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## 2 Accountability in US educational research and the travels of governance

Noah W. Sobe

Since the end of the nineteenth century, educational research in the USA has been linked to the political rationalities of liberal democracy, specifically assumptions about society and the nature of social control, order and responsibility (Popkewitz 1991, 1998). Beyond the overt management of researchers' activities through professional associations, trends in the availability of funding and mechanisms such as Institutional Review Boards,<sup>1</sup> the governing that travels through US educational research is inscribed in the principles that divide and order the actions and objects of schooling. Educational research has inscribed a particular idea of progress in which the salvation of the individual can be delivered by saving or rescuing the child/student. Though 'an elusive science' in terms of its normative development (Lagemann 2000), the science of education in its many guises has historically tended to embody notions of redemption. Science was to rescue modern society from its unique predicaments. As Popkewitz (1998) has argued, it has been conventionally assumed since the nineteenth century that 'scientific knowledge' serves democratic ideals. This can be seen to occur as scientific inquiry brings a coherence and a rationalisation to the activities of governments, and as it equips a democratic populace with the tools and knowledge necessary for effective public participation and responsible individual self-management.

Such assumptions about the democratising and liberalising potential of social science research have formed the backdrop to much of what has historically occurred in the name of 'educational research' in the USA and they continue to be felt today in connection with the notion of 'accountability'. As a concern of educational research, 'accountability', as I will show below, has been problematised in a way that links it to the social administration of the individual and the design of salvational collective narratives. 'Accountability' – viewed both as the defining characteristic of an era (e.g. the 'age of accountability') and as an empirically researchable object – is currently one of the central concerns travelling through US educational research and in this chapter I focus on the governing that occurs as notions of accountability help to order the reason of individuals and communities.

As for other contributions to this volume, a key analytic point of this chapter is the intersection of research and policy making. In looking at the interplay between 'research-based policy' and 'policy effects on research', the question that I tackle is not whether the tail-wags-the-dog or the dog-its-tail but the question of how certain objects of reflection, action and intervention are fabricated across the domains of educational

research and educational policy. The strategies of governance that I examine here are not the levers or control mechanisms that 'steer' US educational research in an instrumental manner. I am attempting to direct attention to the strategies of governance that create and are created by the relations between educational research and the ordering of the reason of individuals and communities. This analytic emphasis, of course, is not to deny the actuality of institutional arrangements and networks of actors through which the agendas of US educational research are formed, contested and reshaped. It is instead to shift attention to discourses that occupy a central position within contemporary educational research in the USA, discourses that can be seen as cultural practices structuring the possibilities and parameters for collective and individual agency as well as for what is considered 'reasonable'. Here, I focus on 'accountability' as an analytic strategy for investigating systems of reasoning that travel through contemporary US educational research conversations and interrogating cultural practices of social science research and policy making that are locally embedded at the same time as they may be globally converging.

In certain respects, the apparent contemporary emphasis on accountableness closely accords with the American exceptionalism that is alleged to have culturally imbued a continent and a nation with the global salvational mission of rescuing the individual and redeeming the social domain (Greene 1993, Ferguson 1997). Defined as one component of democratic governance, 'accountability' would seem to come ready-packaged for the US export market. At the same time, there are longstanding assertions of American exceptionalism in the arena of social policy, both in the social science models used to analyse the historical development of health and social welfare provision in the USA and in the explanatory frameworks that look at the ostensibly dispersed and decentralised character of US public administration (cf. Skocpol 1992). As a feature of US social policy, 'accountability' would seem to be linked to the wide distribution of administrative powers and the devolution of social welfare responsibilities to local levels. A claim of exceptionalism might also be levied with regards to the federal/national role when it comes to research steering in the USA (even given the recent revamping of the Federal-level Department of Education and reorganisation of some of the mechanisms through which US educational research is to inform policy making that will be discussed below). Thus, the standard story would be that there is such a dispersion of public agencies (on state and national levels), sources of funding (through a range of governmental agencies and private foundations), institutional arrangements and distribution networks that the USA cannot be said to have a national policy programme for researching education on a par with other parts of the world. This story of dispersion, variety and absence makes an odd companion for another story, the story of the global hegemony of US education research. Yet, an examination of 'accountability' reveals a set of coherent organising principles and allows for a discussion of the governance that does in fact travel through education research in the USA. Whether this is exceptional or simultaneously a global governance is a question outside the scope of this particular study, though this is certainly an issue that warrants additional research attention.

Concerns with accountableness have historically provided one of the rationales for harnessing the social sciences to the provision of public schooling in the USA. In the 'accountability' surge of the early 1970s, which I discuss below, the accountableness of governments (federal, state and local) was tied to a social engineering and a 'scientific' planning for a future – a deferred future of equality and justice in the Great Society to

come. The use of social science research in US President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, for example, held the promise of making governments better accountable to their citizens and better accountable for the ameliorative social projects being undertaken in the name of progress. To an extent, these employments of technological expertise and social planning can be seen as a continuance of New Deal government social interventions as well as of the planning models connected with the Second World War, yet they were also marked by greater sets of distinctions and different technologies than existed previously. 'Accountability' of the early twenty-first century overlaps with these previous notions but in its present forms has been linked to a reconfiguration of social governance that places more responsibility on communities; has been recast as a technical problem of actuarial expertise and data management; and, concurrently, has been attached to the political rationalities of liberal democracy as much through the specification of what is proper for governments as through the governance of the reason and actions of the individual.

### The 'new era' of accountability

The centrality of 'accountability' on the contemporary American educational research landscape is underscored by its appearance in the themes of recent annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), with the theme of the 2003 meeting '*Accountability for Educational Quality: Shared Responsibility*' and the 2005 meeting taking up '*Demography and Democracy in the Era of Accountability*'. With this last – the notion of 'the Era of Accountability' – it has achieved the level of a proposed label for our times, the chief defining characteristic of the times in which we live. In this section I discuss travelling strategies of governance within US educational research by looking at the notion that accountability is an appropriate label for the era. However, to begin with, it is worth noting that US education and research on it are not alone in appearing presently to reside in an accountability-time. Homologous discussions about accountability as our 'new era' can be found across multiple domains, notably within business and industry where this new epoch also appears to be acutely felt.

In 2002 the US Congress passed the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, officially titled the 'Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act', legislation that restructured securities and corporate governance regulations on a scale not seen since the New Deal of the 1930s (Cohen and Qaimmaqami 2005). Coming on the heels of the Enron and WorldCom scandals, the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation requires increased public disclosure requirements, notably of the activities of corporate boards of directors. These new regulative provisions were advanced in the name of increasing accountableness and have certain implications in other areas, for example in the management of US-based non-profit organisations to which some of the audit and disclosure provisions apply. As in the spheres of education and educational research, accountability in these circuits is being increasingly viewed as a key feature 'of the times'. Accountability has created a 'brave new era', an article in *Business Week* magazine recently declared, in which 'professionals can no longer automatically sanitize everything they do ... nor can they barricade themselves behind a wall of ignorance' (France *et al.* 2004). The teleology of this periodisation, particularly the suggestion of an antecedent era without accountability, suggests that academics ought not unquestioningly to accept such political slogans and concepts as the critical tools and analytic frames of scholarship. In the 'new climate',

the 'post-Enron' world of which Sarbanes-Oxley is only one part, declarations of accountability-time are frequently seen to represent a progressive evolution of the social, cultural (and financial/commercial) arrangements we inhabit. To bastardise a familiar Kantian formulation – but hopefully to capture its logic – it could be said that while we may not live in an accountable age, if it is an age of accountability that we live in, we are one step closer to freeing ourselves from our self-imposed immaturity.

Nonetheless, while caution is warranted with regard to both triumphant and despairing declarations of accountability-time, there are noteworthy features of the current state of cultural arrangements in the USA that accountability-related notions seem accurately to describe. Increased reporting requirements are the main contributions that Sarbanes-Oxley has made to the 'era of accountability'; however, what we are witnessing is much more than a restructuring of the legal provisions that apply to corporate governance. There is a larger social governance at play, a governance which means that the reporting/dissemination and consumption of educational research assumes new imperatives and configurations. It is not only corporate executives who are no longer permitted to barricade themselves behind walls of ignorance. The responsibility to take responsibility for disclosing and being disclosed is becoming ever more widely dispersed.

The governing strategies that are connected with accountability, reporting and disclosure come into high resolution when we examine how this plays out with regard to community notification statutes, laws which in the USA are often collectively discussed as 'Megan's Law'. This first appeared as 1994 New Jersey legislation requiring community notification when individuals identified by the state as potential sexual predators moved into an area. Such provisions have since been enacted as federal legislation (signed into law by President Clinton) and continue to generate attention in national and local politics. On the one hand, community notification provisions make governments 'accountable' in new ways to their citizens, yet with these statutes it can be argued that there is a net transfer of responsibility for ensuring public safety away from governments and onto individuals and their communities – a conundrum that nicely demonstrates how even within an accountability-time, what makes for 'accountability' is anything but straightforward. Ron Levi (2000) has argued that 'Megan's Law' disclosure provisions create a 'preventative state' that can be shielded from criticism on the basis of having undertaken risk management measures by deploying an actuarial expertise that is then translated into community-level actions. The dissemination of information by the state becomes central to a community's ability to protect and manage itself; it necessitates that community members act and not act in certain ways. Similar forms of what Nik Rose and others have termed 'responsibilisation' (Rose 1999) are now appearing in the mechanisms that the US government is presently employing when it comes to disseminating and shaping the use of educational research.

In the spring of 2002 the US Congress passed the Educational Sciences Reform Act (H.R. 3801), a bill which overhauled the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and created in its place the Institute of Education Sciences within the federal Department of Education. Other features connected with these legislative changes, specifically an increased emphasis on 'evidence' and 'scientifically valid research' can be explored as strategies of governance traveling through US educational research in similar manner as the present examination of accountability (see e.g. Lather 2004, Popkewitz 2004). In terms of the government's role in the diffusion of educational research, H.R. 3801 is significant for helping bring the What Works Clearinghouse

(WWC) into existence. As an education research dissemination vehicle, the WWC operates along many of the same lines as community notification statutes. The clearing-house presents itself as a 'decision-making tool' that 'helps the education community locate and recognize credible and reliable evidence to make informed decisions.' Similar to the government's actuarial computations that assign certain individuals to sexual predator risk pools, the WWC uses an evaluative calculus that is designed to provide a community (the 'education community') with reliable resources for managing itself. As of late spring 2005 WWC had presented its reviews only of middle school math research – bestowing a green light double-checkmark upon a study that 'Meets Evidence Standards'; a yellow light single-checkmark on research that 'Meets Evidence Standards with Reservations'; and a red light 'X' on research that 'Does Not Meet Evidence Screens'. Particular 'interventions' are not endorsed by the WWC, rather information is coded according to these 'reliability' ratings and is transmitted for the purposes of informed decision making and the differentiation of, in their words, 'high-quality research from weaker research and promotional claims'. As the notion of meeting 'evidence screens' clearly suggests, the WWC is operating in an actuarial world of risk-level and confidence-level assessments. Despite the ambition of serving as a cut-and-dry 'trusted source of scientific evidence', the organisation's own statements hint at the probabilistic nature of these reviews and the research they present as matters entailing 'credibility' and 'reliability'. This is something, it could be argued, that comes with the territory of any such endeavour, yet what is of special significance for present purposes is that these strategies for disseminating and structuring the uses of education research constitute forms of social governance that reflect the responsibilisation we see also occurring across other domains in the accountability-time of our present.<sup>2</sup>

What Works constructs an 'educational community' that can putatively demonstrate its 'reasonableness' by basing its decisions on research findings that have been established to present less risk. (As a rule, qualitative research fails to pass the WWC evidence screen as allegedly being epistemologically incommensurable with the 'outcome evaluation'.<sup>3</sup>) The WWC's traffic-light icons fabricate a 'common-sense' around its procedures, for who in their right mind would run a red light! These become the new accountability provisions that govern educational research. The responsibility for equitable, quality educational provision is shifted over to communities of researchers and decision makers who must conduct themselves with prudence and be ever-mindful of the actuarial expertise that the preventative state provides in the course of discharging its duties. Researchers play a key role in this governance: to quote the presidential address of the 2003 AERA President, 'researchers too need to share responsibility' (Linn 2003). Walls of ignorance are no longer to serve as exculpatory barricades, which of course is something that can be welcomed for a host of reasons. However, we should also note that in advancing the spread of enlightened reason (thanks in part to the tri-colored illumination of the traffic signal), the accountability of our time is bringing a certain high stakes logic to US educational research itself and widely dispersing the responsibilities for managing successful educational provision. What Works works into a collective salvation narrative that has been recast to include actuarial expertise, disclosure and reporting as the keys to social hope.

### Accountability as an empirical object

To say that within our accountability-time 'accountability' exists as a thing in the world is not the redundancy that it might seem on first blush. My intent here is to discuss how an analytic and theoretical concept can be transmuted into an apparent empirical reality – how accountability has become an object that is reasoned about in particular ways, as well as acted upon, and how educational research is drawn into these transformations. From the previous section it should be clear that the 'accountability' presently under examination pertains to much more than a pattern of relations between 'the elected' and 'the people'. We are dealing with a phenomenon of governance much more expansive and diffuse than the *Federalist Papers* style of concern for designing the democratic systems of government best able to be held 'accountable' to constituents. This notion of designing appropriate systems is, however, relevant, for it is common to find accountability analysed in US education research literature as a systems-management problem, e.g. in terms of 'accountability systems' (Linn 2003). Another congruent approach is to conduct research on 'accountability policies' (Spillane, Diamond, *et al.* 2002), e.g. as a bundle of mechanisms and initiatives sharing certain family resemblances. A focus on management systems and policy implementation might appear to skirt the notion of accountability as an empirical reality, however we will see that the sciences of education research themselves help to call this accountability-entity into existence. As a thing in the world, accountability takes a place on the landscape, affecting the social positions of subjects and structuring the social administration of the individual.

Forms of accountableness have appeared in various landscapes for some time now – as the above reference to the *Federalist Papers* hints at. In many of these instances, the emphasis has been on a relationship, a someone/something being 'accountable' to or for another someone/something. US educational research literature from the early 1970s evidences a burst of interest in accountableness. Notable in this respect is the work of Leon Lessinger (Lessinger 1970, Lessinger and Tyler 1971, Lessinger and Sabine 1973), as well as a progressive vision of the connections between public policy and social science research, a mode of thinking that, for example, played into making programme evaluation such a key feature of the 1965 Title I legislation (Lagemann 2000). In 1971 the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) felt compelled to adopt a position statement on accountability. This statement critiqued behaviourist evaluation paradigms and spoke of the multi-directional accountability relations that bound English teachers to students, colleagues, parents, administrators, the local community and vice-versa.<sup>4</sup> That we find a 1972 article in the *Journal of Higher Education* referring with evident exhaustion to the 'current "accountability" craze' (Cooper 1972) should be further cause for tempering present day claims about the absolute novelty of our 'new era'. The accountability movement of the 1970s attracted the critical attention of Thomas S. Popkewitz and Gary G. Wehlage (1973) who criticised the then-conventional concept of accountability as a technological mode of thought that rigidified thinking about schooling by installing behaviourist evaluative criteria, disregarding the diverse ways that people give meaning to experience, and considering schooling only to be a problem of bureaucratic management. Such critiques may still be quite relevant 35 years later, however, for my purposes here, returning to the early 1970s has its most value for pointing to features of 'accountability' that have been somewhat obscured with the accretions of time.

It will be illustrative to turn specifically to a November 1971 editorial from the *Journal of Higher Education*, as a way of tracking some transformations in 'what' accountability can be. This particular piece of commentary emerged in the context of a series of articles and discussions of accountability in US colleges and universities. In June of that year, for example, the journal had published an article on 'Autonomy and Accountability', a piece self-consciously written in the shadow of the Kent State shootings of the previous year and in the general context of 'turmoil and disruption on college campuses' (McConnell 1971). 'Autonomy' and 'accountability' were here problematised as relational descriptors that existed in a contentious, uneasy tension, something that the November editorial addressed by speaking to colleges and universities not as conforming to one or another ideal-type model but as political systems with 'complex interactions'. However, seemingly increasingly figuring in these interactions was 'accountability' (quotation marks in the original), in regards to which the *Journal of Higher Education's* editor, Robert J. Silverman, noted: 'those who control information, those who utilize, manipulate, and evaluate data on university processes influence the definition of situations to which others respond,' adding 'in essence, they create the reality on which all are dependent' (1971). The shift from 'accountable' as descriptive (or not) of a relationship to accountability understood as a process is, I think, a key one. Quite evident and accessible in this 1971 statement is the acknowledgement that 'accountability' processes and systems *make up* part of our reality: they structure how individuals become positioned in relation to flows of data and information ('reporting' and 'disclosure', to use the terms I discussed in the previous section). Pointing to an historical instance in which 'accountability' is seen in terms of cultural/social processes and is acknowledged to be part and parcel of the construction of realities will, I hope, help to unsettle the brute force of its current, taken-for-granted prevalence. This contemporary 'presence' has the potential of making 'accountability' seem natural and necessary, and not a made and historically contingent part of the landscape (or edu-scape).<sup>5</sup> The empirical object 'accountability' that appears before US education researchers today is the flows of data and their management reified. This object is also one that owes some of its visibility to their work.

A study recently published in the *American Educational Research Journal* will nicely illustrate how the apparent empirical realities of 'accountability' have become problems of educational research. Samuel Stringfield and Mary Yakimowski-Srebnick (2005) present data from a longitudinal study of Baltimore public schools, organising their study according to what they define as 'three phases of accountability'. In one sense this harkens back to the above conversation of accountability-time, for the authors discuss the early implementation of standards in the period after the *A Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), followed by a series of reforms connected with 1997 state legislation, and finally the implementation of initiatives connected with the No Child Left Behind federal legislation. Nonetheless, in looking at these phases, the researchers rely on accountability as the unifying theme, the object that took slightly different yet consistently recognisable shapes during this 15- to 20-year period. Stringfield and Yakimowski-Srebnick note that in recent years education researchers have had profound concerns about the narrowness of data measures and 'America's current testing regimen'. All the same, they remark that 'aggregated scores on various states' designated achievement measures have become key components of accountability for America's public schools' (Stringfield and Yakimowski-Srebnick 2005). The concept of accountability deployed in this study – as in other recent US education

research – is one directly lifted from the contemporary political context with the result that as it circulates in scholarship, accountability has become the collection and reporting of data. In the transit from theoretical concept to object in the world and back to analytic construct ‘accountability’ now describes not the qualities of a relationship but constructs a social reality that, for example, makes the research problem for Stringfield and Yakimowski-Srebnick’s study one of what works and what doesn’t in ‘accountability-driven reform’. This is, of course, not to point to any flaws in their study, rather it is to point to the way that it has become possible for ‘accountability’ to travel as an accepted empirical reality.

## Conclusion

Accountability, as it moves within US educational research both as a thing in the world and as the defining characteristic of our era embodies strategies for the social administration of the individual. The common understanding of accountability as a problem of educational research, I have maintained, furthers a general social trend of increased responsabilisation that requires education professionals to act in accordance with a set of norms of reasonableness. As an empirical object, accountability can be seen as ‘too little’ or ‘too much’ present, part of the apparent reality that researchers and policymakers grapple with. We can note, for example, that ‘Standards, testing and accountability’ (in one breath) are among the research topics (others are ‘School reform’, ‘Teacher retention’) that the *Harvard Education Letter* includes when ‘summarizing the latest education research and synthesizing it with practical suggestions you can put to daily use in your classrooms and schools’.<sup>6</sup> As we have seen above, accountability travels not in isolation but commonly in conjunction with ‘standards and testing’. In US educational research, ‘accountability’ has, to considerable extent, come to represent the reification of flows of information and their management.

While such bureaucratisation and technicalisation takes us some distance from accountability as a description of the qualities of a relationship between the governed and the governing, there is still a liberal-democratic political rationality embedded in the strategy of governance we have been examining here. Similar to ‘Megan’s Law’ community notification statutes, educational accountability generates a ‘proper’ social control. Government and its representatives are prevented from being overly intrusive, true to the liberal spirit; and in their stead, the maintenance of social order is entrusted to individuals as members of communities. The social science knowledge that educational researchers produce furthers this arrangement through studies of ‘accountability-driven reforms’ that rationalise and bring a coherence to the actions of governments. The social science knowledge that educational researchers produce also supports individuals as members of communities by giving them ‘accountability data’ to use in their decision making. ‘Accountability’ thus offers a salvation narrative for our times in which the properly informed (and properly reasoning) individual becomes proof of science’s democratising potential and become the agent of a progress that offers social hope for redemption. This social redemption of the early twenty-first century is not the late nineteenth-century secularised saving of a soul but a redemption that rights past wrongs through the attainment of educational equity with no child no longer left behind.

## Notes

- 1 Often referred to as IRB, these are university committees charged with ensuring the ethical treatment of human subject.
- 2 The quoted material in this paragraph is drawn from What Works Clearinghouse pamphlets and website. See <http://www.whatworks.ed.gov/whatwedo/overview.html> [accessed 12 March 2005].
- 3 <http://www.whatworks.ed.gov/info/disclaimer.html> [accessed 4 April 2005].
- 4 <http://www.ncte.org/about/gov/reports/03annrpt/srcommit/107344.htm>.
- 5 An analogous argument about social objects and subject positions could also be elaborated along the lines suggested by Arjun Appadurai’s work on ‘-scapes’ (Appadurai 1990).
- 6 <http://www.edletter.org> [accessed 10 March 2005].

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### 3 Crossing borders

## The European dimension in educational and social science research

*Angelos Agalinos*<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

Europe is confronted by major societal challenges and opportunities such as social and regional cohesion, unemployment, migration, interactions between different cultures, poverty and inequalities, enlargement, demographic change, security and global interdependence. There is a need on the part of society in general and policy makers in particular for a deeper knowledge and understanding of such issues, of their driving forces and consequences, and of how best to tackle them. A need for significantly improved understanding of how social, economic and environmental objectives might be successfully combined, of how the key social, political, cultural and economic issues in an enlarged EU can be faced.

Generating in-depth, shared understanding of such complex challenges and providing an improved knowledge base for decisions on relevant strategies and policies, requires a strong collaborative research effort across the social and human sciences in all their strength and variety across Europe. The social and human sciences do not only contribute to current social, economic, political and cultural development processes, but also build the intellectual foundations and resources for dealing with future challenges, foreseen as well as unexpected. A vibrant research scene in the social and human sciences is an essential component of a dynamic Europe.

The activities of the European Commission in this field aim to provide a coherent and interlinked understanding of the challenges contemporary European societies are faced with and to support policy, thereby enabling Europe better to understand itself and face its future. This essentially descriptive chapter argues that these activities provide a new exciting arena where new interpretations and new practices of research have been generated that foster the interaction of *policy relevance*, *transnationality* and *multidisciplinarity* and stimulate innovative social and educational research. The argument of this chapter is that, especially after 1995, European social science research programmes have become a powerful way of beginning to draw together and understand the complex dimensions of contemporary social and educational change in Europe and beyond.

The chapter provides an insider's account of the development of educational research supported by the Directorate-General for Research of the European Commission since 1995. When and how did EU-supported educational research begin? What is its wider research policy context? What are some landmarks in its development? What are the key players involved? Why support educational research at a European level? What kind of

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## Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	viii
<i>List of contributors</i>	ix
<i>Series editors' introduction</i>	xviii

<b>Introduction: education research and policy – steering the knowledge-based economy</b>	<b>1</b>
JENNY OZGA, TERRI SEDDON, THOMAS S. POPKEWITZ	

### PART I

<b>Globalising policy and research in education</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1 Universities, the internet and the global education market</b>	<b>17</b>
INGRID LOHMANN	
<b>2 Accountability in US educational research and the travels of governance</b>	<b>33</b>
NOAH W. SOBE	
<b>3 Crossing borders: the European dimension in educational and social science research</b>	<b>43</b>
ANGELOS AGALIANOS	
<b>4 International policy research: 'evidence' from CERI/OECD1</b>	<b>78</b>
TOM SCHULLER	
<b>5 A European perspective on international arenas for educational research</b>	<b>91</b>
SVERKER LINDBLAD	



## PART II

<b>Research steering in national contexts</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>6 Toward new government of education research: refashioning researchers as entrepreneurial and ethical subjects</b>	<b>105</b>
KARI DEHLI AND ALISON TAYLOR	
<b>7 The steering of educational policy research in neoliberal times: the case of Argentina</b>	<b>119</b>
JORGE GOROSTIAGA, MÓNICA PINI, ANA M. DONINI AND MARK B. GINSBURG	
<b>8 The steering of educational research in post-Soviet Russia: tradition and challenge</b>	<b>135</b>
IRINA ISAAKYAN	
<b>9 The politics of educational research in contemporary postcolonial Malaysia: discourses of globalisation, nationalism and education</b>	<b>147</b>
CYNTHIA JOSEPH	
<b>10 Research as consultancy in the African university: a challenge to excellence</b>	<b>164</b>
KENNETH KING	
<b>11 Redesigning what counts as evidence in educational policy: the Singapore model</b>	<b>170</b>
ALLAN LUKE AND DAVID HOGAN	
<b>12 Performativity, measurement and research: a critique of performance-based research funding in New Zealand</b>	<b>185</b>
PETER ROBERTS	
<b>13 Global trends towards education and science: tension and resistance</b>	<b>200</b>
BARBARA SCHNEIDER, ZACK KERTCHER AND SHIRA OFFER	
<b>14 Neoliberalism liberally applied: educational policy borrowing in Central Asia</b>	<b>217</b>
GITA STEINER-KHAMSI, IVETA SILOVA AND ERIC M. JOHNSON	
<b>15 Marketing academic issues: to what extent does education policy steer education research in Spain?</b>	<b>246</b>
XAVIER RAMBLA	

<b>16 Competition and interaction between research knowledge and state knowledge in policy steering in France: national trends and recent effects of decentralisation and globalisation</b>	<b>259</b>
AGNÈS VAN ZANTEN	
<b>17 Education policy research in the People's Republic of China</b>	<b>270</b>
RUI YANG	
<b>PART III</b>	
<b>Global-local politics of educational research</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>18 Knowledge beyond the knowledge economy: merely cultural? Merely commercial? Merely civilizing?</b>	<b>287</b>
JOHANNAH FAHEY, JANE KENWAY, ELIZABETH BULLEN AND SIMON ROBB	
<b>19 After methodolatry: epistemological challenges for 'risky' educational research</b>	<b>302</b>
ERICA McWILLIAM	
<b>20 Policy scholarship against de-politicisation</b>	<b>316</b>
PATRICIA THOMSON	
<i>Index</i>	<b>332</b>