Elites and Experts in Education Policy Summary

How changes in knowledge (for example from embodied, interpersonal communication to the growth of statistics, digital media and data) may affect the capacity of policy actors (political elites and experts) to govern education.

Elites in the past (in England): through shared 'assumptive worlds', education, experience, networks, practices of knowledge production-precedent as a guide to action.

Economic crisis late 70s, change from the 80s onwards: Thatcher, New Public Management, civil service reform, beginnings of technological change.

Rise of data from 2000s onwards, national and international, its rapid dissemination, increased availability, new actors, brokers, consultants and specialists promoting 'cognitive consensus' (Grundmann and Stehr 2013, Shiroma 2014) about policy directions.

Big data and epistemic governance: simultaneous externalisation of policy advice, and the politicisation of the knowledge production processes ....a new elite?

Action and Positional Elites

Positional elites exercise hierarchical forms of power through structural domination, through shared ideological conviction combined with the capacity to work within structures of domination (including education systems) to pursue their material and social interests-especially maintaining their position.

Action elites are defined more in terms of what they can do, with attention to distributed power, and to cultural resources that sustain dominance.

Combine these to explore what Scott (2008) calls the 'storage and holding of power' with the 'exercise and mobilization of power'

Power here understood as including struggle by by contending elite groups to gain or retain monopoly access to and control over the resource distributions that structures of domination institutionalise.

'The civil service is run by a small group of people who grew up together' (Heclo and Wildavsky 1974;76)

'

Research on the 'assumptive worlds' of policy makers 40s-70s describes how their social and professional identities are inextricably intertwined; public schools produce the generalist all rounder as the preferred model civil servant, characterised by integrity, detachment, and team-work.

The major Public schools and ancient universities were seen as ideal training grounds for such qualities, fostering cameraderie, loyalty and respect for tradition.

The close ties formed in these networks lasted from early school age through working life.

Elites shape knowledge

Through four distinct exercises of power:

-*Information suppression*, in which elites purposively act to suppress knowledge damaging to their interests;

-*Contesting knowledge*, in which elites fund experts to attack and disqualify knowledge that poses a threat to their power base;

-*Knowledge production*, in which elites fund or otherwise promote the production of particular knowledges, either through peer-reviewed scientific research or governmentally administered through tests and analyses;

-*Knowledge administration*, in which elites influence the selection of what information counts as knowledge and what information does not count. ⌊SEP⌋

Eric Bonds (2010)_The Knowledge-Shaping Process: Elite Mobilization and Environmental Policy *Critical Sociology* 37(4) 429–446

Official Knowledge: education civil servants 1960s-80s

'*As part of your stock in trade as an educational administrator you will have acquired a wide range of knowledge about both the work of the Department and the problems that beset the educational world.*

By the time you have been in the Department for some years you will have become familiar with the chief reports of the Councils, Committees and Working Parties of different kinds whose analyses of problems and recommendations for solving them form one of the main sources of material for policy making'.

(Toby Weaver-former Deputy Permanent Secretary in DES interviewed in 1986)

(For example)…you will certainly be familiar with what the Plowden report said about nursery education. You will know what the law says about the topic and how in the past it has been interpreted by the Department.

You will have at your elbow any regulations that bear on it. You will be familiar with the past and present policy of the Department, be ready to explain and defend it, be aware of its limitations.

You will do your best through books, journals and research articles to keep abreast of the development of expert thinking on the subject, and to read the press cuttings that cross your desk every day, in the hope of spotting anything relevant……Finally you will be wise to keep in touch one way or another with the Secretary of State's day to day thinking on the subject'

Political Advisers- the beginnings

'My role was in effect proposing, developing, researching what became our education policy for the 79 election and subsequently I was what's known as a special adviser to the Secretary of State following it through and developing it further-I was probably the only one in the 70s but then others came in on it as it developed throughout the 80s.

.....in addition, I produced publications from the IEA, [Institute of Economic Affairs] which are widely distributed to Ministers, MPs and so called opinion formers-so publications, conferences, seminars and lots and lots of informal meetings.'

(Stuart Sexton interviewed 1990)

Political Advisers: established

Well, they are bloody frightening, they are. [political advisers] Because they are usually people with very very little experience. Very ambitious, so this is only a step on the route. And, very opinionated. So, they will have views about exactly what needs to be done, that will be influenced by the press, public opinion, and not history.

From '74 through to '79, it was still.. the people running it were old-style civil servants, and they had excellent folk memories of how things had happened.

I mean, any sense of history has gone. It's gone from the civil service as well.

(Tim Brighouse, former Chief Education officer, June 2013)

New Knowledge and Knowledge Actors

Different claims to legitimacy: know-how, experiential and scientific knowledges;

From a diversity of recognised knowledge holders-commercial, corporate, as well as academic, scientific;

Free of 'silos'-what (ever) works, actionable, auditable, translatable –containing 'levers for action'

Fast-moving, internationalised, data-based.

Data Entry

'It is exploding. Extraordinary. And the reason is the role of indicators and statistics in the open method of coordination.....Inside the Commission we had a clear understanding that we had to develop that area because it is the strongest element in the open method of coordination.

This is how the Commission can say [to member states] that you can engage with certain objectives, or you are not following them....[we can identify] who is following, who succeeds, where the performance lies...'(EU3 2006)

'......it's interesting to reflect on how the work of a central government policy department has evolved. I'm sure that in olden times here people would have never grubbied their hands with the detail of what was going on in any individual school or institution in the country – that was a job for 'others' not for the mandarins of Whitehall – to a system now where certainly in the schools that are underperforming we're looking almost school by school about the kinds of intervention that are available'. (Permanent Secretary, DfE interviewed June 2009)

Experts and 'cognitive consensus': a new governing elite?

The rapid growth of experts, advisers and consultants in education arises from the rapid expansion of knowledge/information, this provides opportunities for simplification of the 'problem of endless competing interpretation in order to provide a basis for action.' (Grundmann & Stehr 2012: 20-21).

Simplification promotes 'cognitive consensus' (Grundmann and Stehr 2013) about policy problems and policy directions

These changes reconstitute knowledge as policy-forming rather than policy-informing, in other words, policy problems do not appear in the external environment but are identified through their statistical representation from which solutions are (apparently) also derived. (Grek and Ozga 2010)

Data Solutionism

The 'modelling' of education through digital data creates algorithmically driven 'systems thinking' where complex social problems are converted into complex but solvable statistical problems. Thus, digital data encourage 'solutionism' (Selwyn 2015)

Digital data enable schools and entire sectors of society such as education to be seen as 'computational' projects (Molstad and Pettersson 2019).

Data and data practices are not neutral representations or measurements of educational activities but bring these activities and results into being (Decuypere 2021).

A New Elite?

'It is not simply education and education services that are subject to forms of privatisation: education policy itself – through advice, consultation, research, evaluations and forms of influence – is being privatised' (Ball and Youdell 2008, 12).

'a new consolidation of power, expertise and financial capital capable of reaching into the beliefs, choices and behaviours of citizens. And such forms of power – transnational, networked, secretive, digital – typically tend to elude public scrutiny' (Wedel 2009).

A New Elite?

Experts – often advisors, consultants, policy entrepreneurs, think-tanks, philanthropic organizations or nongovernmental organizations–occupy an increasing role in the production of ideas (or 'policy paradigms') influencing policymakers' decisions. In doing so, not only do they prescribe the 'right' policy solutions but also, and fundamentally, elaborate diagnoses that build ways of seeing, prioritizing and interpreting educational problems.

….a growing number of private actors have begun to sponsor private education pilot undertakings or to finance established private providers as a way to influence policy making 'leading by example' (Fontdevila, Avelar, and Verger 2018). This strategy has been channelled especially by 'third generation' philanthropic organizations, also known as 'venture philanthropies', which conceive their donations in terms of investments, expect returns on those investments, and promote large-scale pro-market educational transformations.

(Mauro Moschetti, Marc Martínez Pons, Eloísa Bordoli & Pablo Martinis (2020) The increasing role of non-State actors in education policy-making. Evidence from Uruguay, Journal of Education Policy, 35:3, 367-393)

People have had enough of experts....

When the algorithms and analytical instruments that inform major news outlets, political pollsters and multinational companies are those trafficked by 'computational propagandists', it hardly seems surprising that scepticism about the authority of experts is on the rise (see Woolley & Howard, 2017).

'.....people in this country have had enough of experts from organizations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong'

Michael Gove –former Secretary of State for Education-quoted in Janet Newman & John Clarke (2018) The instabilities of expertise: remaking knowledge, power and politics in unsettled times, Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, 31:1, 40-54, DOI: 10.1080/13511610.2017.1396887]

After Covid

'To paraphrase The Communist Manifesto, all that was solid melted into air: 'globalization' went into reverse; long supply chains, that were previously the only 'rational' way to organize production, collapsed and hard borders returned; trade declined drastically; and international travel was severely constrained.

In a matter of days, tens of millions of workers became unemployed, and millions of businesses lost their employees, customers, suppliers and credit lines.' Saad-Fihlo (2020:477)

Education after Covid

The complexity of translating complex scientific knowledge and practice into action has become apparent as the crisis unfolds, as public and politicians have had to recognise that scientific knowledge is often emergent, disputatious, contingent and slow (Stone, 2019 Van Doren and Noordegraaf 2020) and that it does not necessarily provide a clear guide to action.

Will this lead to fundamental change in the data-driven 'structured agenda' for education, and a dilution of economically-driven learning and data-driven performance measurement ?

Or even greater dependence on educational technologies and technological 'solutionism' (Teras et al 2020)?

Psychodata

Coalitions of think tanks and philanthropic foundations …… have been attracted to the idea that social and emotional learning qualities are malleable and improvable, and therefore key to boosting academic attainment and shaping skills that are seen as valuable to social and economic progress.

Crucially, these coalitions act as relays between the domains of expertise and policy by packaging scientific knowledge into accessible evidence digests, standardized frameworks, and glossy reports and websites……..they are building on the scientific foundations established by key psycho-economic experts to construct the infrastructural supports necessary for SEL measurement.

Research Project Data Sources

Elites in Education Policy (with Sharon Gewirtz) Open University funded 1989-90)

Governing by Numbers: Data and Education Governance in Europe (ESRC RES 00-23-1385) (2006-09)

Governing by Inspection: School Inspection and Education Governance in Scotland, England and Sweden (ESRC RES 062 23 2241A) (2010-13)

Knowledge and Policy in the Health and Education Sectors in Europe (EUFP6 IP 028848-2) (2006-11)

Contrasting the Dynamics of Education Politics in England and Finland (Finnish Academy: Project leader Jaakko Kauko) (2012-2015)

Leverhume Emeritus Fellowship EM-2015-016: Governing Education: knowledge and policy in England and Scotland since 1988 (2016-2018)

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