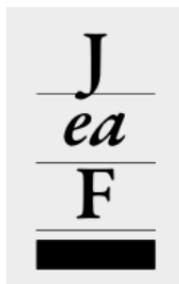


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Administration, Policy, and Education: Mobilizing the

Firm

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Abstract

Theoretically informed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this paper engages with the contemporary relationship between administration and policy in education. Significantly, rather than map or apply a Bourdieusian lens to educational administration and policy, I argue that the relevance of Bourdieu for advancing understanding may only be made explicit if we understand the contemporary policy conditions as concerning a reworking of relations between the state and administration. This paper therefore contains two interventions: i) the claim that the contemporary capitalist condition represents a de-centring of the nation-state; and ii) this warrants a new image of the school – to which I propose ‘the firm’.

the firm; Bourdieu; social theory; relational

Introduction

This paper will examine whether the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu can be mobilized to understand the contemporary relationship between administration and policy. This may seem an odd question to pose on many fronts, not least because Bourdieu is frequently called upon to engage with education policy and administration matters (Eacott, 2011; Gunter, 2012; Ladwig, 1994, 2014; Lingard, Taylor, & Rawolle, 2005; Thomson, 2010). However, it is this very usage that poses challenges for using Bourdieusian social theory in educational administration and policy studies. Notable among them is the accessibility of Bourdieu's writing, the perceived criticality of his argument, and the temptation of novelty.

As with many French social theorists, Bourdieu's writing is dense. Following Gaston Bachelard's (1934/1984) notion that the simple is never more than the simplified, Bourdieu refused to simplify his work, arguing instead that what he is discussing is complex and therefore the writing is full of complexity. The exceptions are some of his later works (1996/1998, 1998/1998, 2001/2003), which are shorter and very accessible, yet heavily critiqued for their lack of sophistication (McRobbie, 2002). When combining the density of his major works and the proliferation of Bourdieusian-inspired scholarship since his death in 2002, it is seductive for the novice researcher or those new to Bourdieu to read secondary sources. As a pedagogical strategy, secondary sources might serve as a useful introduction, but when it comes to mobilizing

Bourdieuian resources in research, nothing is more potent than primary sources (even when they are translations). It is the primacy of secondary sources that leads to the mobilization of individual concepts (e.g. *habitus*, *capital*, *fields*) as though they can be understood when removed from their original framing. What is lost in this approach is the complexity of a Bourdieuian methodological approach. The level of sophistication that Bourdieu was able to achieve was built upon a rigorous and robust methodological approach, and this is lost when a researcher skips primary sources, seeking to easily apply theory and concepts that have already been digested by others.

Bourdieu is well recognized as a critical sociologist. In education, this is derived largely from a reading of his classic *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* with Jean-Claude Passeron (1970/1977). Researchers frequently draw on his key thinking tools of field, habitus, and capital to show how existing structures reproduce themselves in the social world. This popular 'use' of Bourdieu when combined with his later works (1996/1998, 1998/1998, 2001/2003), which characterize neo-liberalism as the contemporary orthodoxy is significant. A fundamental question to ask is: Of what value is a social theory built on a critical account of the contemporary condition useful in generating new ways of knowing, being and doing education? To move beyond merely applying a critical social perspective one needs to engage with Bourdieu's work on epistemology, and in particular his work with Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron in *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries* (1968/1991). In this book, Bourdieu and his colleagues articulate, in a very pedagogical manner, an approach to scholarship. This approach becomes obvious when reading the broader scope of Bourdieu's work. In doing so, Bourdieu offers a more methodological and less conceptual toolkit approach to understanding the social world.

Researchers often claim that Bourdieu has never been used to study X in Y context, a novelty approach. Arguing for the novelty of something never having been studied in a particular context, as is frequently seen – but not limited to – higher degree research, is not enough to constitute an original contribution

to knowledge. Significantly, this positioning overlooks Bourdieu's privileging of the theoretical problem over the empirical. That is, Bourdieuian social theory is concerned with large scale theoretical problems, such as equity, and their empirical manifestation in time and place. In contrast, drawing on Bourdieu, or any great thinker, as a novelty (i.e. never having been done here before) privileges the empirical problem and then overlays that with Bourdieu's thinking tools. This is a subtle, yet significant, matter. It is the difference between applying Bourdieu and mobilising Bourdieuian thinking tools. Across his oeuvre, Bourdieu stresses the need for the latter.

Nonetheless, despite the many objections about invoking a reproduction theorist, or the potential over-use of Bourdieu in education policy research, I argue here that in Bourdieu we can find important resources for understanding contemporary administration and policy. However, to do so, I argue that the theoretical resources of Bourdieu may need certain refinements and modifications. In particular, I contend that the usefulness and relevance of Bourdieuian social theory for advancing understanding of educational administration and policy may only be made explicit if we understand the contemporary policy conditions as concerning a reworking of relations between the state and institutions. This paper therefore contains two interventions. The first is the claim that the contemporary capitalist condition represents a reconfiguration of managerialist (state) policy, in other words, a de-centring of the nation-state. The second claim is that the contemporary condition warrants a new image of the school.

This new image of the school I propose here is based on the notion of "the firm". The shifting temporal and socio-spatial conditions of contemporary society, especially the creeping privatization and quasi-privatization of schooling have economized schooling. However, the transformation is far from complete, rather in a state of constant revision. After establishing this argument, I outline some methodological implications of mobilising Bourdieu for these conditions. Importantly, this paper is an invitation to think differently about the relationship between policy and administration. To take seriously the matters

I raise will require going beyond this paper. Therefore, while I offer a sound basis for taking up the firm to think through the interplay of administration and policy, I encourage the reader to think with, beyond, and where necessary, against what I propose here in the spirit of the scholastic enterprise.

Bourdieu's firm as a theoretical resource

On a global scale, education is increasingly discussed in economic terms: return on investment, correlations between economic prosperity and educational attainment, and so on. Yet for the most part, education researchers have been resistant to using the theoretical resources of economics. The exceptions being, quite understandably, the economics of education, and somewhat arguably, the school effectiveness and school improvement movement (including accountability). Bourdieu serves as a useful theoretical resource here because from early in his career he took a broad perspective on what constitutes a phenomenon. While he is positioned as a (critical) sociologist, he is against the artificial partitioning of the social world in ways that serve the classifiers' purposes more so than reflect an empirical reality. For Bourdieu, education cannot be separated from the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of the social world. Also, despite using a different lexicon, much of Bourdieu's work (primarily through the various forms of capital) economizes. This is not necessarily through material wealth as is the case with mainstream economic discourses, but the very idea of capital embeds an economy within all fields.

In 1997, Bourdieu published an article in which he summarized the way he thought the traditionally "economic" dimension of the social world could be analyzed. It was entitled "The Economic Field" and appeared in Bourdieu's journal, *Actes de la Recherche En Sciences Sociales*. The article was later included in *The Social Structures of the Economy* (2000/2005) with some very minor revisions, under the title "Principles of an Economic Anthropology." In the spring of 2001 Bourdieu agreed to include a new version in the second edition of *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, but with his

death in January 2002, this never eventuated (Swedberg, 2010).

For Bourdieu, firms are key actors in the economy (the economic field) and analyzing them requires attention to the dynamics of power and history. This is also picked up, although in a slightly different way but with explicit links to education, in his study of French CEOs reported in *The State Nobility* (1989/1996). Some significant features of this perspective include the role of the state as a key structural arrangement and that firms exist within a market-based environment that is socially produced and sustained.

Public administration, under which I include educational administration, and economics are frequently constituted as state sciences. In doing so, they are embedded in and embody state thinking, constantly pre-occupied with the normative concerns of an applied science and are "dependent on responding politically to political demands, while at the same time defending itself against any charge of political involvement" (Bourdieu, 2000/2005, p. 10). However, in thinking with Bourdieu, it is important to consider that the state is a social construction that begins and is maintained through the various systems and structures that it establishes in its name such as education, welfare and security. The underlying generative principles of this original social construction that which economizes and makes economic, exist in every social action.

In thinking through this conceptualization of the firm, there is an underlying problematic in the mainstream mobilization of the nation-state. The issue is whether we need to de-centre the nation-state, or at the very least the government/governance of nation-states in an increasingly globalized world. The past, both history at large, and our own trajectory, shape the present, our role in it, and our understanding of it. My question in this space is: *Are we too wedded to the idea of the state being at the top of the policy hierarchy to see any alternatives?* In our complicity with the everyday, too much primacy is given to "the state." Much like the writings of the European jurists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who in the guise of describing the state contributed to building it (Bourdieu, 2000/2005), educa-

tional administration and policy discourses frequently further legitimize the state as the centre of power relations. The influence of the state is prioritized over others (fields) at the expense of seeing the fluidity and reciprocity of these relations. This is somewhat contradictory to the historical dynamism and malleability of Bourdieu's mobilization of field, one that avoids the inflexible determinism of classical structuralism (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992/1992). I contend that Bourdieu's conceptualization of the firm enables us to move beyond the downward linearity of state influence on education by opening up a more relational approach to understanding policy and administration.

The firm and the globalization of education

Thinking with Bourdieusian concepts to discuss the increasing globalizing of education policy is not new, notably taken up in the work of Bob Lingard and Shaun Rawolle (2008; 2015). A critical development in this stream of work is Lingard's (2010) use of the notion of a "post-Westphalian" society. By this he means the way that political authority is no longer located within the borders of the nation-state. Rather, it is rescaled, creating another layer beyond the nation that includes a range of international governmental, and significantly, supra-governmental organizations (see Sellar & Lingard, 2013). The geographic territory that is the nation remains important, but operates differently within a global set of policy discourses.

The "economic" was constructed within the framework of the nation-state and is intimately linked with it, yet globalization is a form of meta-economic. This is a political creation seeking unification at scale and bringing into contact firms, both individual institutions and systems that had previously been constrained by national boundaries. This is a key shift when working with Bourdieu. As Will Atkinson (2012) argues, for Bourdieu, the sociologically pertinent relations concern the abstract systems of difference and distance in fields and social spaces, on the basis of capital possession. This is different to network theorists whose interest compromises ties

and chains of interaction between individuals. The distinction here is ontological. Despite how Bourdieu's work has been appropriated, a relational ontology remains, where objects are only understood in relation to others. In contrast, network theorists frequently employ an entity-based ontology, where individual and separable entities are mapped in relation to one another. This distinction is further articulated in the relational leadership literature (see: Eacott, 2015; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The "firm" provides a theoretical architecture to engage in this space which moves beyond the downward linearity of state influence. It builds within Bourdieu's field theory, a theory that rejects the atomistic approach frequently used by organizational theorists which understands firms as individual and separate decision-making entities seeking to maximize profit. This also removes the flawed pursuit of the "final decision maker." As Bourdieu (2000/2005) argues, in heavily administered societies, much like a gravitational field, even the person perceived to have absolute power (that is, decision-making authority) is him/herself held within the constraints of administration. As such, nobody knows anymore who is the subject of the final decision, and the place of the decision is both everywhere and nowhere. This is counter to the illusion of *the* decision maker and the countless case studies aimed at investigating how decisions came to be, merely through the phenomenological manifestations of the exercise of power. Through the lens of the firm, this means that the boundaries of the firm are at stake at all times. Competition between firms is aimed at acquiring a degree of power over the state primarily through advantages achieved through interventions. The influence of the state is limited to its ability to provide advantage to challengers as opposed to the dominant players. What does this mean for the mobilization of the firm? First, the boundaries of the firm are at stake at all times and second, it constructs firms as key players within a field, but also as a field in their own right (see Eacott, 2013).

That being said, Bourdieu is against operational definitions, which is problematic for graduate students and for more experienced researchers looking for templates. Instead, he

sees this type of work about the research object as part of the research, not an *a priori* decision. What I am arguing for in this paper is that the image of the firm enables us to understand the dynamic relations that shape the idea of the educational institution, and in particular the school, moment-to-moment. Significantly, the firm goes beyond the standard conceptualization of the school as the local face of a state agenda. It recognizes that not only are markets especially understandings of supply and demand socially constructed, but so too are educational institutions. Just like any other market, the stakes, which in this case are the outcomes of education, (whatever one chooses them to be), are also the weapons. Educational administration and policy studies have the opportunity to engage with where and when these weapons and stakes come together.

Bringing to the fore the relations of key actors in the weapons and the stakes at hand is a means to historicize the scholarly narrative. It becomes less about sweeping assertions of a static field and more about locating in time and space the trajectory of a firm and/or a collection of firms. This enables one to go beyond the ahistorical account of how contemporary policy is changing the very nature of public administration and requires that we pay attention to the point of genesis, even while mindful that such a demarcation is highly contestable. Bourdieu's conceptualization of the firm, rather than providing a means of studying administration and policy differently, allows for a rethinking of the very object of the school and its relations with policy.

Reimagining the school

Considering educational institutions, and in particular schools, through Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the firm requires that we accept the fuzziness of the social world. This is a Bourdieusian trademark articulated in the opening narrative of James Ladwig's (1996) *Academic Distinctions*. What is conceptually significant in this is that activating a Bourdieusian perspective means interweaving the macro and micro levels of analysis. This requires blurring the boundaries of institutions. The firm therefore provides a theoretical resource that pays attention to the macro while

also acknowledging the specificities and particularities of each social microcosm.

Actors create the space, education, which only exists through the actors that inhabit it and who, in doing so, deform the space in their vicinity. It is impossible to separate actors and space. Practice takes place *in* context not *on* a context. Thinking through education in this way explicitly blurs the lines between policy and administration, not to mention other social institutions. Both policy and administration are performed, they only exist through action. This speaks to the argument that policy is both the product and producer of administration (Eacott, 2015). One cannot understand administration without attention to the contemporary policy conditions; these in turn, cannot be understood without attention to contemporary administrative conditions. Invoking the firm privileges interplay between policy and the administration of educational institutions. Importantly, this breaks down *a priori* assumptions about the partitions of policy and administration.

For researchers, this means paying attention to the epistemological preliminaries of research. Bourdieu uses the notion of the "spontaneous sociologist" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1991/1992) to discuss how everyone theorizes about the social world. The key distinction for scholars is between the native (naïve) perception of the spontaneous sociologist and the research objects constructed through the "scientific" method. It is significant to note that Bourdieu has a belief in "science." However, this is not the science thought of in mainstream Anglophone employment of the label, that which is mostly tied with logical empiricism and displaying an exhibitionism of data and procedures. In contrast, Bourdieu believes that "one would be better advised to display the conditions of construction and analysis of these data" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992/1992, p. 65). This requires greater attention to the epistemological and ontological preliminaries of scholarship, which is carefully articulated in *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries* (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 1968/1991). The conceptualization of school through the image of the firm means breaking with common-sense parti-

tioning of policy makers, school administrators, and communities.

While Bourdieu's notion of the firm may appear somewhat vague it requires attention to both the process and product of research. Investigation focused on the firm requires attention to the boundary work of institutions. The fluid boundaries and ongoing relations with other social institutions exist within a site of struggle. A particular example of this struggle is taken up by Pat Thomson (2010) in her work on school leaders and autonomy. However, as Bourdieu (2000/2005) points out, the dynamic relations in which firms find themselves also exist internally. This means that firms do not act as coherent wholes; rather, they too exhibit a field of struggle. To think with one of Bourdieu's most commonly used thinking tools, the firm acts as a field of struggle within a larger field of struggle. This is not beyond the approach to studying fields Bourdieu articulates in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992/1992), which has previously been appropriated into educational administration scholarship (Eacott, 2013). The image of the firm therefore represents a methodological as much as theoretical lens through which to think through administration and policy.

Methodological implications

Having articulated the firm as an alternate conceptualization of the educational institution in the contemporary capitalist condition, the question remains: *Of what value is "the firm" for critical education policy research?* There are two key contributions that Bourdieu's notion of the firm offers critical education policy studies and they operate at two different levels. First, Bourdieu offers an approach to the preliminaries of scholarship, or in other words, a sociology of knowledge. This is very much built upon his belief in science and the potential of sociology as disciplined inquiry (see Bourdieu, 2001/2004). The second are his theoretical resources. Although often cherry-picked by researchers, when combined with the preliminary work, Bourdieu's thinking tools provide a productive means of coming to understand, if only partially, the social world.

As articulated earlier, Bourdieu had a belief in science. This belief in science leads to a strong attachment to the epistemological preliminaries of scholarship. In the context of this paper, the firm is an important conceptualization in understanding the interplay between policy and administration. The importance of preliminary work, for Bourdieu, requires substantial attention to the construction of the research object. This means not accepting the social world as it is. Education researchers do not stand outside of the social world they analyze, nor do they look down on it from above. Rather, they themselves are actors in the social world, and the pre-constructed notions of education, administration and policy, teachers, students, buildings, and so on, derive their self-evidence and their legitimacy from the actions of subjects. Following Bourdieu, the social world that education inquiry deals with is something that the subjects themselves make, modify and transform through their activity. The choice of problem, the elaboration of concepts, and the analytical categories function as a ratification of the everyday understanding of the social world, unless the crucial operation of scientific construction breaks with the social world as it is. This requires researchers to submit to scientific scrutiny everything that makes the everyday experience of the world possible.

Educational administration and policy, like the sociologies of the professions, primarily owe their existence to the currency of public concern over particular social issues (e.g. schooling and international test performance, for example). Such inquiry however rarely achieves any scientific status while it remains in the realm of the pre-scientific, or what could be called public concern or technocratic management. Although it can be profitable materially and symbolically for researchers to remain within the pre-scientific discourses of the wider public, Bourdieu challenges researchers to bring greater scholastic rigor and robustness to our work. Scholarship, as an act of distinction, is therefore achieved through a break from the orthodoxy of the pre-scientific world.

The methodological challenge of mobilizing the firm in this space is to explicitly engage with the construction of the research object. As with any social activity, research is politi-

cal work. To change the orthodox ways of the world requires that we construct different ways of seeing and being in the world. This necessitates breaking with everyday common-sense. As Bourdieu notes, in the social sciences, even the least competent and intellectually equipped scholar (Bourdieu, following Alain, actually uses the label “dumbest”) can use common sense and find support, especially beyond the academy (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992/1992). My position is that the firm constitutes a productive avenue to potentially provide alternate ways of seeing and being. To do so means disbanding the artificial partitioning of policy and administration, coupled with careful attention to boundaries and relations with other social institutions. Disrupting the common sense perception of the downward linearity of policy opens up the prospect for an understanding of education policy and administration achieved through relations and the privileging of description.

For Bourdieu, the social sciences privilege description, unlike the natural sciences which frequently, if not always, pursue causality and generalizability. This position on the social sciences is quite likely an outcome of Bourdieu's intellectual trajectory through anthropology, philosophy and then sociology. In the case of the firm, this means articulating how particular administration and policy conditions play out in a specific time and place. In other, and perhaps more appropriate words, the scholarly narrative is empirically grounded in a particular time and place. This historicizes the narrative through a mobilization of temporality in relation to the firm's trajectory, rather than making comparisons based on external measures. The comparison with other firms and social institutions is not lost, but replaced with a focus on relations. What a researcher can claim then is to have constructed a rigorous and robust description of a particular phenomenon under particular conditions. This description will not suffer the enduring rhetorical criticism of description as a lowly, if not the lowest, form of scholarship. Instead, it is the rich or “thick” (to think with Clifford Geertz (1973) following Gilbert Ryle's (1971)), description. As Michael Savage (2009) notes:

... it is not about understanding why someone is doing something, rather to relate actions to other actions, rather than establish causal relations, this is about unfolding an elaborated description of the ongoing political work of organizations (p. 163).

For educational administration and policy studies this poses a problem for both researchers and those engaging with research. Although Bourdieu articulated a sophisticated theory of practice and a set of thinking tools, his work is generative. Thus, his theoretical resources are continually shaped and reshaped through ongoing theoretical and empirical research. Further, in combination with his acceptance of the fuzziness of the social world, Bourdieu's scholarship is notable for the absence of an end point. As Les Back (2009) argues, what makes sociology interesting is engaging in the task of the interpretation of meaning that inevitably must be left open. He contends that the slip-pages, the insights, as well as the blindness, are what make it valuable and where the incomplete record is nonetheless compelling.

Michael Grenfell and Derek James (1998) contend that research drawing on Bourdieusian theory offers insights and understanding not readily visible in other approaches. To achieve this, however, requires as much attention to the epistemological preliminaries of research such as the construction of the research object as it does to the mobilisation of Bourdieu's most common thinking tools of habitus, capital, and fields. This is the key distinction between mobilizing and applying Bourdieu in scholarship. In the case of the latter, a researcher applies or maps Bourdieu's writing or theoretical resources on to a specific phenomenon. This application or mapping is neither desirable nor helpful (Adkins, 2011). Such methods leave the existing labels and terms of those events entirely intact. In contrast, mobilizing Bourdieu's methodological and theoretical resources, which are constantly updated through scholarship, to understand events in new terms unsettles assumptions and invites new ways of understanding.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that in Bourdieu's theoretical and methodological writings we find unexpected resources to think through the administration and policy of education. These resources, however, do not lie in the usual places used by education researchers. They do not lie, for example, in Bourdieu's understanding of education as a principal source of reproduction in society, or in his later works on globalization and neoliberalism. Rather, I have suggested that it is in Bourdieu's writing on the social structures of the economy, and especially the conceptualization of the firm, that such resources are to be found. This is particularly so because, as illustrated throughout this paper, contemporary policy conditions have blurred the boundaries of traditional institutions and shifted previous relations between the state and education. The institution that is "education" owes a number of its most distinctive properties to the set of relations it holds with other institutions and society at large (Eacott, 2013). These relations are not static, but rather, complex and ambiguous. This makes it impossible to represent them in neat frameworks. What is required is a sophisticated discussion of the situatedness of the social space, grounded in temporality. Bourdieu's concept of the firm provides this. Significantly, I have not sought to apply the firm as a proxy for educational institutions. Rather, I have mobilized the resources of Bourdieu to understand the administration and policy of education in new terms. These new terms have provided an avenue for unsettling many of the common-sense assumptions of educational administration and policy. Herein lays the strength of social theory, a productive space to make the familiar strange for the purpose of thinking anew.

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