



**Response: Policy? Policy Research? How Absurd?**

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3 Response: Policy? Policy Research? How Absurd?  
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7 Stephen J Ball  
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11 There is no way that I can address the wide range of issues raised  
12 in the exemplary collection of papers on *policy sociology*. These  
13 are cutting edge pieces by world-class scholars that lay out  
14 analytic possibilities for future work. Perhaps what I can do, very  
15 briefly, from the space and time of policy research in which I now  
16 stand, and as other contributors do, is to look back and look  
17 forward and think against or beyond where we have got to and  
18 where we might go next. This does not properly engage with  
19 individual papers but rather with some of the commitments and  
20 sensibilities they share and hold on to.  
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33 When I began to try to engage with something that Jenny Ozga  
34 called *policy sociology* (which she and others discuss in this  
35 issue), there was not much in the way of extant education policy  
36 research in the sociology of education, apart from Jenny's own  
37 work and that of the estimable Roger Dale (see references in  
38 Jenny's paper), and the studies done by Ted Tapper and Brian  
39 Salter (e.g. Salter & Tapper, 1981) and Andrew McPherson and  
40 Charles Raab (Mc Pherson & Raab, 1988) - that drew on a more  
41 mainstream political science approach.  
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53 What I was working on when I read these books and papers was  
54 an interview study of actors involved in and around England's 1988  
55 Education Reform Act, published as *Politics and Policymaking In*  
56 *Education* (1990). That was a kind of hybrid between my  
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3 ethnographic sensibilities (from before) and the beginnings of my  
4 engagement with Foucault, in an attempt to explore the capture of  
5 policy by neoliberal intellectuals and its re-articulation within  
6 neoliberal discourses. Further musing on the interplay of these two  
7 different orders of account (ethnographic and discursive) led later  
8 to a set of considerations of what doing policy sociology might look  
9 like: (Ball, 1993) and (2015,) and (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). Apart  
10 from Foucault lurking in the background probably the most  
11 important influence on *Politics and Policymaking In Education* and  
12 my later work on the shift from government to governance (e.g.  
13 Ball & Junemann, 2012) was Bob Jessop (who gets little mention  
14 in the papers in this special issue) and his theorisation of new  
15 forms and modalities of the capitalist state.  
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31 In different but closely related ways all of these early studies were  
32 trying to make sense of how policy gets done rather than what  
33 policy does. That is, initially the focus was on who does policy and  
34 with what ideas. Latterly attention shifted, for some analysts, to  
35 how policy forms the objects about which it speaks. That is, the  
36 attempt to understand how some issues are identified as policy  
37 problems, and others not, and how, following from that, some  
38 solutions are made obvious and necessary and others are ignored.  
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49 The *Politics and Policymaking* work also began to alert me to the  
50 importance of what might be called the social relations of policy -  
51 which led to an enduring preoccupation with policy networks and  
52 concomitantly network governance. (e.g. (Ball, 2017), (Ball, 2019)  
53 and how these enabled and facilitated what is now called the  
54 mobility of policy, that Steven Lewis insightfully explores in his  
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3 paper. In part this re-focusing on the policy process, both in  
4 methods and concepts, as I have argued elsewhere, was a  
5 necessary response to the reformulation of the state as a set of  
6 neoliberal *heterarchical* relations (Junemann & Ball, 2018). Apart  
7 from Jessop, Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes on new forms  
8 governance and meta-governance also proved to be useful  
9 starting points for thinking about this.  
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13 Thinking back over this and the work on digital governance and the  
14 'information state' (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2015), and Ben  
15 Williamson's work on the use of intimate data to construct what he  
16 calls *precision education*, there is more work to be done I think on  
17 theorising the state, pursuing a Foucauldian conception of the  
18 state, which would involve both 'leaving the problem of the state  
19 aside' and, at the same time, focusing on its permeability,  
20 dispersal and adaptiveness. Most policy analysis still holds onto an  
21 antiquated and essentialist institutional conception of the state  
22 rather than seeing the state as a function of changes in the  
23 practices of government. Helen Gunter's work is a notable  
24 exception to this.  
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28 From its humble beginnings, as they say, a sophisticated and  
29 effective analytic toolbox for policy sociology has developed over a  
30 40-year period. That toolbox defines, fairly loosely but  
31 recognisably, a field of study. This field has both a set of mobile  
32 and fixed characteristics, and both an openness to some new  
33 possibilities and a closedness to others.  
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60 Wedded to rationalism?

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5 Reading the papers in this special issue does make me think that  
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7 sometimes we bring too much rationality and intentionality to our  
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9 objects of study. We tend to construct a policy actor who or a  
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11 policy discourse (and its practices and technologies) which sifts  
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13 and sorts through possibilities for action and assembles these into  
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15 a coherent 'position'. We tend to ignore both the limits of discursive  
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17 resources and the presence of incoherence. In doing so we  
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19 constantly over-estimate the sense-making capacity of policy  
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21 actors. Most policy analysis work begins with an assumption of or  
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23 brings to bear a perspective of coherence or rationality or planned  
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25 order, in this sense the analysis works to constitute the object of its  
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27 concern. We lack the tools, and perhaps also the predilection, to  
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29 address policy otherwise, and to accept that at least sometimes or  
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31 in part policy and policy ensembles are incoherent or absurd  
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33 (Webb, 2013). Perversely this narrows or excludes attention to  
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35 some possibilities for resistance – while in other respects  
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37 resistance is constantly sought and valued by policy sociology. It  
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39 could be argued that recent work on policy assemblages and  
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41 dispositifs offers a more subtle representation of policy. These  
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43 analytic devices attend to the heterogeneity, relationality and flux  
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45 of policy (see Savage 2020), and allow us to think about policy and  
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47 as a permeable and fluid, strategic and technical 'arrangement of  
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49 elements and forces, practices and discourses, power and  
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51 knowledge' (Foucault, 2010 p. 29), which enables the 'emergence'  
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53 of games of truth, functions and subjectivities.  
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57 While there are clearly some aspects of different political  
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59 rationalities embedded in the making of education policy and  
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3 history, and these need to be addressed and not neglected, they  
4 do not always work through to or produce sense and logic at the  
5 level of practice (Ball, 1997). Rather, they mix, meld, grate and  
6 contradict and realise and perpetuate what Jenny Ozga calls '*ad*  
7 *hocery*, serendipity, muddle and negotiation' (1990: 360) -  
8 although to be clear Jenny is critical of policy analysis work that  
9 gives too much ground to muddle, in as much that it can lead to a  
10 failure to address the structural power relations that are invested in  
11 the policy process. What I am suggesting is the need to attend to  
12 incoherence, irrationality and the epistemic grammar of policy and  
13 their relations, at the same time – the importance of not starting  
14 with rationality. Furthermore, I also suggest the need to recognise  
15 that policy is sometimes beyond messy – as the English  
16 government's responses to COVID-19 have demonstrated – I want  
17 to argue for more attention to its *absurdity*.  
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35 Nonetheless, to reiterate, I am not urging that we should abandon  
36 attending to the political preoccupations and structural inequalities  
37 that underpin the messy apparatuses we call policy, and indeed  
38 the existence of and response to multiple inequalities play a part in  
39 the historical constitution and reproduction of messiness. I want to  
40 point up the importance of both continuity and contingency, that is  
41 to acknowledge the scale and scope of the incoherence and  
42 disarray of current education policy and provision – if incoherence  
43 can have scale and scope - an apparatus that lurches from one  
44 prejudice, 'solution' or 'good idea' to the next often without any  
45 explicit consideration of why and what for, driven by ministerial  
46 enthusiasms and biases, international orthodoxies and ad hoc and  
47 often ill-informed and ill-thought-out borrowings from other systems  
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3 (Exley, 2012; Morris, 2012). In the midst of this hyperactivity policy  
4 begets policy as new 'solutions' are generated to respond to the  
5 failures, inadequacies and inefficacies of previous fixes multiplying  
6 incoherence – single policy studies can miss this kind of mix and  
7 match effect.  
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15 At the level of policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012)  
16 schools must make sense of, respond to and enact (or not) a  
17 constant stream of initiatives, funding streams, regulations  
18 alongside continually changing measures, indicators, targets and  
19 benchmarks, all of which contribute to increasing workloads  
20 (Sellen, 2016). If we take the point made by Glenn Savage and  
21 colleagues in this issue, then we need to attend to stasis,  
22 immobility and slowness, but articulated in relation to, set over and  
23 against (whatever), the 'bright lights' of global and mobile  
24 networks. That was the primary concern of *How Schools do Policy*,  
25 to focus on the dark corners in which policy is 'done' on a daily  
26 basis, in mundane interactions and struggles – and teachers  
27 struggles, often unsuccessful, to make sense of mis-matched  
28 arrays of policy and constantly changing policies that are together  
29 incoherent and absurd. This is a different sense of space and time  
30 from those of most *mobilities* research, see for example (Clapham  
31 & Vickers, 2018).  
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51 So that said, and given the invitation to 'respond' to the special  
52 issue, whatever that means, I want to use, perhaps not entirely  
53 reverently, Albert Camus' philosophy of *absurdism*. Camus has  
54 become oddly topical in the context of COVID-19. Indeed, his book  
55 *The Plague*, an allegory exploring the Nazi occupation of France,  
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3 might also serve to think about the neoliberal ‘occupation’ of  
4 education. But I am thinking of a different work – *The Myth of*  
5 *Sisyphus* (MS). Camus begins this with a striking image of the  
6 human fate: Sisyphus endlessly pushing his rock up the mountain  
7 only to see it roll back down each time he makes it to the top. As  
8 an aside - that seems to have an uncanny relevance to critical  
9 education policy analysis that begins with a commitment to hope  
10 for social justice and ends with the despair of exclusion and  
11 oppression – we are always disappointed. See Taylor Webb et al.  
12 (2020) on policy analysis that is ‘always attempting to “reform” or  
13 “improve” itself’ (p. 293) observing that ‘reform efforts are the  
14 habitual attempts to improve upon . . . failed memories of a  
15 glorious future’. I have suggested elsewhere (Ball, 2020) that  
16 generally the sociology of education is mired in a set of  
17 unreflexive, redemptive, Enlightenment rationalities and through its  
18 research and its engagements with teachers, plays its part in the  
19 production of ‘hopeful’ subjects, socially just schools and ‘free’  
20 learners. My own work began firmly and misguidedly rooted in the  
21 attitude and ethos of the Enlightenment and that remains the  
22 predominant mode of relating to contemporary reality in most  
23 policy analysis work<sup>1</sup>. We fail to subject our ‘selves’ to critical  
24 historicisation.

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Esoteric human science knowledge and experts, like policy  
sociologists, generate and perpetuate discourses of hope that are  
integral to both bio-political strategies and governmentality. As  
Allen (2017) argues educational critique finds itself trapped, based  
within an educational good it cannot question because it is  
committed to its rescue. Given the limits on thought currently



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3 imposed by the assumed goodness of education, there is no space  
4 in which education may be thought differently, critique is blunted  
5 and circumscribed by cycles of hope and disappointment –  
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7 romanticism is cherished and cynicism is abhorred.  
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13 If we translate Camus' big question, "What is the meaning of  
14 existence?" into a more mundane one "What is the meaning of  
15 policy?" – we can think further about the politics of hope and  
16 disappointment. He denies us an answer to the big question but  
17 argues that since existence itself has no meaning, we must learn  
18 to bear an irresolvable emptiness. It is between our impulse to ask  
19 ultimate questions and the impossibility of achieving any adequate  
20 answer that lays what Camus calls *the absurd*. If we accept this  
21 thesis and apply it to the absurdity of policy, using Camus' anti-  
22 philosophical approach to philosophical questions, we have to ask:  
23 What role is left for rational analysis and argument? I give this a  
24 slightly different turn, and as said already, we must think the  
25 absurd and the rational together, to paraphrase Michael Apple. We  
26 need to engage with the absurd and develop an analysis of it, or at  
27 least incorporate it into our analyses. By taking policy and policy  
28 rhetoric and discourses too seriously in their own terms we are  
29 always giving ground, making the existence of policy more  
30 sensible than it might be, closing down possibilities of refutation  
31 and refusal. For Camus the problem is that by demanding  
32 meaning, order, and unity, we seek to go beyond those limits and  
33 pursue the impossible. Our analytical and political efforts are  
34 driven by nostalgia for unity. We need more of an "absurd  
35 sensibility" (MS, p. 2)  
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3 Indeed, for Camus “This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all  
4 that can be said” (MS, p. 21). However, Camus’ is not an anti-  
5 rational posture that ends in silence (Jeanson 1947) or suicide. It  
6 is not irrationalism, rather a struggle to rationally understand the  
7 limits of reason (Sagi 2002, 59–65). In short, Camus recommends,  
8 rather like Foucault, a life without consolation - the consolation and  
9 disappointments of hope, but a life characterized nonetheless by  
10 lucidity and by acute consciousness of and rebellion against  
11 mortality and its limits. Also like Foucault, Camus was determined  
12 to criticise attitudes that he finds to be natural and inevitable and in  
13 *The Rebel* he goes further and takes the act of rebellion as a  
14 primary datum of human experience.  
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29 I am not in any way at all suggesting a wholesale abandonment of  
30 the critical policy sociology project but rather a broader sensibility  
31 that moves beyond simple rationalism and the implicit aesthetics of  
32 hope with its understated utopianism - with all of its ‘cruel  
33 optimism’ (Berlant, 2011). However, as Berlant says, optimism  
34 becomes cruel only when the object that draws your attachment  
35 actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. Instead of  
36 submitting ourselves to the tyranny of ‘alternatives’, perhaps we  
37 might embrace a commitment to uncertainty and the exploration of  
38 ethical heterotopias, real and unreal, where difference is affirmed,  
39 ‘a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space  
40 in which we live’. As Barry, Osborne and Rose suggest, this is not  
41 simply an ‘intellectual exercise’: ‘Rather what is at stake is the  
42 production of a certain kind of experience, a reconfiguring of  
43 experience itself’ (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1993, p. 6) – that we  
44 might name as education.  
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3 In a sense, I am extending here Bourdieu's call for a greater  
4 'epistemic reflexivity' in relation to our practice, given all of the  
5 complexities that are attendant upon that notion. Or perhaps more  
6 pertinently a willingness to 'get lost', as the wonderful Patti Lather  
7 puts it (Lather, 2007). *Getting* lost is a state betwixt and between, it  
8 involves pushing forward toward resolution while perpetually  
9 withdrawing from such resolution. Getting lost in the remnants of  
10 research is to feel the shift in the educational logic of research  
11 from *learning from* one's experiences to *studying in* the ruins of  
12 this experience and concomitantly the giving up of researcher  
13 expertise and authority. She says, "'Getting lost' might both  
14 produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently"  
15 (p. 13), that is an opening up of spaces that allows for new ways  
16 of knowing to emerge. It also involves a loss of innocence, a giving  
17 up of our role as the heroes of our own story, as revealers of  
18 injustice, advocates of radical change and procurers of resistance.  
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<sup>i</sup> Although policy research is also currently subject to the processes of neoliberalisation.