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Researching Education Elites twenty years on: Sex, Lies and… video meetings

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Introduction

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

The visit took place and a fairly broad discussion was held with the promise on both sides to continue conversing. However, more important than what was actually

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

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

In ‘Sex, Lies and Audiotape: Interviewing the Education Policy Elite’ (1994), Ozga and Gewirtz are ‘concerned with problems and issues which arise in the gathering of life-
history interview evidence from polished and experienced policy practitioners in the context of a strong theoretical framework’ (1994;121). In their account, they foreground ethical dilemmas in conducting this research, given that their ‘strong theoretical frame’ was a Marxist adherence to research that aspires to social transformation, in addition to their feminist agenda (hence the ‘lies’ and ‘sex’ in the title). Their discussion of their experiences goes into depth in the relationship between theorizing and fieldwork, focusing explicitly on the ‘embeddedness of theory in values’ (1994;122). They highlight the ‘antithesis’ of critical theory with what they call ‘problem-solving’ theory. Finally, they eloquently discuss the challenges and experiences of (primarily female) researchers in doing research with elites. Here, in a beautifully written extract:

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

Following this brief reminder of the challenges and opportunities that interviewing education elites presented to Marxist feminist researchers in the early 1990s, this chapter asks if and how policy elites might have changed over the last few decades. Second, it explores what this might mean for the practice of researching contemporary education elites: what are the challenges, opportunities and new ethical dilemmas? With
the move away from government to governance and the perceived flattening out of hierarchical structures and power asymmetries, do the contemporary elites of transnational education governance, for example, have similar qualities with the actors occupying positions of power in the 1980s/early 1990s? In other words, how elite is the elite and how have new accountability and governance structures changed the ways ‘we’ and ‘they’ conceptualise the authority that they hold? What are the qualities of contemporary education elites as opposed to those that Ozga and Gewirtz met and ‘broke bread with’ (1994:130)? As this chapter will discuss, it is not only policy elites that might have changed; (education) research has also substantially altered; it is either produced by large technocracies seen as the modern truth oracles (see plentiful interesting analysis on the role of the OECD, for example), or by self-proclaimed ‘world-leading’ and elite higher education institutions.

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

Therefore, this chapter will primarily focus on the role of knowledge in the evolution of education elites: if there was a time that policy elites were formed on the basis of their social status and intuition (a certain form of ‘connoisseurship’ of government), what has changed with new policy elites whose good grasp of evidence and international networks have become the preferred tools for decision making? How prominent national education policy elites are and how much of their policy work is already predicated by expert, elite knowledge producers at the transnational level? How are the epistemic and the political enmeshed in this knowledge and policy relationship and what does the rise of transnational education governance suggest about the fate of previously powerful national policy elites? Finally, what does this changed knowledge production landscape mean for researching education elites? As this chapter will show, it appears that the primary capital contemporary education elites hold is not state power, upheld through traditional, bureaucratic and legislative tools, but the ability to move swiftly in and out of national and transnational policy making spaces, armed with the epistemic and symbolic capital that they skilfully master (Grek, 2020).
The production of new knowledge regimes and their impact on education, 1990s onwards

Before embarking on the (necessarily brief) analysis of the ways education research and knowledge production has changed over the last 30 years, a reminder of the context of that transformation is needed. To return to Ozga and Gewirtz’ account, it is clear from the start that it builds on a tradition of education research in England that sprang around the mid 1970s: issues around gender, class and race inequalities became pronounced in education research in the 1980s and early 1990s (Stanworth 1983; Troyna 1982) and hence the previous close relationship with the education policy world became much more strenuous and fragile. The Marxist/ feminist ideological standpoint that the Ozga & Gewirtz article openly takes, is further proof of a class of researchers that did not see education governing elites as allies in their struggle for ‘social transformation’ (1994; 123). As Young (2004) has commented, the tendency in this research tradition was to view policy as a means by which power and control operated; thus, the elite policy circles were seen as a close-knit group, complicit in the maintenance of unequal power relations. Ozga and Gewirtz’ piece follows, in this sense, a longer trajectory of the continental sociology of education which underlined the inability of education to ‘compensate for society’ (Bernstein 1970) and explained education’s role in social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976). Indeed, as if the strenuous relationship between education research and policy makers was not tense enough, the ‘80s and the early ‘90s became the period of the sharp economization of the education policy discourse, as well as the rise of a discourse around the need to raise ‘standards’ in schooling (DES 1985): this was the time of the growth of technical accountability and the parallel devolution of
management, in a general steer towards the making of a new imaginary of governing through performance measurement. Therefore, in some sense, at the time that Ozga and Gewirtz were conducting their fieldwork, the policy elite they were investigating were already representing the ‘old guard’ in a rapidly changing environment.

On the one hand, these changes in policy-making, as described above, can be summarised as a shift from government to governance, i.e. the shift from a hierarchical regime of decision-making towards multi-layered points of policy-making involving a plurality of public and private actors (Osborne 2010). On the other, there have also been significant changes in knowledge-making, which have been sketchily summarised as a shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001) - which is the focus of this section. Importantly, changes in both the policy-making and the knowledge-producing fields are not separate or even simply parallel developments. Rather, they come together and work *symbiotically*, continuously feeding in and sustaining one another: changing governance practices create the conditions of Mode 2 knowledge production, whilst Mode 2 knowledge is a vital resource for governing in the new networked, transnational policy world.

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

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

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

Elites then, elites now

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

Closer to home, in the field of education policy, we observe that a number of important works during the ‘80s began to ‘relate individual identity and the micro-politics of personal relationships to a wider analysis of power’ (McPherson and Raab, 1988; p:xii).

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

We take it as axiomatic that any education policy must have a source (or sources), a scope and a pattern. That is, any education policy has to originate somewhere…education policy can be made by only three major groups within the social formation: the state apparatus itself (including the professionals in the state service), the economy and the various institutions of civil society (1994;189).
One of the most comprehensive accounts for the reasons elite interviewing is essential for understanding the workings of education policy-making was offered by Fitz and Halpin (1994), who suggested that speaking with elites is the only possible way to obtain information that is not publicly available. They suggested that elite interviews allow the uncovering of the complex webs and networks of actors involved in policy-making; and that, even more importantly, they allow researchers to familiarise with the ‘assumptive worlds’ (McPherson and Raab 1988) of policy-makers. Fitz and Halpin were therefore keen on ‘exploring the ideas and values of key actors who were involved in setting the policy in motion and who had influenced its substance and the course of its progress’ (1994; 33).

Of course, elite interviewing is not only the privilege of the education policy research world, nor writing about it was confined only to the 1980s and early 1990s. A lot of interesting work in interviewing elites in policy settings has been -and still is being- produced, especially within the feminist paradigm (see for example Boucher 2017; Mason-Bish 2018). Nonetheless the literature discussed above is helpful in order to describe the policy and research context within which Ozga and Gewirtz wrote their account of the experiences and dilemmas of interviewing powerful male actors of the English education system. This chapter reviews that methodological analysis 20 and more years later, in order to explore what interviewing education elites in contemporary times entails. What are the similarities and differences? To return to some of the questions posed in the introduction: have elites disappeared? Has the move from government to governance, in parallel to the rise of evidence-based policy, resulted in a shift to more horizontal and evidence-led governing practices, thus negating the concentration of power to fewer actors in key positions (ie. elites)? The answer
would be negative. Instead, what research experience gathered over the last ten years, and especially through the project METRO (see footnote 1) has shown, is that education elites are now much more fluid and changing actor formations, existing in-between national and transnational spaces, being state and non-state, and deriving their power from their key position in relation to knowledge production and expertise, as well as their influence of funders, philanthropists and the education industry.

Indeed, as the experience of METRO and previous research projects have richly shown, the role of a ‘meso-level’ between the national and international has to be properly identified and examined in researching and understanding the changing circumstances of elite formation. Since the turn of the century, education scholarship has eloquently described the complex and increasingly close relationship of nations with large international organisations like the OECD, or with political projects like the European Union (Grek 2008; 2009). Research has also shown how these relationships are continuously mediated and ‘massaged’ by a range of third parties, from think tanks and the various experts, to data agencies and private education and research contractors (Fontdevila et al 2019; Williamson 2019). Nevertheless, this complex governing web that brings together national statistical agencies, international organisations, philanthropists, the civil society and the education industry, is not a flat field of power, distributed equally amongst different actors and organisations; instead, we see time and again a powerful elite of transnational actors organising this political work and carrying not only the scientific and epistemic credentials to do so, but also increasingly claiming the moral and ethical dimensions, too (for a more in-depth analysis of this kind of education elite, please read Grek 2020). Thus, we see that contemporary education elites mostly derive their power from three important sources: expertise,
networks and brokerage work. In order to give a visual example of the ways these education elites manage to occupy central importance in large networks of current education performance monitoring projects, here is an example of what the making of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (the one related to education) looks like:
The visualisation above presents social network analysis data of all the Technical Cooperation Group (TCG) and the Global Alliance for Monitoring Learning (GAML) group meetings on the SDG4\(^2\): these are the two main indicator working groups, set up by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) in order to do all the methodological validation work required for setting targets and achieving the goals of the SDG4 (for more details on both the SDG4 and the workings of both these groups, please read Fontdevila and Grek 2021). According to METRO’s data, there were 399 participant actors, belonging to 218 organisations and attending 15 meetings in total in the period 2016-2019. Although a detailed analysis of this SNA diagram and the role of these groups and actors in the making of the SDG4 is well beyond the purposes of this chapter, it is immediately obvious that it has only been a very small pool of actors (A152, A41, A134, A144 amongst others\(^3\)) who are located at the centre of influence, connected closely to one another and also bringing together many others. These actors represent a transnational education elite, as they have been clearly in a position of power to organise such a complex and aspirational transnational education agenda, that has multiple effects on countries of both the global North and the global South. Interestingly, these central elite actors are IOs’ workers, but also representatives of national statistical agencies; members of civil society organisations; research agencies’ workers and even volunteers; and government representatives. Although the majority of them come from the Global North, there are actors in the central elite grouping that also originate from the Global South. Although some of them are well-known figures, many of them are less eminent, but no less key. The challenges of locating and accessing these actors are plenty. Many of these actors are well-trained in being at the

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

\(^3\) The coding refers to specific individual policy actors, rather than organisations
spotlight, travelling around and ‘proselytising’ in following specific agendas; some of
them appear to have reached almost religious status at least in some countries, with
every word that they say representing (quite literally in data management terms) the
‘single source of truth’ (Bandola et al 2020). However, the majority of them are much
more subtle; their work is to broker knowledge and construct consensus. They can never
be very prominent in one place, for their role is to move and adopt different identities
depending on their context. They travel a lot and are cosmopolitans. They share a faith
in numbers to bring fundamental positive change, but they are also acutely aware that
their work is mostly political. This is a process that requires a different set of qualities:
an understanding of data but also of the local contexts they aim to take with them; a
certain humility and perseverance in the face of lack of funding and the diversity of
interests and value-systems; and an ability to foresee change and place themselves at
the best possible place to tame it (Grek 2020).

Thus, how are the METRO interviewees similar and different from the elite actors Ozga
and Gewirtz met and interviewed 20+ years ago? In contrast to the ‘old’ elites who drew
their capital from their position in key state structures, contemporary elite actors use
their accumulated epistemic, economic, social or other capitals in order to transform
them into symbolic capital that determines their (in)visibility, authority and legitimation
in the field. More often than not, interviewees cite own career trajectories, values,
frustrations or aspirations to justify the reasons they take the positions they have and for
the choices they make; these positions are not permanent and solid. They often change
in the face of developments in the ‘field’ (in the Bourdieusian sense), ie. the
positionality, advancement and withdrawal of other actors in it (Grek 2020). They often
talk about internal organisational struggles and contradictions; they do not describe a
polished world but one ridden with conflict. The actors we are interviewing are
cosmopolitan: they aim to rise to the challenge of global crises; they see the world as interconnected and they value data and measurement as the most effective way to understand and respond to contemporary social phenomena. Above all, they are reflexive and they value the interview moment, not as a venue to impose their authority and prestige, but as an opportunity to persuade about a specific imaginary of ‘a world that counts’ (UN 2014). It is precisely in their skill of mediation and brokerage that a great part of their authority lies.

In these ways, they can be seen as quite different from the characteristics of the people interviewed by Ozga and Gewirtz. Although their focus of research was the level of the national, whereas METRO focuses on the transnational perspective, the actors we have been interviewing have particular countries they work closely with, often because this is their place of origin, or because they have worked in these national contexts for a long time. They seek to establish their legitimacy and influence by walking on the tight rope of balancing technical and democratic accountability (for an extensive discussion of this tension, please read Fontdevila and Grek 2021); and their elite status is derived by presenting themselves as above the political constraints and path dependencies that characterise national education policy elites. Although they are powerfully persuasive at the statistical and discursive planes, they are still quite dependent on and restricted by the limited financial resources made available for their work; in some ways, they also try to turn this into a strength: “if only we knew better, we could allocate spending most effectively”. Therefore, transnational policy elites are neither solely ‘national’, ’international’, or ‘global’; they are not merely technocratic, nor political; they ‘universalise’ through their practices of commensuration, yet they can also delve deep into a local context and offer advice. In other words, their ‘elite’ skill is their fluidity and chameleonic qualities, as they can assume multiple identities, moving in
and out of countries and organisations, connecting them to one another, and linking nations to global developments. Indeed, it is precisely their insistence on commensurating on a global scale whilst also doing local, contextual work that renders them so powerful in both mastering large comparative assessments and the statistical complexity they require, as well as executing detailed, ‘nitty-gritty’ work at ground level, together with national and local actors (for an in-depth analysis of this kind of work, please read Grek 2019).

Have transnational actors and their expert networks replaced national education policy elites? That would have been a very bold claim to make, although there are more and more examples of an increasing reliance of the key decision-makers of previously strong and confident systems (like Sweden and Scotland, for example) on external actors, such as the OECD, through its influence not only generated by PISA but also of the more longstanding country reviews (Grek 2019). Rather, what this chapter claims is that the rise of global education governing class -the meso-level, as described above- has diluted and impacted on the education elites grown at home, to the extent that much of their former grandeur and connoisseurship has been replaced by evidence-based policy making and the dependence on quantification for decision-making.

If education elites have changed, how has research about them transformed? How does their -usually quantitative- expertise come to terms with academic -usually qualitative- research that aims to study them through a sociological and/or anthropological lens? The experience from METRO, as well as from other previous projects, is that, although access is not always easy and often only comes after securing access through a gatekeeper, the interview atmosphere is quite relaxed. During the last ten years, I have interviewed a high number of these elite actors; during the last two years, most of these
interviews took place online, via Skype or similar online meeting platforms. If there is an interview effect brought about by the fact that Skype does not involve any of the usual -in the past- rituals of meeting an interviewee (ie. interact with a PA several times, travel, wait outside someone’s office, enter and be told where to sit – many aspects of interviewing that Ralston [2020] calls the ‘dramaturgy’ of the meeting), this ‘Skype effect’ is even starker when interviewing elites. The global pandemic of Covid-19 in the first half of 2020 (and probably extending far beyond that) meant that many of the interviewees were connecting for the interview from home. Not only there were none of the rituals described above -and thus arguably a sense of the interviewee’s work space was lost-, but the intimate surroundings (interviewees’ partners or pets were also often present at the background) would give the occasion an almost surreal atmosphere.

Although some ‘posturing’ often takes place at the start of the interview, interviewees quickly appear not only interested, but almost flattered; this is because rather than them collecting data on others, this time it is someone else who researches and tries to understand them. Although the innocent, female sociologist appears to always be the identity I adopt - or, in reality, be given to- by my mostly male interviewees, the tables soon turn: I confidently exhibit my knowledge of the policy spaces they work in; I ask them about the challenges of their work and their organisational cultures and share my own frustrations with mine; I discuss my work and offer them analysis of theirs; I sometimes ask provocative questions and perhaps push them a little more than I normally do with other actors, especially when I see that they appreciate it (they often do). The interview becomes a space of mutual sharing and revealing, of reciprocally attempting to understand how ‘our’ work shapes that which we study, try to understand and, admittedly, built a career upon.
Indeed, perhaps the most unexpected ‘finding’ from these elite interviews is the level of reflexivity showed by these actors. The education elites that I meet and interview, are not data ‘geeks’, uninterested and pejorative about qualitative research; instead they show high reflexivity in thinking about and sharing their work practices. They often openly discuss a lot of the quantitative research they perform as deeply political, but they also have a strong, almost religious, faith in numbers and in their ability to bring on sustained and positive change. They are not defensive about their work; instead, they appear very reflexive about its complexity, its unintended effects and -sometimes- even its futility. Above all, they are cosmopolitans; they believe in the need to learn from and work with others, and they share an unwavering belief in the value of education – of course, ideologically, they represent different, and often opposing views, of what this value might be, but this is a point that, like with Ozga and Gewirtz (1994) remains often muted in these interviews. My intention has always been a desire to understand elites’ work: how and why they do what they do. I reflect upon my own work and challenge their ideas to the extent that it leads them reflect further. Questioning or openly critiquing their work would have damaged the accounts of their ‘assumptive worlds’ which I aim to record and understand.

Finally, the academic research we as sociologists do, doesn’t live outside the institutions we work in and promote us for. It is precisely these same institutions that suggest they belong to the ‘elite’ in the academic field, and describe their staff (us) as world-leading researchers, using their research to achieve maximum positive social impact – in fact, when we write applications for grant funding or career promotions, this is precisely the ‘elite’ language we ourselves use. The following quotation comes from the author’s home institution:
The University of Edinburgh is one of the *world’s top research-intensive* universities, *ranked 4th* in the UK for *research power* (Times Higher Education, Overall Ranking of Institutions), with 83% of our research activity classified as *world leading* or *internationally excellent* in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework.(my emphasis)

The hyper-competition of contemporary higher education, translated in global university rankings and a language of ‘world-beating’ ‘excellence’, is the socio-political context of researching policy elites today. This marketized discourse has led to increased commodification, managerialism and precarity in jobs in the university sector (in the UK at least). Education researchers -including the author of this article- inadvertently have to co-opt with the language of academic elitism. The participation in the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) is an example of these -very similar to policy elites- chameleonic qualities of contemporary education researchers: powerless on the one hand, presenting ourselves as the harmless academics that ask for access, but also powerful enough to use the university brand name and the prestige of the hard-won funding scheme to prove our worth and persuade interviewees for their time. Although many education researchers still produce the kind of critical sociological work that questions the current social order, their participation and ultimately acceptance of the contemporary higher education ‘rules of the game’ suggests that the adoption of a social transformative stance (similar to the one Ozga and

4 https://www.ed.ac.uk/research

5 The REF criteria for the assessment of academic research follow the same elitist language of ‘starred levels’ of ‘outputs’. For example, a ‘four star’ academic article has to display ‘quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.’ (https://www.ref.ac.uk)
Gewirtz so powerfully describe) is that much harder. In addition, the ‘impact agenda’ that has arisen so dominantly in UK HE over the last decade often perplexes the interviewer-interviewee relationship even further; given the central network position of elite actors, researchers often find themselves in the awkward place of not being able to critically question actors, as the interviewees’ participation in the co-production of future research work is vital for the building of successful -and ‘impactful’- academic careers.

**Conclusion: knowledge, policy and researching education elites**

Education elites do exist; they might not be the data crunchers and the data geeks, although in most cases they have a strong statistical background. Instead, they are the mediators and the knowledge brokers; they are the ones who bring actors together, move knowledge around and slowly and steadily move the data juggernaut forward one notch at a time. I would suggest that if one was to highlight one key issue from this paper, that is the evolving and often shifting relationship between the production of research and policy. In previous work, we suggested that if one wants to predict and understand why and where policy is moving towards, then one should be looking at the management of knowledge, rather than policy itself (Grek and Ozga 2010); this is largely confirmed from the description of the shifting weight from national to transnational elites, who find themselves in positions of privilege, as they can expertly consult national education ministries on ways forward, allowing enough space for local adaptation, whilst ensuring continuous relevance and dependence (Grek 2019). Although there is vast literature on the knowledge and policy continuum, I would contend that this is a new governing reality altogether. What was discussed in this paper is not simply a case of elite
knowledge producers informing education policy; rather, contemporary education elites represent a fusion of knowledge and policy and of the national and transnational levels in a conscious, strategic and largely -given their level of influence- successful manner.

In a way, the discussion of researching education policy elites points towards the shift from previous accounts of ‘knowledge and policy’ or ‘knowledge in policy’ to almost a new reality, where knowledge is policy – it becomes policy, since expertise and the promotion of undisputed, universal policy solutions drift into one single entity and function. Researchers, as knowledge producers, are not mere spectators in these social transformations: I have discussed (albeit briefly) the challenge of critical research of elites conducted from the privileged and stable position at a ‘top-ranked’, prestigious university. It is precisely in this regard that we, as academics of self-proclaimed elite institutions, need to be particularly alert to and reflexive of the knowledge about these elites that we produce.

References


