals with interviews conducted with ‘corporate’ policy elites from the edu-business, Pearson. This follows the acknowledgement that edu-businesses have become influential policy actors in education today in the context of network governance (see Ball, 2007, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012).

Reflecting on attempts to research corporate policy elites, most individuals initially approached for interview were cautious about the nature of the research. The researcher’s experience largely reflected that of previous research about the inherent difficulty in gaining access to those with the ‘power and ability to protect themselves from intrusion and criticism’ (Mikecz, 2012, p. 483). As Thomas (1993, p. 82) reflects, corporate elites are good at insulating themselves, and ‘when they do venture out of the corporate suites it is to address important issues and constituencies, such as stockholders, other business leaders, financial analysts, government officials, customer organizations, and community groups’. Unsurprisingly then, most edu-business representatives declined to be involved in the research. However, this experience was

vastly different with Pearson representatives, and analysis of the conditions for this difference provides the analytical focus for our third case.

The individuals at Pearson who were approached for interview were attentive, quick to respond to requests and willing to be involved. Each person interviewed suggested other high-level Pearson executives that might be useful to talk to and generally facilitated an email introduction. This relative ease of access to policy elites within Pearson raises questions about why Pearson elites were so willing to consent to interviews. Pearson has been in the public spotlight, especially in the USA where they have borne the brunt of fierce public criticism (Hursh, 2015). This has been directed through media outlets, social media campaigns and even public demonstrations. Perhaps counter intuitively, this context explains why Pearson representatives were amenable to being interviewed. By communicating with external stakeholders and responding to how its educational activities are evaluated by the public, Pearson seeks to position itself as accountable.

Conversely to the other two cases presented, participants made no reference to a post-interview relationship, to the desire to be sent any findings, reports or publications, nor did they express any concern over the ways that the research might benefit them. The research relationship seemed to be based on the notion of how Pearson might convince the researcher, and the potential audience for the study, that it is doing the right thing for education policy and practice. Pearson's willingness to be involved in this study was their appreciation of 'the rules of the game' (Foucault, 1979) and their recognition that continuing success and power in education policy networks are dependent on social relations between the company and the critical public. As Schoenberger (1992, p. 217) reminds us, 'These are, recall, very powerful and self-assured people, talking, moreover, to an obscure [young female, doctoral!] academic who poses, as far as they are concerned, absolutely no threat'.

The interviews were used by Pearson to provide accounts and justifications of their education work. As we have already noted, and as Grek (2011) has argued in relation to her interviews as a young researcher with education policy elites in Scotland, the researcher provided an 'audience' for the explication of official public representations of Pearson's position, as was the case with the OECD example above. In this case, interviewing corporate policy elites was complex given, as Alvesson (2011) argues, that most researchers hold a romanticised view of the interviewing process, whereby 'interviewing is grounded in an image of a potentially honest, unselfish subject, eager or at least willing to share his or her experiences and knowledge for the benefit of the interviewer and the research project' (p. 29). Alvesson observes further that interviewees 'may be politically aware and politically motivated actors' (p. 29). We would suggest that Pearson interviewees were both. In Pearson's quest to become an influential policy actor in education, it has adopted a business strategy focused on proving its legitimacy and increasing its authority in

education and in education policy. We have written about these business strategies elsewhere (Hogan et al., 2015, 2016), but it is worth noting that many of these strategies are about shaping the discourses around private involvement in public education.

In summary, the relative ease of access to interviewing policy elites within Pearson cannot be explained fully by the positionality of the researcher or what Pearson could gain from the research or interviewing experience, but rather how Pearson could use the process as an opportunity to promote their brand and their positionality within the field of education as *legitimate*. It suggests that researchers wanting to conduct interviews with corporate policy elites need to carefully consider the motives behind the representations collected from interviewees as data. If we were to accept the dominant view of the interview as a tool in which a knowledge-transmitting logic prevails, then we have to accept that the interviewees were motivated by a desire to assist science where ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ answers were provided and, that the data could be mobilised as a ‘competent source of meaning, knowledge and intentionality’ (Alvesson, 2011, p. 107). However, theorising the interviewees as political actors rather than as ‘truth tellers’ helped to focus on particular details in interview texts, and challenge the data in terms of its political motivations (Alvesson, 2011). It is thus necessary to recognise the interview process as an ambiguous and complicated encounter that should not be idealised, and where researcher reflexivity is critically important for data interpretation and representation in education policy sociology.

Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed three cases of interviewing policy elites in education, albeit policy elites of different kinds that are situated in different locations, namely: an idiosyncratic nation-state; an influential international organisation in the global governance of education through its testing regimes, data based policy work and national reviews; and a powerful edu-business that is a significant policy actor in education globally in the context of network governance and privatisation and commercialisation of education. Researcher positionality is an important issue that cuts across these cases. In the Omani and Pearson cases, the status of the studies as doctoral research affected access to policy elites, making it difficult in the case of Oman, while also reflecting its political structure as a hierarchical Sultanate; and making it relatively easy in the case of Pearson, as the interviewees sought to present the case for Pearson and positioned the researcher as audience. The situation was different in terms of researcher positionality in relation to the OECD study. More experienced researchers with a long research involvement at the organisation had ready access, but in the visit discussed here were required to present research-in-progress findings to OECD staff as the *quid pro quo* for continuing research

and interview access. As shown, this presentation opened up further insights into developments in the Directorate for Education and Skills. Indeed, it might be said that the requirement to present a paper at the OECD enabled better understanding of internal complexities and contestation inside the Organisation. This also raised awareness of the ways senior policy actors, sitting at the interface with the political work of the Organisation, also seemed to regard the research interview as part of their policy work and the need to proselytise the OECD's position on education matters, sometimes leading to a kind of filibustering in the research interviews. Recognition of the variant ways differently positioned interviewees responded in research interviews was important for understanding the internal workings of the OECD and the different policy habituses of those focused on policy and those more focused on research.

In each case, we see the positioning of 'researcher as audience' for the views of the policy elites. Power differentials and relations, as well as asymmetry and gendered relations, in the interviews make it difficult to interrupt such functioning of the interview and the control exercised by interviewees over their representation of policy. Importantly, reflections on the nature of the interview also provide useful data in respect of the nature of policy work and the culture of the organisations being researched. This worked differently in relation to each of the three cases, but in all cases provided further insights and data. We thus suggest that researcher/policy elite relationships can be seen as a source of data and stress the value of structured reflections on interview situations immediately following their completion. Insights from the research interview relationships provided insights into the character of policy and policymaking in each of the three cases and of the habitus of elite policy actors.

The issues traversed in this chapter also raise questions about the representations of research findings derived from interviews with policy elites. It is the case, particularly when interviewing policy elites in education, 'that one cannot trust simply to one's own good faith, and this is true because all kinds of distortions are embedded in the very structure of the research relationship' (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 608). We thus argue for the necessity of ongoing researcher reflexivity regarding interview data collected from policy elites and the need to use various practices of triangulation of interview data with other data sets, so as to provide defensible accounts of what is going on in policymaking in education and the role of elites in this work. This also means we need to critically engage in (and reflect on) the interview process itself, understanding the rationales of those elites consenting to be interviewed and how this might frame their responses to questions in the interview situation. We need to be ever vigilant in our research interviews, and in our representations and analyses of interview data, so as not to be captured by the views extant in the organisations we are researching, yet at the same time, we need to be open-minded and practise a 'reflex reflexivity' (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 608). Our stance is thus one that rejects 'epistemological innocence' (Bourdieu et al., 1999) in all

research endeavours, but particularly when interviewing policy elites and utilising the data so gained to understand education policy and policy processes.

Notes

- 1 Author names are listed in alphabetical order.
- 2 Word limits have meant we have not dealt with the ways different types of questions also function in the elite interview and also have effects on the data collected.

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