

**ARTIGO**

**THE RESEARCH ON EDUCATION POLICY IN BRAZIL: AN ANALYSIS  
OF THE THEORETICAL-EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASPECTS<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents the results of a study that aimed at identifying the theoretical-epistemological framework used in the research on education policy, from the analysis of 140 papers published between 2010 and 2012, in seven Brazilian academic journals. The theoretical background is based on the discussions about the focus of the epistemologies of education policy and meta-research and on the concepts of combined explanatory strategies and additive theorization (McLENNAN, 1996). From the data analysis, some challenges for the research on the education policy field are presented.

**Keywords:** Education Policy. Epistemology. Research.

**A PESQUISA SOBRE POLÍTICA EDUCACIONAL NO BRASIL: ANÁLISE DE ASPECTOS TEÓRICO-EPISTEMOLÓGICOS**

**RESUMO:** Apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa que objetivou identificar os referenciais teórico-epistemológicos empregados em pesquisas de política educacional, a partir da análise de 140 artigos publicados entre 2010 a 2012, em sete periódicos brasileiros. O referencial teórico fundamenta-se nas discussões do enfoque das epistemologias da política educacional e da metapesquisa e nos conceitos de teorização combinada e teorização adicionada (McLENNAN, 1996). A partir dos dados analisados, são apresentados alguns desafios para a pesquisa no campo da política educacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Política Educacional. Epistemologia. Pesquisa.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present reflections on the theoretical and epistemological frameworks that have been used in the research on Education Policy in Brazil, based on the analysis of 140 articles that deal with education policy, written by Brazilian authors, published in seven journals, from 2010 to 2012. The research is based on a set of discussions that have been developed within the ReLePe (Network of Theoretical and Epistemological Studies in Education Policy),<sup>2</sup> created in 2010, with the aim of intensifying the theoretical discussions on education policy research. At first, we present the main aspects related to epistemology and epistemologies of education policy. Next, we present the analysis of data of an empirical research. Finally, we present some challenges that the epistemological studies offer to the field of education policy research.

### ESTABLISHING A THEORETICAL-ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION POLICY

In general, the authors who discuss research methodology believe that epistemology or theory of knowledge is related to the nature, sources, and limitations of knowledge. The epistemological guidelines form and determine the particular view of the researchers on the world and reality, providing them with guiding principles on which they base their research questions, theories, methods, analyses, and conclusions (Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron, 2013). Each researcher focuses on certain paradigms that guide his work as well as the basic components of ontological knowledge production process (nature of existence), epistemology (nature of knowing), methodology (best ways to build the knowledge), and axiology (the role of values in the development of knowledge) (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Authors such as Marshall and Rossman (2006) and Anastas (2004) agree that researchers display their epistemological engagements by explaining their paradigms and research traditions, which is fundamental to rigour in qualitative research.

A choice of certain epistemological perspectives presupposes a practice of reflexivity. Reflexivity demands that researchers develop a permanent critical consciousness with regard to social aspects that are involved in the knowledge production process in their studies (Koch & Harrington, 1998). In addition, reflexivity involves a conscious and reflective use of theories as well as acknowledging potential limitations.

Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013) explain that theory is another aspect of epistemology, and researchers agree that there is

no research without theory. For the authors, the critical aspects of the epistemological foundations of research are as follows: reflexivity, the relationship between researchers and participants, an account of the theories underlying a study, and the conscious and integrated use of a research tradition or paradigm.

This research is in tandem with studies focused on The Epistemologies of Education Policy Approach (EEPA). This perspective is focused on establishing theoretical-epistemological frameworks that can be used in education policy studies.<sup>3</sup>

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The epistemological analysis of education policy productions is a relatively recent area of research in Brazil (Tello & Almeida, 2013; Bello, Jacomini, & Minhoto, 2014; Diógenes, 2014; Oliveira & Palafox, 2014; Stremel, 2014; Souza, 2014; Marcon, 2016; Soares, 2016; Mainardes, 2013, in press; Mainardes, Ferreira & Tello; Mainardes & Tello, 2016; Tello & Mainardes, 2012; 2015a; 2015b).

The theoretical framework of this research area was established on contributions from EEPA and meta-research (Tello, 2012) as well as the concepts of combined and additive theorisation (McLennan, 1996). This meta-research (research on the research) on a 140-article sample was based on those concepts.<sup>4</sup>

According to Tello (2012) based on Bourdieu's theory (2012), EEPA is an analytical-conceptual schema that may be employed by the researcher to exercise an epistemological vigilance and develop meta-research<sup>5</sup> studies on education policy. The epistemology perspective of education policy is formed by three analytical components: an epistemological perspective, an epistemological positioning, and an epistemic-methodological perspective. The epistemological perspective refers to the worldview that a researcher employs to guide his research. Some examples of this concept include marxism, neo-marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, existentialism, humanism, and pluralism. The second component, the epistemological positioning, is (or should be) related to the epistemological perspective in a robust study. Epistemological positioning is linked to the field of study; it is related to the researcher's stance regarding the object of the study under investigation. Some examples of epistemological positioning are as follows: radical-critical, critical-analytical, critical-reproductivist, critical-normative, reformist, neo-institutionalist, legal, neoliberal, post-modern, etc. The epistemic-methodological perspective looks at how a study is developed methodically based on a particular epistemological

perspective and an epistemological stance. It refers to the level of consistency between the different aspects of research (objectives, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis, and conclusions). No methodology is neutral. For this reason, when a researcher is explaining his epistemological foundations, he may exercise epistemological vigilance in his research. The construction of this research stems from the epistemological perspective and positioning taken by the researcher. Joining the words ‘epistemology’ and ‘methodology’ together shows that the research methodology stems from the researcher’s epistemological guidelines.<sup>6</sup> The epistemic-methodological perspective may be understood as the thread that links all elements of research, expanding its coherence, consistency, and rigour.

Based on Bourdieu, Rawolle and Lingard (2015) argue that the concept of reflexivity is central to the dissemination of research. Rejecting the notion of epistemological innocence and acknowledging that all research is both empirical and theoretical as well as practical, demands (as per Bourdieu), an openness and vulnerability as well as a complete honesty when presenting studies, whether in oral or written form (Rawolle & Lingard, 2015).

Rawolle and Lingard (2008), agreeing with van Zanten (2005), believe that the theoretical concepts and methodological approaches formulated by Bourdieu may contribute to research and understanding of education policy in the context of globalisation and the process of its ‘economisation’. For those authors, the concepts of habitus, capitals, field, and practice, which are synergistically related, are relevant to research in education policy (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008). According to these authors, Bourdieu’s methodological insights, such as rejecting an epistemological innocence, the need for reflexivity, research-like fieldwork in philosophy, and the concept of viewing epistemology as a practical matter may also be useful for research on educational policies.

Ball (2011) makes a relevant theoretical contribution to epistemological studies on education policy. Ball (2011) mentions two epistemology types in the research process: ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ epistemology. For him, politics is a social, relational, temporal, and discursive process. A deep epistemology is related to wider, more profound issues about assumptions of power, truth, and subjectivity (Ball, 2015). Therefore, it refers to the fundamental pillars of research in ontological and epistemological terms. The ‘surface’ epistemology focuses on relationships between study conceptualisation, design, execution, and interpretation. They are ‘relatively mundane reflections on access to data, the status of an actor’s interpretation, the interviewee’s validation, etc.’ (Ball, 2015, p.

162). Such considerations are important, but they are not enough to tackle deep epistemology. A study involving deep epistemology aims to explain and problematize the theoretical assumptions employed as well as the discursive or deep economic-structural foundations that are being used to analyse the object under investigation. For Ball, operating with both epistemologies in research is not a macro and micro re-articulation, but ‘a erasure of such binary to view politics as a set of techniques, categories, objects and subjectivities’ (Ball, 2015, p. 167). According to Ball, most policy analyses have not been very theoretically sophisticated, and, in many cases, they have no theoretical basis. Furthermore, a large part of policy analysis is dominated by an implicit, undiscussed assumption of rationality, in which political processes are considered rational, orderly, and coherent. According to him, this causes distortions in the empirical work. He takes the stance that politics is not a very rational and orderly process. Consequently, we must theoretically reflect upon the possibility of irrationality, confusion, disorder, and chaos. This also leads to questions about what counts as data, and the possibilities of what may be data. This means that we must reflect upon the ontological foundation of politics, and the relationship of politics with the way we think about how the social world works in general. (Ball, 2015, p. 162)

The concepts of combined and additive theorisation (McLennan, 1996) were also relevant in the analysis of the 140 sample articles. Discussing the ‘four sins of modernist theory’, McLennan (1996) argues that combined explanatory strategies are legitimate and may be promising. In this sense, combined theorisation is an effort to articulate theories or concepts originating from different theories with the aim of writing a robust theoretical framework to support a certain analysis. Such an effort requires making theoretical choices and justifying them, which implies an exercise of reflexivity and epistemological vigilance. The notion of additive theory relates to adopting somewhat random theories, concepts, ideas from different theories and epistemological perspectives, resulting in a set of ideas and concepts without coherence, unity, and coordination. The simplistically additive and overlapping ideas from different authors results in a failed attempt at defining a theoretical framework, which may be considered fragile, disjointed, and not very epistemologically coherent.

## METHODOLOGY

This study featured an analysis of 140 education policy articles by Brazilian authors published between 2010 and 2012 in the following

journals: *Cadernos de Pesquisa, Educação & Sociedade, Educação e Política em debate – EPD, Ensaio – Avaliação e Políticas Públicas em Educação, Jornal de Políticas Educacionais - JPE, Revista Brasileira de Educação – RBE, and Revista Brasileira de Política e Administração da Educação – RBP AE*. The initial criterion for journal selection was to review only journals that were originally meant to publish articles in the field of education policy (*EPD, Ensaio, JPE, and RBP AE*). However, the following journals were later included: *Cadernos de Pesquisa, Educação & Sociedade, and RBE*. These journals were selected since they are well-established journals that feature articles on various areas, including education policy.

It is important to highlight that this study was an attempt to employ and clarify EEPA concepts and proposals of meta-research in education policy. In conclusion, this is a sample with possible limitations. We acknowledge that besides *Cadernos de Pesquisa, Educação & Sociedade, and RBE*, there were other relevant journals in the education field that also feature education policy articles. This study was carried out between 2013 and 2015, and the selected articles were published between 2010 and 2012. Meta-research is a procedure in which a set of productions are selected for systematic and critical examination. Consequently, meta-research differs from literature reviews, which are studies on the state of the art or knowledge. In the case of the meta-research described in this article, the goal was to understand how the sample article authors dealt with technical and methodological issues. The analysis is based on EEPA formulations that present relevant concepts and categories (e.g., epistemological perspective, epistemological stance, epistemological-methodological focus, approach/abstraction levels, etc.), as well as a set of questions that guide the aspects that may be considered in meta-research (Mainardes & Tello, 2016).

In the first stage of research, it was found that 646 articles were published in that period (Table 1). Next, the articles on education policy were selected, excluding articles by foreign authors, articles on other themes, and 33 articles on education policy by Brazilian authors that consisted of comments or criticisms (18.9% of the total of education policy articles). Articles featuring comments or criticism are needed and relevant in the field of education policy. However, since they were not actual research articles, we decided that it would not be appropriate to include them in the sample. The final sample included 140 articles – 53 theoretical articles or document analysis research articles (38%) and 87 empirical research articles (62%). We decided not to include any articles dealing exclusively with educational evaluation and democratic management, and/or educational or school management. Although many assessment and management studies

are related to education policy, we believe that the epistemological analysis of such studies would be more appropriate in another study.<sup>7</sup>

**TABLE 1.** Articles included in the research sample (2010-2012)

Journal		Education policy articles (Brazilian authors)	Comments or critiques	Theoretical research	Empirical research	Total articles - sample
Cadernos de Pesquisa	123	14	3	0	11	11
Educação & Sociedade	173	41	10	15	16	31
Educação e Política em debate (*)	29	11	2	1	8	9
Ensaio – Avaliação e Políticas Públicas em Educação	105	28	0	4	24	28
Jornal de Políticas Educacionais	34	27	7	3	17	20
RBE	97	13	4	3	6	9
RBPAE	85	39	7	13	19	32
Total	646	173	33	53 (62 %)	87 (38 %)	140 (100%)

\*Refers only to articles of 2012 (year of creation of the journal)

**Source:** Author

The second phase involved the systematic reading of articles and recording of the relevant study data in a spreadsheet: theme, the type of research (theoretical or empirical, and document analysis) authors used as foundation, epistemological perspective, epistemological stance, methodological procedures, level of approach

and abstraction (description, analysis, understanding), theoretical frameworks (concepts), and range of research (international/global, national, regional, state, or local). Even though such categories were defined *a priori*, it was in the process of research that those categories/concepts were tested and reworked.

The third phase involved analysing the records in the light of the theoretical framework and the aforementioned items.

The articles addressed a large variety of education issues. The most recurrent ones were as follows: financing and collaboration regime (13 articles); analysis of specific programmes - PDE, PAR, IDEB, PROUNI, REUNI (11);<sup>8</sup> expansion and regulation of higher education (10); public and private (9); assessment and regulation (7); national plan of education- PNE (7); municipal education policy (7); career, compensation, and teacher appreciation (5); and federalism (5). As indicated in Table 1, 53 articles originated from theoretical studies (38%) and 87 articles originated from empirical studies (62%).

Regarding the methodological procedures, the greater part of the empirical studies adopted mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative). The most recurrent procedures were: document analysis (34 articles); analysis of statistical data such as microdata from INEP, data from IDEB, data from state or municipal student performance assessments; enrolment data; salary scales (34 articles); interviews (21 articles); questionnaires (9 articles); observation (3 articles), focus group (2 articles).

The article authors were university professors, postgraduate studies in education (PPGEs) professors, PPGE graduates, and doctoral or master's degree students. Regarding geographical distribution, the majority of authors were from the Southeast region (45.7%) and South region (25.7%). The Northeast region amounted to 17.1% of the author distribution; the Midwest region amounted to 7.9% of the author distribution; and the North region amounted to 3.6 % of the author distribution. This uneven distribution somewhat reproduces the PPGE distribution in Brazil.

Regarding the scope of the studies, it was found that among the 128 articles which identified the scope of the studies (either theoretical or empirical),<sup>9</sup> 6 articles had an international-global focus, 62 of them had a national focus, 4 of them had a regional focus, 26 of them had a state focus, and 30 of them had a local focus. Although some studies classified as nationwide, state level, or local level showed relationships

with an international/global context, such studies were the minority because only six articles focused on international/global aspects.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The main aim of the study was to analyse the articles from an epistemological point of view by exploring how researchers in the field have been tackling theoretical-epistemological issues in their research. According to Sánchez Gamboa (2008), elaborating a response through research involves the following levels: technical, methodological, theoretical, epistemological, gnoseological, and ontological. The epistemological level relates to the ‘conception of causality, validation of the scientific evidence, and criterion of scientificity’ (p. 72). The ontological level relates to the ‘comprehensive and complex categories, conception of Man, education, and society, conceptions of reality (conceptions of space, time, and movement)’ (p. 72). In the analyses performed, we believe that these two levels are interrelated. Identifying the epistemological perspective and the epistemological stance requires considering epistemological and ontological aspects. Identification of the epistemic-methodological perspective requires an analysis of the text in its totality to understand the internal logic of the debate, and the level of coherence between the theoretical framework, data analysis, discussions, conclusions, epistemological stance, etc. This analysis is complex, and it demands that the researcher conducting the meta-research have a command of different theoretical-epistemological foundations that have been used in the field. In addition, he must practise exercising the analysis of epistemic-methodology based on the references that were employed. For example, if a study is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA), the analysis and inferences must be carried out within this perspective.

Another challenge in meta-research is related to the classifications that need to be made. In this study, research type classification systems (e.g., theoretical, empirical, and comments/ critiques), epistemological perspectives and stances, and level of abstraction/approach were used. It must be pointed out that all typology or classification is arbitrary, and it is related to specific purposes. In addition, because of its arbitrary nature, the same objects can be classified in different ways. Consequently, the classifications used should be understood as a theoretical exercise in the educational policy research. The process

of classification carries some risks including crystallisations and the employment of rigid schemata and closed categories. For this reason, the classifications elaborated on must be understood as attempts at systematisation and analysis exercises.

This study employed an article sample to explore how researchers in the field have been working with epistemological questions, avoiding judgement or creation of hierarchies. Although there is an effort to develop universalising categories (concepts that may be used in other studies), the sample does not allow generalisations.

Ball (2006) proposes the urgent need for theory in research in education and researcher training. To him, the theory plays a key role in epistemological decision-making to ensure conceptual robustness and devises a method for reflexivity to understand the social conditions of knowledge production. He also suggests that violence forms an important part of the theory. As a reflexive tool for research practice, the theory defies conservative and closed orthodoxies, parsimony, and simplicity. This is the role of theory in retaining any sense of obstinacy and social complexity.

## **THEORETICAL-EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The sample analysis indicated that few articles showed evidence of deep epistemology. Most articles presented a brief overview of the theoretical framework with no concerns about justifying choices or problematising theories based on the data and analysis.

Among the sample articles, only five of them alluded to an epistemological perspective. Ferretti (2011) mentioned the Marxist perspective, Oliveira et al. (2010) mentioned a critical-dialectic approach, Masson (2012) mentioned a historical and dialectical materialist conception, Saldanha & Oliveira (2012) mentioned a historical and dialectical materialist conception, and Souza (2012) mentioned a historic-philosophical perspective. In some cases, authors from other epistemological perspectives are used in the analyses (e.g., Ferretti, 2011). Moreover, in three articles, the authors refer to the theoretical perspective: Machado and Aniceto (2010) mention the theory of social representations; Pereira and Velloso (2012), the theory of speech (Laclau & Mouffe); and Barreto (2010), the critical discourse analysis (CDA). In the other articles (132 in number), the theoretical or epistemological perspectives were inferred from the

reading and analysis of articles because there was no such explanation by the authors themselves.<sup>10</sup> Table 2 shows the classification of 140 articles regarding the theoretical perspective.

**TABLE 2.**Theoretical perspectives of the sample (2010-2012)

Categories	No.	%
Combined theorisation	92	65,8
Historical and dialectical materialism	10	7,1
No evidence of theoretical foundation (absence of theorisation)	8	5.8
Additive theorisation	7	5.0
Neoinstitutional focus (normative institutionalism, historical institutionalism, network institutionalism)	5	3.6
Historical - sociological focus	4	2.9
Bourdieu's Theory	3	2,1
Historical-philosophical focus	2	1.4
Legal-institutional focus	2	1.4
Foucault's theory	1	0,7
Functionalist focus	1	0,7
Culturalist focus	1	0,7
Social Representation Theory	1	0,7
Critical theory	1	0,7
Critical discourse analysis (CDA)	1	0,7
Theory of discourse (Laclau & Mouffe)	1	0,7
Total	140	100

In articles classified as combined theorisation, the researchers searched for articulate theories, authors' contributions, and concepts from different theories, with the aim of elaborating a theoretical

framework. The analysis indicated that there are different levels of combined theorisation. In several cases, the combination resulted in a foundation that was able to support a coherent, articulate analysis (e.g., Freitas, 2012; Davis et al., 2011; Costa & Koslinski, 2011; Chaves, 2010; Susin & Peroni, 2011; Souza, 2012; Campos, 2012; Adrião; Pinheiro, 2012; Morais, 2012; Bruel & Bartholo, 2012; Santos, 2010; Augusto & Oliveira, 2011). The use of international references in some articles provided a more expanded, consistent, and differentiated theme analysis (Bruel & Bartholo, 2012; Davis et al., 2011; Augusto & Oliveira, 2011). Similarly, the use of classics such as Weber, Bourdieu, and Foucault has deepened analysis and broadened argumentation (Corrêa, 2010; Souza, 2012; Martins & Lotta, 2010; Amaral & Oliveira, 2011). In some cases, the exclusive use of authors with the same theme or contemporary authors made theorisation relatively fragile with consequences for analysis and discussions. Paraphrasing Ball (2006), it may be concluded that some researchers are content with what is available (in terms of theories and data) instead of what would be more significant for a more expanded and deepened analysis.

These combined theorisation strategies encourage reflections upon the establishment of a robust theoretical framework to analyse policies. Firstly, this strategy may foster a consistent theoretical framework. Ball (2016) is quoted by Avelar as saying

we cannot interpret the world or attribute meaning to the world by means of a theory or epistemological stance, since the world is persistently more complex and difficult than what one can understand with the simple use of a position, by taking a stance. (Avelar, 2016, p. 4)

Saunders (2007) explains that theoretical dependency (the recognition that all research needs a theory) does not imply theoretical determination. According to the author, there is no reason to suggest that different theoretical perspectives can be used in common areas of conceptualisation and common criteria of empirical evidence (Saunders, 2007). However, it is important to clarify that this is not a mere juxtaposition of theories. The combination of epistemological perspectives, theories, concepts, and ideas is complex, and it requires a high level of reflexivity, some justification for the combinations performed, a theoretically informed consciousness of the epistemological perspective, and understanding of the ideas or concepts that are being combined. Therefore, it is not about a random, unconscious choice of such theories, ideas, or concepts.

Secondly, this strategy refers to a theoretical pluralism that still needs to be deepened as an epistemological perspective (Tello & Mainardes, 2015a; Mainardes, in press). Also, the criticisms that have been made about the methodological, sociocultural, and political pluralism must be considered (e.g., McLennan, 1995; Mészáros, 2004; Tonet, no date found).

The articles included in the additive theorisation category (5%) are characterized by simple aggregation of theories, concepts, or ideas from authors of different theoretical perspectives, which are neither articulated nor problematised. The category 'absence of' (5.7%) is composed of articles that do not have a theoretical framework. These are articles that present data analysis (statistical data, data collected by the author, citation of official acts, etc.) and discussions without regard for theorisation. There is a very intimate relationship between the articles of these two categories (additive theorisation and absence of theorisation) with an empiricist epistemological stance (20 articles - 14%) and a descriptive level of approach/abstraction (21 studies - 15%).

Identifying the epistemological stance required an analysis of the article in its entirety including the theoretical perspective adopted, analysis procedures, argumentation, conclusions, and the positioning of the researcher in relation to the object of study.

Regarding the epistemological stance, the following categories were defined: analytical (78 articles), critical-analytical (28 articles), empiricist (20 articles), critical-normative (9 articles), critical-radical (4 articles), and culturalist (1 article). The greatest number of articles (78) came under the epistemological stance category. These articles presented either data analysis or the development of a theoretical essay, duly substantiated in a theoretical framework. Nevertheless, they do not take an explicit stance regarding the policy investigated, issues approached, or data analysed. Arguably, when the author's chosen theoretical framework is more founded on research on the subject of the theme itself but not on a denser, consolidated theory, the analysis becomes more limited. Moreover, there are different levels of analysis: highly and fairly sophisticated, analyses with greater or lesser theory and data integration, and analyses with a higher or lower level of originality and argumentation.

In articles classified as critical-analytical, there is a greater effort to contextualize the policy or issue investigated. In addition, the authors seek to clarify their stance on the policy or issue (e.g., Santos, 2010; Ferretti, 2011; Trojan, 2010).

The articles classified as showing an empiricist-epistemological stance display statistical data or data research but with little analysis and very little theorisation. These articles were subsequently classified as descriptive with regard to the level of approach/abstraction.

Beyond the analysis, the articles classified as critical-normative propose alternatives and solutions to the problems or weaknesses identified in the investigated policy (Moreira, 2012).

The articles classified as critical-radical present more in-depth analyses of the investigated policy, and they aim to reveal the contradictions in the policies and their consequences for social classes and the future of society (Kuenzer, 2010; Moura, 2010; Frigotto & Ciavatta, 2011; Masson, 2012). Because they offer a broader, in-depth view, those articles may function as foundation for other studies. Such articles were also classified based on the level of comprehension, and the levels of approach/abstraction.

Sayer (1984) argues that complex systems are characterised by a variety of mechanisms, structures, and events. Private mechanisms produce effects in economic circumstances. The same mechanisms can produce different events and the same types of events can have different causes. If this structure-mechanisms-events schema is applied, the critical-radical stance aims to comprise the broadest structures, conditioning mechanisms and events. The critical-analytical and analytical stances comprise the most general mechanisms associated with the events investigated. On the other hand, the empiricist stance tends to manifest in the analysis of events and is more concerned with the singular, local aspects of specific policies.

Regarding levels of approach/abstraction, three basic categories were devised: description, analysis, and comprehension (Mainardes & Tello, 2016). In the case of the sample, the studies were classified as follows: level of analysis - 114 studies; level of description - 21 studies; level of comprehension - 5 studies. In predominantly analytical studies, the data or ideas are worked on, categorized, and compared. The theories are not merely applied because the effort at analysis results in the generation of concepts, categories, typologies, and empirical generalisations (Mainardes & Tello, 2016). The predominantly descriptive studies present a set of ideas (in theoretical or bibliographical articles) or empirical data, with little analysis of the ideas or data presented. Even though they may present some theoretical foundation, these studies show reduced theory and data integration. Among the descriptive studies, some present a significant and relevant set of data (e.g. statistical information), which are weakly explored in the light of theoretical frameworks. Some studies present

results that are based on too few subjects, or show too much focus towards a specific (local) context. In this case, what is at stake is not the number of subjects or the range of research but the style of approach (merely descriptive). The level of comprehension is the highest and most advanced level of abstraction. These studies seek to approach the theme (theoretical or empirical) in a more totalising way, and extensively explore the relations and determinations involved in the investigated policy or in the question that is being discussed. Such research presents greater richness and depth in the analyses, which may also function as a foundation for other studies. In these studies, a strong, coherent liaison between the epistemological perspective, epistemological stance, and epistemic-methodological focus was found, even when the epistemological perspective was not explicit.

Based on the meta-research, it was found that there are different levels of analysis (more developed, less developed, more concerned with the technique, or more focused on theorisation based on the data). It was also found that the theoretical framework is a key element in the construction of the analytical process. Authors such as Ball (2006, 2011) and Fávero and Tonieto (2016) highlight the importance of theory in the analysis of policies, and they suggest that the absence of theory hampers a researcher's critical, creative thinking. There are cases in which the central problem is not the absence of theory but a fragile relationship between the theory adopted as foundation and the analyses conducted (low theory and data integration).

The meta-research in education policy and the classifications and categories that have been developed seemed relevant for the following reasons:

- a) They allow a deeper understanding of the theoretical-epistemological perspectives employed in the study of education policy and its implications to strengthen research in this field;
- b) They offer a 'description language' to refer to research in the field;
- c) They enable clear identification of potential tensions and challenges in education policy as well as reflect upon strategies for a continued strengthening of research in the field.

## **CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION POLICY**

Based on the meta-research, some challenges posed by the epistemological studies for research in education policy are outlined in this section.

The first challenge involves the need to expand knowledge about epistemological foundations used by researchers in the field of education policy. There are at least three issues related to this challenge: the possible validity of stating epistemological choices in research reports (publications), the importance of using the theories in a conscious and reflective way, and the possibilities and limitations of pluralism as an epistemological perspective.

There is no consensus or more in-depth debate on the importance of stating an epistemological perspective and epistemological stance. Based on the concepts of reflexivity and epistemological vigilance (Bourdieu, Passeron & Chamboredon, 2007) we have considered that expressing a theoretical-epistemological view may increase the consistency of research and the coherence between theory, methodology, data analysis, and conclusions, and that it may increase rigour in research. However, the expression in itself does not guarantee that the elements of research are aligned and coherent, and that the researcher deals with the adopted reference adequately. In cases where a combined theorisation has been employed, presenting justifications for and the role of theories or concepts used in the study may be an essential aspect and may demonstrate reflexivity and epistemological vigilance. Using a conscious, reflective theoretical-epistemological perspective to guide the study and engaging with a deep epistemology in the reports and the research practice are aspects that contribute towards strengthening research in the field and increase the level of rigour and scientificity.<sup>11</sup>

One of the relevant findings of this research was a confirmation of something already detected in systematic productions in the education policy field: the employment of theoretical frameworks formed by theories, concepts, and contributions by authors of different theoretical-epistemological perspectives (combined theorisation strategy). This strategy refers to epistemological pluralism, which needs to be debated and deepened. In this study, pluralism is viewed as an attempt at establishing a robust theoretical framework based on a combination of concepts from different theories that make sense and form a consistent reference. It also involves explanations and justifications for the reference established and the role of each theory in the referred composition. This does not imply the random use of ideas or concepts that characterise the so-called eclecticism or even the additive theory strategy.

The second challenge refers to the need to expand the number of comprehension studies. All studies and publications can contribute to knowledge about education policy in different ways. However, only comprehension studies effectively contribute towards

strengthening research in the field. A clear theory and the conscious, reflective use of the theoretical framework are some aspects that may support comprehension studies.

The education policy field is relatively new<sup>12</sup> yet it is ‘under construction’ (Azevedo & Aguiar, 2001; Santos, 2008; Mainardes, 2009; Schneider, 2014; Stremel, 2016). In addition, it is an inclusive, comprehensive field. The field of education policy, similar to education, ‘[...] has no strict filtering rules and it is quite inclusive’ (Manzon, 2011, p. 2). It is also a complex field since it is characterized as both a scientific project and a political project,<sup>13</sup> i.e., it involves a ‘living border’ between the academic and the political field (Hey, 2008). In addition, it involves the analysis of increasingly complex phenomena of the political, economic, social, and educational reality.

Considering the research and discussions on EEPA, arguing in favour of strengthening the field of education policy does not mean that the field produces fragile research. Rather, we highlight the need for a continued strengthening of research based on what has already been produced. Some aspects that could contribute to this task are presented in brief:

a) Pay more attention to the formation process of new and future researchers in the field, especially with greater regard to the study of epistemology in general and specific epistemologies of the education policy in particular. In view of how researcher training has been conducted in Brazil, it seems essential that this be one of the concerns of Postgraduate Programmes in Education, although it should not focus only on this level.

(b) Emphasise, among researchers in the field, the issues related the theoretical role in research. Additionally, emphasise the importance of epistemological vigilance and reflexivity; the validity and plausibility of the expression, in the highest possible range, of the epistemological perspectives and epistemological stances that found research; and the strategies to increase the number of studies at the level of comprehension. This emphasis could be employed in the process of researcher training as well as in research development and evaluation of articles and event papers.

c) Develop more texts, with an accessible language, which focus on discussions of methodological issues, specific approaches to education policy, theoretical discussions that have been developed in other countries, publication of interviews with international and national renowned researchers, etc.

## FINAL REMARKS

This study discussed the main data of a research study that aimed to analyse how education policy researchers have been tackling theoretical-epistemological questions, based on a sample. The analysis involved aspects related to the ways of expressing epistemological perspective, theories that have been used, and ways of combining theories to establish a theoretical framework.

This article emphasises the need for broadening further research and discussions about the theoretical foundations of research in education policy. This must be achieved without neglecting space, time, and energy to analyse the current policies and the complex contexts of crisis, instability, and setbacks with which we live. One of the reasons that the field of education policy is highly complete in itself is because it is comprised of a scientific project and a political project. As a scientific project, it must offer consistent analyses and conclusions based on criteria of scientificity, such as objectivity, adequacy, and verifiability. As a political project, it must provide socially referenced and politically engaged analyses and conclusions based on criteria of normativity policy, such as legitimacy, effectiveness in terms of social justice, equality, and criticality.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Financing: CAPES and CNPq.

<sup>2</sup> [www.relepe.org](http://www.relepe.org)

<sup>3</sup> Johnson Jr. (2003) argues that it essential that the field itself be continuously evaluated to provide a comprehension of what is being produced and which aspects could be deepened.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the meta-research methodology and differences between literature review, systematic review, state of knowledge, state of the art, and meta-research, see Mainardes (no prelo).

<sup>5</sup> Tello (2012) quotes Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (2007) to refer to the concept of epistemological vigilance.

<sup>6</sup> Based on Bourdieu's thinking, Rawolle and Lingard (2015) argue that an important aspect of Bourdieu's theory is its rejection of the dichotomy between theory and data and the dichotomy between theory and methodology. Rather, he acknowledges the necessary relationship between them and their impact on one another. Rawolle and Lingard (2015) also say that Bourdieu rejects both 'methodologism' and 'theoricism' i.e., the view that the methodology refers only to the techniques of data collection and the notion that theory is something distant from data and empirical reality.

<sup>7</sup> Several reasons led to this decision: (a) this study aimed to analyse, as profoundly as possible, the theoretical responses of etiological research on education policy. An expanded sample would hamper achieving this aim; (b) although the research on management and educational evaluation may be related to education policy in general, authors come from several fields. Arguably, such research belongs to fields akin to education policy. Nonetheless, they have specific theoretical references (from the management and evaluation fields); (c) the number of research articles on management was enough to be analysed in a specific study on theoretical frameworks used in research management (30 articles of the full sample).

<sup>8</sup> PDE – Educational Development Plan; PAR – Plan of Articulated Actions; IDEB – National Index of Quality of Education; PROUNI - University for All; REUNI - Programme for Support to Plans for the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities.

<sup>9</sup> Some theoretical articles did not enable a classification in relation to the scope.

<sup>10</sup> The methodology employed to infer the epistemological perspective of the articles whose authors did not express it was the following: a) a systematic reading of the article

to identify the authors and theoretical perspectives employed; (b) an attempt to identify the epistemological perspective of theories and authors cited with the aim of analysing the level of coherence. In this analysis, it was found that the majority of the studies employed a model of combined theory based on authors of either similar or different theoretical perspectives. Given the difficulty of identifying the epistemological perspective of the authors used, the concept of combined theorisation emerged as a more coherent possibility of classification.

<sup>11</sup>Bracken (2010) emphasises that it is important for a researcher to be aware of the ontology and epistemology underpinning his research. He also emphasises the importance of the researcher making sure that that his own ontological perceptions, epistemological instances, and methods of collection and interpretation of data are closely aligned.

<sup>12</sup>Stremel (2016) argues that the education policy in Brazil emerges as specific academic field from the 1960s onwards, with studies on school administration, educational administration, and comparative education as background. The 1960s may be regarded as the beginning of the emergence of the field to the detriment of a number of aspects such as the creation of ANPAE, the implementation of Postgraduate courses in Brazil, and the more frequent use of the term 'education policy(ies)' in titles of Brazilian publications. A clear milestone in the field's institutionalisation process was the creation of the GT 5 - Working Group 5 of the Anped (Brazilian Association of Education Research, in 1986/87). As a product of historical and social conditions, since the 1990s, the field has gained greater autonomy and legitimacy through the expansion of publications on education policy, the creation of courses on education policy, lines and research groups at Postgraduate level, specialized scientific journals, and research networks, and the conducting of scientific events specific to education policy. The current context indicates that, in Brazil, the academic field of education policy is in an expansion phase, and that it is striving to consolidate itself.

<sup>13</sup>This reflection is based on formulations by Susen (2011).

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