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The turn towards policy mobilities and the theoretical-methodological implications for policy sociology

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects critically upon how the 'mobilities turn' in the social sciences, and its subsequent contribution towards 'policy mobilities', offers theoretical and methodological resources that can be usefully harnessed in education policy sociology. Just as there are new ways in which policy is being made and moved, there are equally new ways to *be* a researcher of education policy who seeks to understand these processes. My purpose here is to help crystallise and make explicit these new mobilities-informed approaches, not only for the purpose of considering how mobility can help reconsider how to think and practise policy sociology, but also to better reflect and accommodate the empirical changes inherent in contemporary policymaking and enactment. I first survey the literature around the mobilities turn and emphasise its implications for social science research, before turning to how policy mobilities theories and methodologies can be employed within policy sociology. Finally, I close the paper by reflecting on the implications of conducting policy sociology with a policy mobility lens and outline the issues that come from foregrounding movement in the research of education policy.

Introduction

This paper reflects critically upon how the 'mobilities turn' (Urry, 2007) in the social sciences offers theoretical and methodological resources that can be usefully harnessed in the thinking and practice of policy sociology in education.[1] Given 'policy sociology' has steadily evolved since Ozga's (1987) foundational contribution, my purpose here is to explore how the ideas, frameworks and approaches around mobilities and, more specifically, policy mobilities can complement and contribute towards a better policy sociology. Specifically, I argue that such mobilities-informed resources are useful precisely because policy sociology *itself* has directed attention to new empirical 'realities', which then requires conceptual and analytical languages, tools and assumptions that can adequately describe and analyse these realities. Policies – as well as the diverse people and places that disseminate, enact and research them – are 'on the move' (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 169) like never before. In this sense, policy mobilities – a critical concern for how policy is produced, mobilised and implemented from elsewhere into

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new locations – greatly expands the conceptual and methodological tools through which policy sociology can account for this movement and its context-specific enactment. This arguably helps build a better, more encompassing, and more attentive policy sociology.

In my calling for a more explicit, rather than implicit, awareness of how policy mobilities can inform policy sociology, it is important not to overstate the perceived novelty of mobilities-informed approaches. There is much to suggest that policy mobilities theories, concepts and methods have indeed begun to make a palpable impression within policy sociology, in terms of both their utility and their impact. In recent years, for example, we have seen policy mobilities expressly employed to understand a variety of policy issues, including: the movement and local enactment effects of advocacy networks (Lubienski, 2018); private tutoring in the Global South (Edwards et al., 2019); charter school policies in the US (Cohen, 2017); the development and implementation of national teaching standards (Lewis et al., 2019); and the international movement of 'learning to code' policy agendas (Williamson et al., 2019). Such research focuses not only on the fact that policies *move* geographically – with their genesis, mobility and uptake often involving distant and dispersed networks of people and places – but also that their implementation and effects are mediated by highly contextualised local conditions. Similarly, a recent special issue of *Critical Studies in Education* (Volume 58, Issue 2) was devoted to exploring how the mobility turn has been variously employed by policy sociology researchers, providing insights into its use as both a theoretical lens and a methodological approach (see, for instance, Cohen, 2017; Gulson et al., 2017; McKenzie, 2017; Metcalfe, 2017).

Despite policy sociology now drawing on mobilities-informed concepts, albeit often in more implicit ways (for instance, the broad impact of globalisation on education policy; see Ball & Junemann, 2012), there are nonetheless very few works that explicitly argue for the acknowledgement of policy mobilities tenets in policy sociology, even as these ideas become increasingly important and useful. Gulson and Symes (2017) have noted that 'mobility has not been the object and focus of much analysis in education' (p. 127), an observation not just limited to the mobility of policy itself, but also the equally mobile researchers – as well as their concepts and methods – who seek to understand these policies and their effects. If policy sociology is to grasp the complexities of globalisation and its various effects on education policy, then policy sociologists also need to more explicitly acknowledge and embrace the implications arising from an ontology that foregrounds movement. In other words, just as there is a new way that policy is being made and moved, there is equally a new (and arguably necessary) way to *be* a researcher of policy and understand these processes.

My purpose with this paper is to help crystallise and make explicit these new mobilities-informed approaches, not only for the purpose of considering how policy mobilities can help reconsider how to practise policy sociology, but also to better reflect and accommodate the empirical changes inherent in contemporary education policy-making and enactment. First, I survey the literature around the mobilities turn and emphasise its implications for social science research, before turning to how the theoretical and methodological insights of policy mobilities can be employed to the study of education via policy sociology. I demonstrate the 'connectedness' and relationality of emergent policies, policy processes and policy networks; their extension across and beyond traditional boundaries; the movement of policy within and across these spaces;

and the methodological implications of accommodating these evolving realities of move-ment. Finally, I close the paper by reflecting on the implications of conducting policy sociology with a policy mobilities lens and outline the benefits that come from fore-grounding movement in the research of education policy.

Policy sociology research on the move

As a research approach, policy sociology – 'rooted in the social science tradition, historically informed and drawing on qualitative and illuminative techniques' (Ozga, 1987, p. 144) – sought to move beyond the technical, evaluative and applied nature of policy research that typified the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the U.K. Until then, policies were understood as concrete entities, employed by rational actors to solve known problems with clearly definable outcomes, and policy research was most con-cerned with contributing towards effective policy development and implementation. By contrast, Ozga (1987) sought to reframe policy less as an obvious solution and more as the 'means by which power and control operated' (Ozga, 2019, p. 10), meaning that policy sociology research should draw attention to the power relations manifest in policy and the policymaking process. A guiding rationale of policy sociology remains under-standing the distribution of power across policy cycles, and contesting the dominant forms of knowledge, authority and discourse in policymaking; in short, attending to 'how a contemporary problem is defined, [and] how mechanisms of power and knowledge production are mobilised in particular forms of defining problems and finding their solutions' (Ozga, 2019, p. 6).

This should not suggest, however, that all education policy research can be collapsed together under the single umbrella of policy sociology. It is clearly imprudent to equate all forms of critical education policy analysis – conducted by all people in all places – with policy sociology, especially in contexts where more 'traditional' evaluative approaches and traditions still dominate, such as in the US (for a critique of this trend, see Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Webb & Gulson, 2015). Nevertheless, the preceding years, across numerous scholarly outlets (e.g. *Journal of Education Policy, Critical Studies in Education, British Journal of Sociology of Education*, etc.), have witnessed the marked take-up of policy sociology logics and techniques within education policy studies research and literature. This is now to the point, arguably, where many critical scholars of education policy might readily identify themselves as practising policy sociology, or at least as being significantly informed by its concepts and approaches.

While these core logics have persisted in policy sociology, the tools and conceptual vocabularies available to policy sociologists have evolved in response to the various celebrated 'turns' in the social sciences. These have included, for instance, *affective* (Clough & Halley, 2007; McKenzie, 2017), *governance* (S. Ball, 2009), *data* (Ozga, 2009), *numbers* (Grek, 2009), *topological* (Lewis et al., 2016; Lury et al., 2012), *digital* (Williamson, 2017), *assemblage* (Savage, 2020) and, of particular import here, *mobilities* (Urry, 2007) turns. As Ozga (2019) has prudently noted, the theoretically driven nature of policy sociology requires it to constantly accommodate these diverse theoretical resources and acknowledge how they impact upon processes of knowledge production.

Reflecting on the fundamental question of *what is policy* posed more than two decades ago, Ball (2015, p. 306) notes that early policy sociology research sought to address two

overarching problems: 'how we understand what we mean by policy and how we research it'. These perennial questions still animate the contemporary study of education policy, its development, its movement and its enactment, even if the conditions, contexts and methods in which these questions are now asked are vastly different. Indeed, I would argue that the uptake of policy mobilities within policy sociology has led people to engage with Ball's questions in a variety of innovative ways that have seen the continuing evolution of policy sociology, both in response to new empirical challenges and to accommodate the new theoretical and methodological tools at one's disposal. For instance, a policy mobilities rationale of 'following the policy' (Ball, 2016; Peck & Theodore, 2015) – where one follows (virtually or in-person) the people, places and processes through which policy is made and moves – is now central for policy sociologists who seek to address the networked nature of education policymaking, as well as for understanding how the enactment of 'global' policy flows is still very much shaped by decidedly 'local' conditions and contexts. Accounting for this dynamism through policy mobilities helps deal with the problematic coupling of relationality and territory that underpins much policy sociology: dynamic movement and, simultaneously, the contextual embeddedness of policy, *vis-à-vis* people and places.

I should be clear that this reorientation of policy sociology to intentionally incorporate mobilities thinking *is not* mere methodological fetishism, but instead stems from significant changes to how, where, by whom and to what ends education policies are now being made, transferred, borrowed, negotiated and enacted. Reflecting on the potential methodological limitations of social science, Law and Urry (2004, pp. 403–404) have highlighted its frequent inability to adequately deal with the complexity of the 21st-century, imbued as it is with phenomena that are 'fleeting', 'emotional', 'distributed', 'multiple' and 'sensory'. These are characteristics of many (if not all) contemporary social processes and practices, not least of which are the mechanisms of education policy and policymaking. One need only consider the present global calamity of COVID-19 to recognise the extent to which social spaces, and the policies that seek to know and govern these spaces, are necessarily informed by, and forced to respond to, events with origins elsewhere, but with these taking shape in myriad local ways. More than ever, the current connectivity of the world, and the unparalleled mobility of people, products, policies and pathogens, has forced a stark reckoning of where policy sociologists might direct their attention.

Put simply, education policies are now being realised in relational spaces not defined solely by the territorial boundaries of the nation-state (Ball, 2016; Lewis et al., 2016); are developed by actors and organisations not necessarily situated in government bureaucracies and traditional sites of policy formation (Gulson & Sellar, 2019); and, judging by their global reach, transfer and take-up, are in constant states of movement and mutation (Lewis et al., 2019; Savage, 2020). Such policies now exist, move and are engaged with in social spaces that reflect what Smith (2003) describes as an 'ontology of movement' (p. 562), in which the complexity of networks, flows, fluids and folds are increasingly recognisable. The influence of spaces and relations associated with globalisation (Amin, 2002) upon the policy cycle in education thus suggests that issues of movement and context *beyond territoriality* become key research considerations in policy sociology, enabling one to understand 'what a politics that moves beyond such limitations might look like, how it is constructed, [and] how it is assembled' (Cochrane & Ward, 2012, p. 5).

The mobilities paradigm: accounting for frictions and flows

Although issues of movement were traditionally the focus of human geography and urban studies, the early 2000s saw an increasing awareness and reconceptualisation of movement as a set of complex social-technical practices (Sheller & Urry, 2016) across a vast array of social spaces. Drawing on fields including anthropology, cultural studies, geography, migration studies, science and technology studies, tourism and transport studies, and sociology, Sheller and Urry (2006) argued the need for a 'new mobilities paradigm'. This focus on mobilities sought to theorise the social world as 'a wide array of economic, social and political practices, infrastructures and ideologies that *all involve, entail or curtail various kinds of movement of people, or ideas, or information, or objects*' (Büscher et al., 2011, p. 4, emphasis added). Drawing upon Urry's (2002) schematisation of mobility, Bissell (2017) suggests this new mobilities paradigm:

> . . . has been concerned with tracing the relationships of different sorts of mobility and how they are entangled . . . [These include] the *physical movement* of objects; the *virtual travel* of digital communication; the *corporeal movement* of people and the *imaginative travel* of imagery and ideas. (p. 141; emphasis added)

Significantly, these observations are both empirical and theoretical, insofar as contemporary social life is marked by the growth of 'mobile' cultural practices that, in turn, provides fertile ground for deploying mobility as an analytical tool, both in everyday life *and* in social and cultural theory. Mobility at once thus provides a new conceptual vocabulary (i.e. the analytical) while also gesturing towards a new, or at least newly explored, empirical phenomenon (i.e. the descriptive).

Regardless of the specific type of movement (physical, virtual, corporeal, imaginative), the mobilities paradigm draws attention to precisely this movement. It is predicated upon all places, and their respective people and objects, being 'tied into at least thin networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place' (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 209), in which no person or place can any longer be considered an island, entire of itself. However, to focus on mobilities is to be concerned with movement and, at the same time, its comparative *absence*; that is, how it is enabled, how it is impeded, and what happens when things do (or do not) move. By way of a specific example concerning education policy, consider the inability of incarcerated students in Australia to access online university courses (see Farley & Hopkins, 2017). Here, mobility is not just defined by one's physical movement (i.e. the ability to move freely in social spaces), but also one's relative (in)ability to access online learning because of restrictions to internet access, and the subsequent limits this imposes on future life prospects and career opportunities. In short, to observe the world through the lenses afforded by mobility is to construct 'a world of transitory hardenings and fluids' (Smith, 2003, p. 569), or *frictions* and *flows*.

Moreover, people and things are not only in (relative) states of motion, but these movements are facilitated by connections that point towards considering how physical and virtual mobilities, and material and figurative networking infrastructures, have become incorporated and interwoven. We can see here the intersection between the physical and the virtual, as different types of mobilities allow for placement in, and movement through, a variety of real and virtual spaces. This simultaneous positioning of actors and objects in multiple 'small worlds' (Urry, 2002) invokes what Adey and Bevan

(2006) describe as a state of *transmateriality*, or 'the movement, or constant flow, between the physical or material and the virtual, or immaterial' (p. 57). Such a conceptualisation of 'being' (of a person or object; in a place) has significant ontological (and, for policy sociology, methodological) implications, insofar as physical absence can be negated, more or less, by virtual presence (and vice versa), in which presence occurs as 'various nodes in multiple machines of inhabitation and mobility' (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 221).

Mobility thus emerges through the constant connection and interaction of these material and virtual domains, and it is difficult within a mobilities paradigm to distinguish between material and immaterial worlds, given that they both provide spaces in which actors and objects can exist and affect others. It is not that virtual presence or identity precisely reflects one's 'real' identity or self; nor that the virtual is a more or less perfect simulation of the material. Rather, these exist as a multiplicity of spaces and being(s), in which the virtual can be as real, or at times even more real, than the physical, insofar as it generates decidedly real effects. Such a multiplicity of placement(s) has significant implications for how education policy is created, moves and enacted, as well as where (and to whom) one might look when undertaking policy sociology research.

Take, for instance, my own research into *PISA4U* (Lewis, 2020), a new online professional learning instrument of the OECD based on data from the triennial PISA test. This has required attention not only to the various actors and organisations that have developed and used the programme, in countries across the world, but also the communities and spaces forged virtually by PISA4U administrators and users via social media platforms, replete with cartoon avatars, hashtags and pseudonyms. Despite existing in both real and virtual guises, it is now arguably impossible to disentangle the real from the virtual, and vice versa, especially in terms of how they both enable these PISA-related policies, discourses and practices to move, as well as have tangible impacts to how schooling is thought and practised. Importantly, this imbrication of real and virtual requires attention to *all* of these spaces as policy sociologists, both in how policy sociologists conduct research and, even more fundamentally, which questions this research seeks to answer in the first place.

Emphasising this connectedness and simultaneous placement in multiple social spaces arguably helps enable new ways of seeing the social world, both in everyday life and in more analytically reflective modes of thought. As Sheller and Urry (2006) note, the co-constitution and mutability of space through social relations, and the mobilisation of the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences, is a central theoretical contribution to the emergence of the mobilities paradigm, given that it helps:

> ... disturb bipolar logics of the local and the global, or the mobile and the immobile, and suggest the co-constitution of embodiments, landscapes, and systems of local and global mobility ... [A]s people, capital, and things move, *they form and reform space itself* (as well as the subjectivities through which individuals inhabit spaces) through their attachments and detachments, their slippages and 'stickiness'. (p. 216; emphasis added)

It is important to note here that the mobilities paradigm need not necessarily exclude other scalar or territorial analyses (e.g. the continuing role of the nation-state or government bureaucracies), but neither does it solely draw attention to different sets of spatial issues (e.g. the presence of new transnational actors across the policy cycle). Rather,

mobilities provide a new way of thinking about existing spaces and scales (e.g. the role of the State in shaping the mobilisation of policy), as well as helping to complicate territorial, State-centric accounts of policymaking (see Bok & Coe, 2017). Despite Baker and Temenos (2015) noting that 'researchers have long been aware that . . . politics and policy are never just local' (p. 824), it is equally important to acknowledge that neither do local spaces, nor local enactments of policy, ever entirely cease to retain their *local*-ness, regardless of the persistent (and increasing) presence and influence of global flows.

If we consider these insights collectively, such as the foregrounding of (im)mobility as a primary matter of concern and the mutable qualities of space and objects (both real and virtual), we can begin to trace the qualities of a mobilities-informed social science, and policy sociology in particular. It challenges the ways much social science research has been what Sheller and Urry (2006) describe as 'a-mobile' or 'sedentarist', where territorially bounded scalar regions or nation-states are presumed to be 'the fundamental basis of human identity and experience and as the basic units of social research' (pp. 208–209). This has significant research implications, not only for revising the ontological primacy of 'territory' and the social processes occurring within territories (e.g. education, healthcare, immigration), but also because so many sociological concepts and categories actually rely on territorial lenses for understanding and measuring education (e.g. class, gender, race, socio-economic disadvantage). Although many policy mobilities concepts and approaches originated in the fields of human geography and urban studies and were evidently not developed or intended for employment within policy sociology of education, they have nonetheless provided considerable analytical tools and insights for understanding the complexity and mobility of education policy processes.

Adopting research frameworks informed by a mobilities paradigm, and foregrounding relational spaces untethered to territories, allows one to eschew 'methodological territorialism' (Jessop et al., 2008), and instead look to the new social spaces and relations through which people and objects (both material and discursive) move, without unduly privileging the nation-state or other *a priori* scalar spaces. Turning specifically to the study of education policy, this helps overcome the limits of imagining policy-making /doing in purely territorial terms, and, at the same time, challenges the sociological concepts and categories that are often applied to analyses of policy. As we shall see, however, employing a mobilities-informed policy sociology also requires attending to how these global processes and movements come to manifest in local sites and specific contexts. Rather than movement being the preeminent factor, such approaches help policy sociology acknowledge that what is stable and place-based is as important to consider as what is mobile and 'on-the-move'.

Policy sociology *à la* policy mobilities

Theoretical implications

Given the emergence of the mobilities paradigm, one can argue the reshaping of both 'the objects of its inquiries and the methodologies for research' (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208), which should encourage policy sociologists to consider how 'our very modes of "knowing" [are] being transformed by the very "mobile" processes that we wish to study' (p.

212). In other words, if the policy spaces associated with globalisation are no longer *a priori* and instead emerge in-context through social relations, then policy sociology, arguably, should also be directed towards where and how these emergent practices are actually occurring. These might include more well-established organisations, such as the OECD, or instantly recognisable policy entrepreneurs, such as Andreas Schleicher (Director of the OECD's Directorate of Education and Skills). However, they might equally include the less readily apparent; for instance, Twitter-based communities of teachers who discuss the release of PISA results; or Edtech conventions where thousands of delegates congregate in fleeting, yet impactful, moments. It is not that bounded sites of study – the school classroom or national Minister of Education's office – are no longer relevant when undertaking policy sociology, but they similarly cannot be *all* that is relevant. Otherwise, we risk overlooking influential actors, actions and impacts simply because they are not where we have traditionally found them, nor where we might think to look in the first place.

Like everything else, education policy is very much 'on the move'. Indeed, movement seems to be a defining factor across the policy cycle, from the circulation of global 'what works' solutions that help frame policy problems (Lewis, 2017), to the increasingly seamless transfer of data across and between vast technical infrastructures (Gulson & Sellar, 2019; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019), to the itinerant consultants and gurus who promote 'off-the-shelf' solutions to all manner of problems facing schooling policy and practice (McKnight & Whitburn, 2020). Policy mobilities emphasises the dynamic movement (or flows) of policy and, at the same time, the contextual embeddedness of its uptake, contestation and enactment (frictions) by people and places. The challenge, then, in adopting a mobilities-informed approach to policy sociology requires 1) accounting for the new relational spaces of the policy cycle (i.e. new people and places); 2) observing how these policies move within and across, and simultaneously reconfigure, these spaces, including the social-technical practices that enables these movements (i.e. the effects of policy *on context);* and 3) how these interactions and movements through space, as well as local processes of implementation, reshape the policies in question (i.e. the effects of context *on policy*).

Addressing these points, the need to look beyond territorial spaces and consider global flows should not occur at the expense of considering how local people and places shape how policy is taken up and implemented. Indeed, all policy moves through reiterative phases of re/de/contextualisation – or *re/dis/assemblage* (Savage & Lewis, 2018; Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015) – as it is made and remade through interaction with people and places, and in ways that require policy sociologists to be attuned to the movement of policy and the specific politics of place. Similarly, Baker and Temenos (2015) assert that policy mobilities must explore 'the processes, practices and resources brought together to *construct, mobilise and territorialise* policy knowledge' (p. 825; emphasis added). Policies are never transferred 'fully formed' from afar into new spaces, but are instead (re)made and enacted through processes of re/de/contextualisation (or re/dis/assembly), with these processes directly shaped by unique local arrangements of people, practices and places. This awareness enables policy sociologists to be sensitive to the myriad ways in which policies are constantly unfolding (i.e. taking shape), just as local places and contexts are similarly always being enfolded into (i.e. shaping) the policy as it is enacted.

Drawing on these traditions, and despite the focus on movement, one can see the continuing salience of place, which supports adopting a policy sociology that acknowledges the dialectic of fixity/flow: an analysis that is both global and local, and always close to practice (see McCann & Ward, 2015). These processes of policy translation never achieve perfect facsimiles when a policy moves from one place to the other, reflecting instead how policies move through 'inherent tensions between local specificity and global interconnectedness' (Peck & Theodore, 2015, p. xxviii), or between (contextual) frictions and (relational) flows. This is especially important in the context of what might appear, at first glance, to be globally homogenous policy formations, or instances of widespread policy convergence (e.g. 'PISA shock'; top-down, test-based accountabilities). Indeed, we risk assuming otherwise that the same policy logics or practices will always produce the same results (see Lewis et al., 2019), with the implication being that we will then fail to understand these varied spaces and policy processes in sufficient detail, or else risk ignoring them entirely as merely more redundant research sites. As Piattoeva et al. (2019) have recently emphasised, context *matters*. To this end, an explicit mobilities-informed policy sociology helps foreground the nuanced manner by which policy is *always* taken-up and enacted in ways that reflect local context(s). The inherent difference between such contexts also hopefully helps a mobilities-informed policy sociology turn its focus to non-traditional cases and study sites beyond the Global North and Anglo-speaking world (for an elaboration of this argument, see Takayama & Lingard, 2019).

While these tenets are central to the policy mobilities literature, these fixity/flow insights are far from unbroken ground for policy sociology, and there is much to reconcile the two research traditions. Indeed, these approaches strongly resonate with those of Ozga (2019), who understands policy as 'made and remade in process; as multi-sited, fluid and unstable; and as open to contestation (p. 9), as well as the broader processes of contingent, site-specific policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012). Taken together, one can appreciate how notionally hegemonic 'global' policies – e.g. the OECD's PISA – cannot affect the myriad people and places they encounter without themselves being affected by these same people and places, experienced both in-transit and at destination. In short, a key focus of a mobilities-informed policy sociology is that policies do not merely circulate; rather, they are 'made-up' locally (Robinson, 2015), whereby *parts of elsewhere* (Allen & Cochrane, 2007) are rendered near and relevant to a variety of specific *here(s)*. As such, undertaking policy sociology – or seeking to answer the 'what is policy' question proffered by Ball – requires one consider the various contributing actors, processes and places, both here and elsewhere, that contribute towards this 'making-up' of policy.

Methodological implications

Now that a theoretical and empirical justification has been laid for adopting policy mobilities to explore education policy, it is conceivable to explicate how exactly one might 'do' a mobilities-informed policy sociology. However, it is not my purpose here to describe a prescriptive, 'how-to' approach. My reasons are two-fold: for one, the methodologies employed in policy mobilities are 'less defined by any overarching theoretical orientation than by a renewed empirical sensitivity to the movement of materials and ideas' (McKenzie et al., 2015, p. 321); thus, it is less important precisely

how one captures movement than it is that movement is addressed as a primary matter of concern. Indeed, the methodological responses to such research challenges in policy sociology have employed such varied approaches as distended case study, or 'following the policy' (McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2015); network analysis, or 'network ethnography' (Ball, 2016); broader ethnographic and anthropological traditions (Roy, 2012); as well as 'inventive methods' that emerge creatively and in-context (Gulson et al., 2017; Lury & Wakeford, 2012). My efforts here are to illustrate what might come from explicitly deploying mobilities-informed thinking within policy sociology, rather than specifically where that thinking might necessarily lead (for a similar advocacy, albeit for assemblage approaches to policy research, see Baker & McGuirk, 2017).

Second, a policy mobilities approach has to balance the tension between 'the need to carefully design research projects, on the one hand, and the reality of unexpected connections, mutations, and research sites emerging during the projects, on the other' (McCann & Ward, 2012, p. 43). Indeed, this methodological *ad-hocery* is almost a feature, rather than a flaw, of a mobilities-informed policy sociology, not to mention a necessary (and long-standing) reaction by policy sociologists to the complexity of researching education (see Ball, 1993, p. 10). While methods obviously have to match researchable problems and the means by which they can be investigated, policy sociologists can also amend such problems *through method*, whereby new and emergent mobile methods actually change how problems are framed and researched (see Lury & Wakeford, 2012). Adopting these policy mobilities approaches means the underlying questions of policy sociology can not only yield new answers but also, significantly, new *questions*, as well as providing new means of answering these questions. This enables policy sociology to more fulsomely pose old(er) questions to new people and places (e.g. how does PISA data and testing affect the Global South or individual teachers?), as well as asking new(er) questions altogether (e.g. how does the dissemination of PISA results via social media influence the spread and intensity of its influence?).

So, where do we begin if we are to think critically through policy mobilities and choose to emphasise an ontology of movement? This is especially relevant given the apparent policy convergences witnessed globally, such as the Sahlberg's (2011) *Global Education Reform Movement*. However, even if the adoption of similar-sounding policies in different places may suggest notionally similar practices, policy mobilities draws attention to the complexity and contestation of policy movement and translation. McCann and Ward (2012) identify three interrelated mobile objects of study – namely, *mobile policies, places* and *people* – in order to ask: 'What situations, "transit points" and "sites of persuasion" do policies travel through? How do education policies mutate as they travel? [and] How do mobile policies impact the character and politics of place?' (p. 48). To these three mobile objects of study, I also suggest a useful, if less mobile, fourth consideration for policy mobilities and a cognate policy sociology, that is, the fixed *place-based contexts* into which policies, places and people move, and the manner by which these contexts themselves help imbue notionally global policies with distinctively local characteristics. Taken together, this leaves two major methodological considerations that require attention: *following*, or 'flows' (i.e. focusing on the movement and mutation of policies, and the actors and objects that facilitate or impede this movement); and *situations*, or 'frictions'

(i.e. being alert to the relational situated of sites through which policies move and/or are implemented) (McCann & Ward, 2012, pp. 46–47).

Although a mobilities-informed policy sociology entails a certain theoretical understanding of the social world, it is equally about adopting a specific research disposition. It is not just a spatial awareness, but also a social and relational awareness that is necessary to understand how policymaking spaces and interactions are brought to bear. Indeed, 'presence', however construed (i.e. physically and/or virtually), is necessary to achieve the depth of understanding sufficient to make sense of the relations that enable policy movement and enactment to occur, and through which such social spaces are animated and given form. And it is not just policies that twist and turn but also the policy spaces themselves, with context shaping policy as policy recursively reconfigures the spaces through which it moves. My efforts here have been to avoid encouraging what might best be described as a tokenistic engagement with mobility, that is, merely a useful set of dynamic metaphors (*flow, transfer, mutate, move* …) with which to approach the study of education policy. Rather, I would attest that an ontology of movement and innovative, contextually driven research methods are key if policy sociologists are to better understand complex contemporary social processes, spaces and relations.

Some concluding thoughts on explicitly doing mobilities-informed policy sociology

Given these theoretical and methodological mobilities-informed contributions to policy sociology, where this leave policy sociologists? How do these empirical and conceptual conditions enable the critical understanding of education policy? What questions and matters of concern do these new analytical lenses unearth? And what possibilities exist to better understand how education policy processes have become thoroughly respatialised, recontextualised and mobilised? Policy sociologists now look beyond the usual spaces and actors within government and the nation-state, and are themselves mobile between and across disciplines. Policy sociology has historically been both *adoptive* (i.e. borrowing from other fields) and *adaptive* (i.e. shifting in research foci and approaches), and has long resisted being located in any particular disciplinary tradition (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 20). However, the complexity of contemporary policy development, movement and enactment has encouraged a further broadening of conceptual and methodological horizons, as well as diminishing prior commitments to clear lines of disciplinary demarcation. I thus see great benefit emphasising how policy mobilities have encouraged the uptake of such ideas within policy sociology to help better understand the complexity that so characterises contemporary policy processes.

Above all else, incorporating policy mobilities within policy sociology presumes an ontology of movement in relation to policy, be it the flow of policy to new places or, at the same time, the re/dis/contextualisation of policy in new place-specific ways. This is not to say that policy has not moved previously; it has always been in motion, from places of production to places of enactment. Policy sociology has rightly sought to trace these movements and explore how processes of power and knowledge production are animated within them (see Ozga, 2019). The present concern with the movement of policy, people and places, and its utility to policy sociology, is largely because policy sociology

had already begun to incorporate tools and languages that draw attention to matters of movement. However, while earlier policy sociology research often *implicitly* drew on concepts from policy mobilities, I see great benefit from policy sociologists more *explicitly* acknowledging their use of policy mobilities-informed tools and concepts.

We can acknowledge then the clear lineage of policy sociology *adapting* over time to reflect the new empirical realities and cases that confront researchers; and *adopting* novel concepts and approaches that help address known issues, as well as newer, unforeseen issues. These mobility theories, tools and languages have become useful because they describe the world we see – a world of flows and movement, across and beyond national borders – and because they draw attention to new instances where that movement (or the implications of that movement) may not be so readily apparent. This is not to unduly privilege movement over context; as Kuus (2015) notes, context is never merely a background. Such contexts are not merely the stage upon which actions and policies unfold, but are central to policy sociology that seeks to understand precisely *how* these unfoldings can (and do) occur, in an ongoing dialect of fixity and flow.

Acknowledging this mobility (i.e. of policy, people, place, researcher, and the relations between them) does a number of significant things for policy sociology. First, it helps policy sociologists build an argument that is *ontologically consistent* with what we have come to know about the complexities of policy development and enactment, which helps the researcher to anticipate movement and (im)mobility as a matter for concern. It foreshadows movement, and the need to look for and critically investigate such movement, including being reflexive to one's own movement as a researcher of policy. But, once policy sociologists are ontologically attuned to the need to anticipate movement, what can be done to actually 'know' these moving things? Second, with regards to *epistemology*, policy sociology needs epistemological tools (i.e. ways of generating knowledge and understanding) that help researchers account for movement, dynamism and flow. If mobility is an ontological assumption then the ways policy sociology understands this movement must accommodate these assumptions. There is much to suggest that methods of knowledge production need to be responsive to mobility, and even be mobile themselves. 'Comparative case study' (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) and 'distended case study' (Peck & Theodore, 2015) are but two examples that show how traditional methods have been adopted and adapted by policy sociology to address these contemporary phenomena.

In closing, I should reiterate my purpose is not to cast policy mobilities as something entirely new to policy sociology. For all the innovation and utility of mobilities-informed thinking and methods, their contribution is no clean break with either past policy sociology research, or policy sociology more generally. Rather, I have sought to bring attention to new theoretical and methodological issues that emerge from explicitly foregrounding movement, and suggest how these might be further incorporated and, importantly, acknowledged within contemporary policy sociology. Lury and Wakeford (2012) call to 'inventive methods' is an apt metaphor here. These methods might well be inventive by researching previously unseen phenomena and accommodating these new conditions – including, for that matter, how that problem is framed and researched in the first place. But, these methods will also necessarily be grounded in more 'established' ways of understanding policy production, enactment and movement. While innovative research methods (e.g. big-data analytics, network ethnography) are definitely helpful to understand how policy, people and places move (or not), it is

equally important to approach more traditional research methods (for instance, the face-to-face interview) with mobility in mind. In this way, policy sociology can critically reflect the prioritisation of theory to shaping the domains being studied (Ozga, 2019), as well as being alert to how changing empirical contexts shape the theoretical tools and questions of policy sociology – and the policy sociologists who practise it.

Note

1. For clarity, references to 'policy sociology' throughout this paper should be read as 'policy sociology *in education*'. This reflects the substantive focus on education within my own work and my desire to remain consistent with terminology first defined by Ozga in 1987. While other neologisms of policy sociology (in education) have indeed been proposed over the intervening decades (e.g. 'critical policy sociology', or CPS), my preference is to remain as close as possible to its original derivation; such is also the case for this very special issue ('The evolving state of policy sociology'). It is worth mentioning too that the 'critical' disposition and intent of policy sociology is something readily assumed, if often unnamed, by those who employ it. As Ozga (2019, p. 7) notes, the 'critical' element of policy sociology alludes to 'a form of alertness, a determination to judge, evaluate and analyse one's own ideas and those of others, but openly and carefully, allowing for a wide range of approaches'. Thus, following Ozga, I choose to leave off the redundant 'critical'. I should make clear that my purpose in this paper is neither to argue that policy sociology-*esque* approaches (e.g. theoretically-informed, concerned with exploring power relations, etc.) are not undertaken in research addressing other public policy domains, such as housing, immigration, public health, etc. These domains outside of education are not my particular focus, nor that of policy sociology (in education) more generally. Suffice it to say, my use of 'policy sociology' and 'policy sociologist' throughout this paper are related *only* to education.

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