

# The Editor Interviews

## *Interview with Professor Stephen Ball, Editor of Journal of Education Policy*

### **1. Can you give us an introduction to the *Journal of Education Policy* and explain the aims and scope of the journal?**

Well the journal is perhaps unusual to some extent in that obviously we're a topic-based journal; we're interested in education policy, but have a particular commitment and interest in theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of education policy. We're not particularly interested in descriptive, substantive accounts of local policies or national policies; we're interested in critical and theoretically informed analysis of policy and building up a body of work over time which would constitute a theoretical, disciplinary approach to policy analysis in education.

Our papers vary enormously, they cover all aspects of education, both in terms of sectors, of age level, so everything from early childhood education through to adult education, inside and outside of formal systems, informal learning, different kinds of policy arenas, business education, professional education. In a sense, to ask the topic base of the paper is not important, it's whether it addresses the issues of policy, policy formation, policy implementation, the policy process: how policy is constructed, disseminated, interpreted, translated into practice. That's what we're interested in and we do get a lot of papers that are about particular 'bits' of policy but they're about the 'bits' rather than about the policy. And we're not really interested in business education *per se*, or changes in assessment systems in higher education, those papers tend not to get accepted. What we're interested in is an understanding of how policy is constructed and worked with, what impact it has in those arenas.

### **2. What kinds of papers are you interested in as Co-Editor?**

We're very interested in work that's different, original, takes risks perhaps in some respects. We're much more interested in a paper that involves risks that don't come off than publishing another fairly standard paper which goes through the routines of presentation in fairly traditional ways.

Some journals, and I know this from my own experience as an author, tend to run a particularly tight scenario in terms of what they think a good paper looks like and you kind of have to conform to that. It has to have the basic sections, it has to ring all the bells and push all the buttons. That's not what we're trying to do really. We don't have the idea of a standard paper, we don't have the idea of a set format, we don't even have a word limit, which is very unusual in this day and age. If a paper is long but justifies its length in terms of theoretical development or conceptual discussion or the presentation of illustration, whatever; if it's justified at whatever length it is we'll publish it. If we think it's overlong but is publishable we'll ask the authors to cut it back.

So we're very open to different forms of writing, different forms of presentation and different types of papers. We're not interested in rehearsing, reproducing kind of orthodox papers that look like one another. So in a sense it's not easy to talk about a primary focus, other than the interest in theory and methods of policy analysis in

education. We're much more interested in attracting new ideas and new ways of doing things.

### **3. What makes a good paper and what are the most common mistakes made by writers?**

Well, the question about what makes a good article relates to what's a bad article or I suppose it's an article that we're interested in. I'm not saying that the articles we don't publish are all bad but some of them are articles that we're not particularly interested in, other journals may be interested in them. I mean we can come back to that in a moment because that is an issue.

But in terms of a good article we're interested in the new, we're interested in people doing things differently, we're interested in the application of theory to policy analysis, we're interested in people who do things with theory and theoretical ideas to make sense of policy and policy issues. So we're interested in papers that attempt to be innovative, equally so in relation to research processes, research methods, research that attempts to do things differently.

We're interested in new writers as well. We do have a fairly active editorial policy; we don't operate mechanically. So we sometimes do make more efforts with new writers in allowing them to go through more than one process of re-writing to get their paper in the journal if they haven't been published before or are fairly inexperienced which we may not give the same leeway to a very well-established writer, perhaps, if they get criticisms from reviewers.

We're also trying to encourage a wider range of countries being represented in the journal so we, on occasion, also go to somewhat greater lengths to process papers from countries that have not been represented in the journal before, particularly areas like Eastern Europe, India, China, Africa. I mean Africa is a problem in some ways, we've had relatively little work from Africa apart from South Africa and it's difficult to encourage work from there.

In saying that, we don't lower our standards. We expect those papers to reach the high quality that we expect from papers that are published in the journal but what I'm saying is we will spend longer with them to get them to that standard in those particular cases. Our acceptance rate varies, you can check it on a day-to-day basis on Manuscript Central. It varies between sort of 20-25% so we turn down more than three out of four papers that we receive. So it's not a matter of compromising standards but it's a matter of encouraging different sorts of work to come into the journal.

The other side of that is that some people who send papers make two very common mistakes. One is they simply send it to the wrong journal and that's becoming increasingly the case, I think it's one of the downsides of having electronic submissions systems because it becomes in a sense easier in some ways to submit things. And it's surprising how many people submit papers clearly never having read the journal, never opened a page of the journal or read on the website what it is the journal's interested in. And increasingly, as the Managing Editor, I'm fielding papers at the initial stage which we would never send out for review and I write back and I say sorry, this doesn't fit within the remit of our journal.

Related to that, the second common mistake is people who want to publish papers in areas that we are interested in without ever referring to previous papers in the same area that we've published in the journal. Which is a silly thing to do really. If you want

to publish a paper on issues around school choice in Australia, or wherever, a paper on school choice, I don't know, we must have published over the 20 odd years of the journal, 20 to 30 papers on issues around school choice in different ways. To not refer to any of those in your submission to the journal is just foolish, really. But it's not simply foolish it's also failing, I think, to engage in a scholarly process of cumulation of knowledge, cumulation of theoretical development, cumulation of understanding.

So it's a bigger mistake in a way. And that can be frustrating as an Editor. I feel I'm having my time wasted when people send papers to the journal which patently don't fit in the journal at all. And they're wasting their own time because then they have to wait for us to read the paper and look at it and send it back to them and then they have to go through it again. I imagine there are some people who spend their life sending their papers to journals that don't want to publish them, not because they're not good papers but because they're just in the wrong place.

So I think one of the key things for anybody who wants to be published in this journal, as in any journal, is to, you know, read it. Even if you don't bring yourself to actually read the papers from beginning to end then look through the issues, look through the sorts of things that are being published, look through the contents list, look for other papers that have been written around the area, in the field that you're trying to write about and then draw on those. Be kind of tactical in terms of thinking about which journal you want to send your paper to so you don't end up wasting your time.

#### **4. Who reads the *Journal of Education Policy*?**

Yes, the readership of the journal is an interesting question because sometimes I'm surprised by some of the people who appear to read the journal. Clearly the readership is very international; certainly our subscription base is very international. I certainly get a lot of feedback from overseas students who've read the journal. I think because of what we do in the journal I think a lot of students, research students, Masters students are very interested in it because of this emphasis on theory and method. I don't think they'd be interested in it if it was simply lots of papers about English education, or Australian education or Chinese education *per se*. But they're interested in it because it gives them tools that they can then work with in their own research and their own writing.

Obviously we're trying to address, and I think we do address, other policy analysts in education and again sometimes the broad base of that surprises me, people in very different fields and areas of education read the journal and that's reflected also in the papers that we get sent. And certainly occasionally some governments or local government policymakers appear to be aware of the journal which is always good to hear. So I think the answer to the question is the audience is fairly diverse but our core audience would be a research student, professional, analytical, policy audience.

#### **5. What are your aspirations for the future of the journal?**

Well I think we would like to see a broader base of papers. We would like to publish more papers from those areas that are not very well-represented, particularly, perhaps, places like China and India and Eastern Europe, and in the longer term Africa. Particularly because in the case of China and India, these are areas of enormous economic development and alongside that very dramatic educational changes that are going on in terms of how their systems are organised, in terms of the nature of participation in their systems, they're important issues in those countries which have a more general relevance. So it would be good to have those better represented in the pages of the journal. We do get quite a lot of submissions, there's

been quite a significant rise in the number of submissions from China, but again a number of them suffer from the problem of not really addressing the right journal. And there's an inevitable problem, perhaps, in the development of scholarship in later developing countries that the capacity for scholarship is not so well developed so there tends to be a higher proportion of lower quality papers so they probably don't get accepted to the same extent.

In terms of other aspirations, well, yes, world domination! We get a small steady trickle of American papers, about 50% of which remain totally entrenched in American parochialism, the other 50% are usually actually very interesting. But the Americans, despite their political position in the world, tend not to be interested much in anything else that's happening in the rest of the world. So, that's interesting in terms of our relationship to America, so it would be good to be able to penetrate the American market a little more in terms of the pecking order of journals, to overtake some of those American journals but because they have such a huge in-built readership in terms of numbers that's a difficult issue.

**6. What do you think is the most important and controversial subject in contemporary debate and research in education that has been discussed recently within the pages of the *Journal of Education Policy*?**

I suppose if you were going to pick one area where there were debates that recurred... the backdrop to a lot of what we're looking at at the moment, and this will apply in a number of areas and a number of journals, but particularly for us I suppose is the question about globalisation.

At one level, in a kind of conceptual sense, it's "what is more important, the global or the local?" So there are all sorts of issues about convergence and it's a fascinating and contentious issue for us. To what extent are policies in very different countries coming to look the same for various reasons in terms of economics, in terms of multinational agencies, in terms of the dissemination and borrowing of policy between countries? But can we understand that as a process of globalisation which is convergence or is it a more complex process whereby the global is translated through local cultures and local structures into something that's both the same but different?

And writers take different positions on this and will give an emphasis one way or another in terms of whether the global or the local is ultimately more important and there's a lot of heat and noise that goes on around that in papers. And that also relates to questions about the policy relationships between the North and the South, if you like. To what extent are these global policies part of a sort of post-colonial process whereby the West is not so much imposing but finding ways and means through which education systems in lesser developed countries or late developing countries are being reconstructed to look like versions of those in the West.

So there are controversial issues around notions about post-colonialism, about the relationship of Western governments to late developing countries, about the role of the private sector in all of this as well in terms of disseminating policies and about privatisation more generally.

So those are, I think, particular areas of interesting controversy that are being batted around in the journal with people taking up different positions in the journal. Together with the issues around theory that we're interested in where there are different positions taken up around different authors, Deleuze, Foucault, Bourdieu, which again engenders debate. And we're very interested in debate, very interested in

people taking up issues in papers that have been initiated previously in the journal or building upon bodies of work that have been published in the journal to create a kind of cumulative body of work rather than just seeing every paper as a sort of one-off.

**7. In your book *The Education Debate* you explain how Tony Blair's declared aim to "make the country at ease with globalisation" engendered a shift in the focus in schooling to economic competitiveness. What do you think are the main impacts to date?**

In some ways the tying of our educational system to globalisation, it is real, but it's also, to some extent, more rhetorical than real. It's always a mistake, I think, in terms of analysing any kinds of policy but certainly education policy, to kind of put all your eggs in one basket and to see policy as driven by a single rationality like globalisation or economic competitiveness. Policies tend to be much more incoherent, they consist of all sorts of different bits and pieces which don't necessarily fit together. So although competitiveness is important and it is making an impact in various areas of education, obviously those which are closest to the labour market are most affected so further education has been massively transformed by the attempt to link the work of further education through skills to the supposed needs of the economy. And that's impacting on schools to some extent through things like diplomas, the new 14-19 diplomas which are being introduced currently in schools.

Although of course in another sense that's a return to a very old policy where there used to be vocational tracks and we've gone through regular cycles and policy again is often very cyclical. We've gone through cycles of having vocational tracks or vocational curriculum streams in schools throughout, really, the whole history of state education but certainly at least three times maybe four times since the Second World War. So although this is a new version of that in another sense it's sort of an old policy as well.

And there's a problem in the whole issue about competitiveness, and the knowledge economy, and the high skills economy and wanting to transform education into a high skills production system for the international market and that is whether or not that actually reflects the real economy rather than a fantasy economy. And I think there is a strong extent to which it actually is addressing a fantasy economy. If you look at the actual skills that are required in the real economy the high skills, information technology-based 'bit' is pretty small. Some people would argue, people like Ewart Keep would argue it's 10-12% at most, perhaps less than that. The major growth areas in the UK labour market over the last 30 years are the service industries. Hospitality, tourism, shopping, that's where the expansion in employment has been. And we're seeing that even now. You're seeing further decline in manufacturing employment so Nissan currently are shedding employees, but Morrisons are about to employ 5,000 more people in the current year.

So there's a degree to which the rhetoric around competitiveness and around high skills doesn't actually match the real world of labour market opportunities. So you have to see some of that argument that Tony Blair was making about globalisation in part at least as being a way of getting things to change without necessarily having a good substantive basis to it.

**8. One of the most conspicuous developments in education policy over the last ten years has been the rise and impact of 'performativity' or performance assessment as a way of improving the accountability of teachers and schooling. You have described performativity as "a culture or a system of terror" that can be enormously stressful and time-consuming.**

## **What do you feel are the key benefits and dangers of increased testing and assessment of teachers?**

Of course it depends from whose perspectives you ask those questions. One of the benefits for governments, or one of the possibilities for governments of performativity, is that it allows an indirect management of the education system as a whole. You can drive the system through targets and benchmarks and output indicators and you don't necessarily have to specify what you require to go on inside the system but you can orient what goes on inside to the outcomes and so you can drive those processes by manipulating the outcomes. Although to some extent our government has often tried to do both.

And one of the arguments in all of this is both for government and for clients or consumers that this makes the system more accountable and more transparent and visible because we have indicators and output measures which allow us to see whether the system is working effectively. And at some levels there's obviously some basis to that argument. The problem is, of course, that performance measures don't necessarily measure the things that you're actually interested in or are actually valuable in their own terms. I mean in a simple sense you tend to value what is measurable rather than measure what is valuable.

And there's also an enormous benefit, and danger, that you orient the practitioner towards the outcomes to the exclusion of anything else. So people become 'taught to the test' as it's called and if it's not being tested then you don't teach it. Clearly we've seen examples of that where in the first term in particular of the Labour government things, particularly in primary schools, like Music and Art and Drama virtually disappeared because everything was driven by the national strategies in numeracy and literacy and if it wasn't numeracy and literacy then teachers weren't going to do it. So kids were suddenly confronted with this impoverished curriculum, with this boring repetitive process of practicing for key stage tests and SATS and whatever.

And it also can be very dulling of innovation and creativity. At a rhetorical level sometimes there are arguments that performance systems can reward quality or excellence but on the whole they don't tend to encourage risk taking, they don't tend to encourage innovation; quite the opposite because those things are dangerous in terms of whether or not you can achieve or improve your output indicators.

So here there's a sort of mismatch in some ways between the economic competitiveness argument, which is that you need a more highly skilled workforce and you need teaching which encourages creativity and innovation and imaginative and creative activities for kids who can then take those out into the economy and create their own businesses and whatever. Whereas the core business of the school actually becomes this very dull mundane routine of testing which produces the opposite from risk taking and innovation. It produces a kind of very reductionist orientation towards knowledge. You only value the knowledge that you're going to be tested on and it doesn't encourage you to think outside of what you're being offered through the fixed curriculum.

So those are very much dangers for the student and for the teacher it also can be a very oppressive experience of being constantly judged in terms of measurements or appraisals or benchmarks so that you become very wary of your relationships with colleagues. Colleagues become valued in terms of what they can contribute to the overall output of the institution rather than their worth as human beings in a sense. So it has the danger of producing drones, technicians who have no sense of sociality,

no sense of principle, judgement, they just do what's necessary to push up the performance indicators.

Perhaps I'm being dystopic but if you look at performative systems in various areas, one of my favourite examples is in America they have performance indicators for the morbidity rates of surgeons so the number of patients who die within six months of surgery. These are now published in many States and so you can look at league tables of surgeons' performance, supposedly, in how many of their patients survive. What's neglected in all that is what it means is that high risk patients who are seeking operations for life-threatening illnesses find it enormously difficult to get a doctor who will actually treat them because they might damage the doctor's performance indicators. So the people who most need medical attention actually find it most difficult to get it in this supposedly transparent system because the very transparency works against their interests. And there are an enormous number of examples of that kind of unanticipated consequences of performativity.

**9. You have argued that class inequalities in education are now almost as stark as they were in the Victorian era, with faith schools now primarily for the middle class, state or community schools increasingly for the working class, and private and public schools kept as the preserve of the upper class. How much of a concern is class inequality in education?**

Well issues of social class, in some ways, are currently back on the agenda in this country, at least for a day or two. There are clearly a set of concerns around issues about social mobility which relates to class reproduction in as much that in this country social mobility has almost come to an entire halt. There isn't any. The class system is being reproduced almost perfectly, currently. One of the key mechanisms of that reproduction is education. Education provides the qualifications, the symbolic capital which reproduces different class positions, again in relation to access to the labour market.

And there are various indicators that schools are increasingly reflecting class differences, sometimes not in overwhelming ways. The issue about faith schools is that they under-represent children from certain backgrounds. It's not that those children are not there at all but they're under-represented compared with other sorts of schools. But obviously with private schools, public schools they're the preserve of those who can afford them.

But it seems to me that part of the issue, and one of the problems of addressing class inequality in this country now, is that perhaps schools are the wrong place to look for remediating or addressing problems of class inequality. That so much now of the business of class reproduction and advantage is actually done outside of schools. And what I mean by that is if you're an assiduous, caring, middle-class parent who wants to ensure that your child achieves the advantages that you had and the position that you had in terms of education and work, things like choice of school or paying for private school is important but increasingly so are things like pre-school activities, nursery schooling, bought-in enrichment activities, educational toys, educational software. At key points you might want to buy a tutor, pay for a tutor for them to support them if you want to get them into private school, common entrance exam, or if they're coming up to, in some places still, 11-plus or GCSE. If they're having problems in certain areas of the curriculum you can buy in a Science tutor or a Maths tutor to make sure that they get their A\* GCSE grades. If they're having learning difficulties you can buy in a councillor to help them and support them or somebody who will help them with their learning skills. You can send them to courses that will enable them to prepare for university entrance. You can now buy advice and

support in writing your statement that goes with your university application. You can go on courses that will prepare you for your interview at Oxford and Cambridge if you're applying for those. All those things can be bought-in in addition to normal state schooling.

So, in order to eek out and ensure advantage increasing numbers of parents who have the economic surplus available to them can re-invest that, literally, in their child through the buying in of these additional resources. And in a sense, you can't necessarily address that, then, by looking at schools or the differences in the performance between schools. You can't explain that, necessarily, in school terms. Some researchers argue that, in fact, you can only explain something like - it varies with the writer - but 9-15% of the variance in performance between schools in terms of school-based factors. That the other 85-90% actually has to be explained by out-of-school factors and I think these mechanisms are increasingly an important part of driving those differences.

So very often when you're looking at two kids in a classroom you've got a middle-class kid whose got all this support and the parents working with them around the computer in the evenings and supporting them in terms of doing their homework and buying-in a tutor and buying-in accelerated learning materials which are available on the Internet to support their schoolwork. When you're evaluating the students in their classroom you've got one kid who you're evaluating in terms of what they can do on that day sitting in the classroom together with the homework they've done at home. The other kid, you're not evaluating them you're evaluating them, their family, their tutors and all of the software that they've been working with; it's a sort of group evaluation. Their performance is not what they can do, their performance is the product of this investment. And I don't think government has come to grips with that at all in terms of thinking about schools.

So it may be that, putting it dramatically, that the last 15 years, or even the last 20 years going back to '88 of education reform, which is the bit about reforming schools, has been totally misplaced, is actually reforming the wrong place and that schools can only do a very small part of changing or affecting processes of class reproduction. But that may be a kind of idiosyncratic, rather individual view of my own in relation to these things.