

# Asking Questions of Leadership: Using social theory for more than critique

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*ABSTRACT: In an era where managerialism is proliferating throughout almost all school practices it is easy for scholarship that mobilises social theory to present negative images of control. Drawing from a single case study within a larger ongoing research program on school leadership, this article explicitly seeks to ask questions of what is it we recognise as leadership. Using the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu, this article does not identify the various structures that inhibit leadership but rather provides a productive means of re-thinking leadership. In doing so, the central argument of the article moves beyond the reproduction of the status quo and provides potential avenues for further inquiry and discussion.*

## **Introduction**

Schooling has long been viewed as a key institution in the (re)production of society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977[1970]) and school leaders have historically been powerful definers of the culture, organisation and relative success of schooling and its relationship to wider society (Grace, 2000). However, there is little doubt that in recent times with the expansion of the managerialist project of the state reconfiguring the very nature of public administration, education has weakened in its capacity to protect its boundaries and practices from broader moves in politics, journalism and economics (Blackmore, 2010; Thomson, 2010). On a global scale, change experts have found ways of entering school grounds and classrooms through reforms such as *No Child Left Behind* (2002) in the United States and *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) in England. The proliferation of managerialism serves as the mechanism through which the state has sought to reform and culturally re-engineer the public sector. This works by instilling performativity into the soul of workers (Ball, 2003), in this case both school leaders and individual teachers. The performative regime becomes the orthodoxy of school leadership and is advanced through state funded apparatus, such as leadership preparation programs and professional standards, which legitimise it as the preferred, and more importantly, required practice. Significantly, it is argued—primarily from the social critical perspective—that managerialism limits, if not removes, the possibility of principals exhibiting leadership, instead constituting them as the local face of a state agenda.

In this article I draw on critical social theory, particularly that of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to demonstrate how it can be mobilised to productively engage with ‘leadership’ in the context of managerialism and not merely critique the conditions of the contemporary enterprise society. That is, critical social theory is frequently called upon in the scholarship of educational leadership, management and administration as a means to highlight the reproductive mechanisms at play in schooling and the means of domination and subordination played out through the managerialist discourses of the contemporary world. In contrast, I mobilise Bourdieusian theory to ask questions of our thinking on leadership and in building my argument I use two common themes picked up by critical scholars (the delivery disposition and autonomy) to think differently about leadership. The central argument is that leadership is not so much constrained by managerialism as it is by using managerialist thinking.

## **Research Design**

Mindful that educational leadership is an applied domain, the need to move beyond the unproductive theory versus practice divide makes it imperative that any argument put forth explicitly integrates abstraction and empirical examples. Therefore, this article draws on a research project which employs a multi-method data generation strategy. Using a theoretical sampling strategy—selecting schools based on five dimensions (gender and executive composition; number of enrolments; percentage of students from disadvantaged groups; socio-economic ranking; performance in standardised tests)—this study is investigating leadership practices in primary schools, a context which typically involves a range of cultural, social, political and temporal influences on leadership practice. Whereas secondary schools and tertiary institutions frequently reflect large bureaucratic organisations and pre-schooling contexts operate in a unique place between corporate enterprises and welfare services, the primary school remains arguably the most significant social institution for all society having long replaced the church as the major agency for socialisation and legitimation in modern societies (Wacquant, 1997). As a measure of socio-economic context, the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA), part of the census of population and housing conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, is employed. In this measure, all postcodes across Australia are ranked and given a rating from 1–10 (ten being the most affluent). Academic productivity is defined as the school’s performance, in relation to state and national averages, in standardised testing regimes, most notably the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Most significant about the sampling approach is that rather than investigating leadership in schools deemed to be highly successful, this work draws on schools in relatively mono-cultural contexts with mid-range levels of socio-economic advantage, making them sites which fall outside those frequently used in ‘turnaround’ leadership narratives. However each school is recognised as a place where things are happening and/or their leaders are recognised as innovative.

Data are generated through: i) interviews with school leaders, which includes both formal roles such as principal, deputy/assistant principal, and informal such as teachers and librarians; ii) observations of practice, primarily executive and staff meetings; iii) a questionnaire for staff; iv) the collection of routine notices such as staff memos and school newsletters; and v) collecting

copies of annual school reports. The five sources of data lend themselves readily to analysis. The study deliberately focuses on school ‘leadership’ and not any one ‘leader’, however it is to be noted that the case used in this article primarily focuses on a principal. Importantly, the descriptive perspective enables the research to move beyond the normative or ‘what ought to be done in schools’ (the focus of much of the literature), to ‘what is done in schools’. It is only through this type of inquiry that the indirectly accessible or underlying assumptions of practice become visible.

## Theoretical Resources

Bourdieu never wrote about leadership, but has been used by many who study leadership both in general (see: Kerr & Robinson, 2009) and specifically educational leadership (see: Eacott, 2011a, 2011b; Gunter, 2012; Thomson, 2010). For the most part, it usually involves drawing on Bourdieu’s key thinking tools of *habitus*, *capital* and *field*—each of which comes with a complex and sophisticated theory of practice (an exception is English, 2012). Bourdieu was however writing in a different place (notably France), at a different time (he passed away in 2002), and as noted above, not about leadership. There are two (at least) problems that this raises: first, the nature of Bourdieu’s writing is dense (his writing is rarely reader friendly, especially for those without a sociological background) and frequently focused on matters of epistemology and ontology; and second, rather than applying Bourdieu’s thinking into a different time and space, we should arguably be thinking in relation to what questions would Bourdieu be asking in this space, or better yet, what does Bourdieusian theory allow us to ask of our contemporary context. In the case of the nature of Bourdieu’s writing, despite his rejection of the theory-practice binary, a dense discussion is arguably of little benefit to the primary audience of *Leading & Managing*, and may in fact exclude the very people on whose work it trades. Therefore, it is around the second matter that I seek to engage.

Since the time of his death Bourdieu’s work has been used increasingly in educational research. Primarily, his work has been drawn upon to interrogate the role of schooling in social reproduction—with specific reference to his much cited book *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977[1970]) with Jean-Claude Passeron. Given that this is the primary means through which education researchers come to Bourdieu (which is a very different path to sociologists or other disciplines), and the explicit attention of the work on reproduction in society, a question is: what use is a social theory which is concerned not primarily with leadership or change but predominantly with the reproduction of existing power relations for coming to terms with the leadership, management and administration of educational institutions? The use of Bourdieu in the leadership space is also problematic in the sense that in his latter works (see: Bourdieu, 1998[1998], 2003[2001]) he characterises neo-liberalism as the orthodoxy of the modern world. Therefore, we might also ask, quite fairly, of what use is a social theory which accepts the domination of neo-liberalism in the context of social reproduction in relation to an analysis of leadership, that which by its very nature implies a degree of agency?

Despite this range of objections or limitations that can be raised in relation to mobilising Bourdieusian social theory for thinking through the leadership of educational institutions, it is the contention of this article that in Bourdieu we can find important resources for this task, even if

those resources may need certain refinement and modifications. I argue that the usefulness and relevance of Bourdieu as a theoretical resource may only be made explicit if we understand leadership as concerning a reworking of the status quo—a social movement of sorts (see also: Eacott, 2013a). In doing so, I use Bourdieu against Bourdieu as a means of interrogating ‘leadership’ in the educational context.

By his own admission, and despite his attention to struggle within society, Bourdieu tends to view disruptive moments, such as radical social or political movements as an exception to the rule and even his own theory (Crossley, 2003). As a result, the appropriation of his thinking tools of *field*, and to a lesser extent *habitus* and *capital*, frequently has researchers arguing how social structures reproduce existing asymmetrical power relations, which minimise, if not negate, alternate ways of doing and being. However, to bring Bourdieu into conversation with leadership requires a more productive, rather than reproductive lens through which to view the world. The idea of applying Bourdieu to productive change has also been used by Albright and Luke (2008) in relation to literacy education. Particularly, I contend that:

. . . leadership is rare—as are social movements in greater society. It is a label of distinction, not inclusion. It is not about everybody and nor can it be solely reduced to ‘change’ as Brian Caldwell does. As a result, leadership is arguably characterised by what it is not. It is not merely made up of the constituent parts such as tasks we might describe as management or administration. Rather, leadership is disruptive. It is a ‘break’ in the status quo, where existing structures are modified and new ones generated, disrupting the cycle of (re)production. (Eacott, 2013a, p. 176)

Working from the above, this article contains two examples drawn from the empirical study where Bourdieu can be used productively as opposed to critique: the delivery disposition and autonomy. That is, I seek to demonstrate how Bourdieu can be used to not only look at how existing social structures shape the dispositions (*habitus*) and what is of value (*capital*) within a particular social space (*field*), but also, and most importantly, to interrogate how leadership works to disrupt the status quo. Specifically, and the brevity of a journal article dictates this, I foreground the role of *capital*, or what is of value and rare, as illustrative of what leadership embodies and why the particular school and principal at the case study site is recognised as a leader by her peers. I should note, this article is a modest beginning for this research program. I will use the empirical materials illustratively and suggestively, and by no means am I claiming that I am using them to establish or demonstrate watertight empirical facts. Nonetheless, they raise interesting questions about what we recognise as leadership.

For Bourdieu *capital* can take many forms (e.g. social, cultural, symbolic) and its primary role in the social world is to buy positions within a *field*. In doing so, it sets the ‘rate of exchange’ within a *field*. That which is both rare and desired has the greatest value. As I work through the case below, I argue that what is of greatest value, and by virtue both rare and highly desired, in the contemporary leadership context is not necessarily doing what is expected or playing the game well but rather doing things differently and demonstrating a freedom to act.

## St Margaret's Primary School

In the initial interview, Amy (pseudonyms are used throughout the article), the principal notes:

Our school was set up to educate the poor. We are a Mercy school [referring to the Mercy Sisters, Irish nuns, coming to Australia], so while the nuns have been gone for 25–30 years, we still have those values. There is a strong ethic of helping the poor and there is a strong social justice agenda.

The school is one of three within a greater parish community. St Edward's is the largest school (473 enrolled students) in the parish and is situated in a high socioeconomic location (ranking: 8) with academic productivity above state average. In contrast, both St Margaret's and St Xavier's are smaller schools ( $n=190$  and  $192$  respectively) in relatively lower socio-economic locations (rankings 6 and 4 respectively) with academic productivity of around state average. While St Edward's is in a dominant position within the group, the work of St Margaret's is well recognised by other schools and Amy has, in a relieving capacity, filled higher systemic positions (e.g. assistant director). St Margaret's is most frequently acknowledged for its innovative programs in ICT and Asian languages (notably Indonesian), so much so that during a dinner function with school leaders from another part of the Diocese as part of the fieldwork for the broader study, without any mention from myself, school executives at the table began talking about St Margaret's and the work going on there and encouraging one another to get their staff there to see what was going on. Something that is beyond the scope of this article is that Amy is the only female principal in the parish and, as is well documented, the Catholic Church, through the centrality of the clergy, remains a largely patriarchal organisation.

### The delivery disposition

Gunter and Forrester (2010) argue that much of the education reform under New Labour has sought to advance a 'delivery disposition' in school leadership, particularly principals. This is advanced through training, such as from the National College, and a general embedded within and embodying of reforms. Although Australia has yet to embrace systematic training of its current and aspiring school leaders—although Dinham et al. (2011) suggest that postgraduate courses are an implicit expectation of aspirants—there is still evidence of the delivery disposition in preparation and development programs (see: Eacott, 2011b). In a school executive meeting in May of 2010 the conversation turns towards the forthcoming school accreditation procedures which will take place in June of 2011. This process is labelled School Evaluation and Development or SEVDEV, and takes place every five years. It serves an accreditation function and is imperative to ensuring the continuation of funding. The following short conversation excerpt occurs between Amy, Daniel the assistant principal and Madelyn the religious coordinator during an executive meeting.

Amy: Everyone, everyone next year we will be doing SEVDEV and we will have to attend the briefing. . . . One thing we will be doing, and Leisa [a former member of the school executive] and I started this last week, during staff meeting time, is just pulling out the basics of policies, looking at anything that

needs revision. We need to fit our four previous headings into the new seven key areas identified by the Catholic Schools Office.

Daniel: Is this different to last year?

Amy: They brought it in at the end of last year.

Daniel: Has anyone gone through with the new categories.

Amy: Yes, people have gone through this year.

Daniel: So you have an idea of what policies and structures they have in each of the categories?

Amy: *Yes, I have them in folders ...* [getting up to reach the folders]

Daniel: Every now and again they like different boxes for the same thing.

Madelyn: But we will be right won't we?

Daniel: Oh there will be nothing new, just slotting things into the ...

Madelyn: It's just all these policies. It is going to be such a big thing.

Although this is but one rather innocuous example, it remains significant. It is arguably in the apparently mundane day-to-day activities of school leaders that the discursive mechanisms of managerialism play out. This is one of the greatest strengths of social theory and its attention to underlying power relations. It is possible to argue from the example, and based on a substantive body of existing research, that constant changes and shifts in policy, such as moving from four to seven priority areas, keeps school leaders busy working in the system rather than speaking back or even engaging with policy discourses. As with Thomson's (2010) argument, school leaders are so busy playing the game—not to mention their embodied/performative belief in it—they have no time to question its rules or purpose.

In addition to needing to re-organise school policies, St Margaret's is asked to rewrite its strategic plan to reflect the seven categories not the four previous and submit that to the Catholic Schools Office for compliance checks. This policy shift does interesting work around the role of leadership at the school level and its relationship with broader diocese/systemic moves. It creates a distance between the system and the school—although such a division is not necessarily productive either—and from the critical standpoint, confirms Gunter and Forrester's (2010) argument about the delivery disposition. One of the central elements of Gunter and Forrester's argument is that the very thought that the administration of school/ing could be generated from within pedagogical relationships between educators and students is dismissed in favour of systemic/state intervention. The explicit allocation of staff meeting time (at least half, and many times almost all, of the weekly one hour timeslot) for policy renewal for SEVDEV was a feature at St Margaret's from May through until the end of the observation period in late July. This time allocation was positively received by staff who saw it as a proactive means of reducing stress closer to the submission date and providing an opportunity for renewal (as some policies had not been updated since the previous round of SEVDEV).

There is naturally a critical argument to build here around the standardisation of education, the bureaucratic nature of education systems and the location of schools within such systems. This

is not to mention the prospect of any formal documents, particularly those for an external audience, being mere re-presentations of what is happening in a school. However, as with the goal of this article—to build a productive analysis of school leadership using social theory—my goal is to look for how this situation plays out for the school leaders. The first matter that requires attention is to what extent are schools the local face of a state (or systemic) agenda. Thinking this through in the Australian context, and although arguably not very popular, schools are the local face of a state agenda. Teachers are public servants and engaged in an activity (education) that is compulsory for all Australian children. This activity is partially, and in some cases fully, funded by taxpayer dollars. Therefore, is there a problem with schools, and by virtue school leaders, being the local face of a state agenda? Given where their salary comes from (even in Catholic systemic schools, public funding is primarily used to cover salaries), should school leaders and teachers not deliver on the state agenda?

To think this through with Bourdieu, if we accept that schooling is the primary mechanism through which the existing power relations of society—the haves and the have nots—are reproduced (and the current schooling funding debate centres on this), then there is a great level of *capital* that is to be acquired through the delivery of the state agenda. Leading a school to the achievement of higher levels of student outcomes, usually but not always measured through standardised testing regimes, is what is desirable (and frequently rare) and this *capital* allows members of the school, but particularly the principal and executive, to buy social positions within the *field*. These positions may be a promotion, involvement in an exclusive program, access to objects not available to others, or even leniency/freedom to act that is not afforded to those without that level of *capital*. Although not using Bourdieu, a similar argument is present in Dinham's (2005) *ÆSOP* work, specifically where he argues:

They [principals in high achieving schools] have earned a certain amount of credibility with system officials who tend to give special dispensation, support or approval to new approaches, even 'turning a blind eye' on occasion. (p. 345)

What we see here is that principals acquired a level of *capital* that enabled them to innovate. They were still working towards the achievement of the state agenda, but going about it differently. Therefore, the argument against school leaders being the local face of a state agenda is more of a symptom than a problem and this is what makes the sample of this project, and specifically the case discussed in this article, interesting. While in Dinham's project the schools were all high achieving—and this was the purpose of his work, so not a critique—the schools in this project were not necessarily high achieving, but they were recognised as places where things were happening. As a result, the school leaders at St Margaret's did not have the *capital* of the principals in the *ÆSOP* project but they were able to do things outside of the norm. This raises questions about how you get to act outside the norm and what that does to the person. In contemporary Australian discourses of educational leadership, management and administration autonomy has been the answer.

## **Autonomy**

Autonomy is not a given, but a historical contest that is constantly undertaken (Bourdieu, 2004[2001]). As such, autonomy is both won and lost in stages. There are two elements to the

discussion of autonomy in relation to the context of this article: timing and intellectual. The timing of initiatives, as evident in funding, planning and reporting timelines is more frequently the result of political cycles—or simply the calendar year—than a pedagogical rationale. The need for compliance and management by numbers is part of the day-to-day practice of school leaders. The intervention of Australian governments, at all levels, in the running of schools has been widely written about (see: Lingard, 2000) and has increased exponentially since the Whitlam administration in the 1970s (Cranston et al., 2010). As part of the advancement of the managerialist project of the state, the rhetoric of policy moves partially serves to distract from the specific mechanisms that proponents seek to introduce in its name. For example, school-based planning, which is sold to schools and their communities on the basis of freeing them from the stifling mediocrity of bureaucracy frequently, comes with the provision that schools continue to meet an expanding systemic agenda and targets (Eacott, 2011b). Therefore, despite the rhetoric of empowerment and local level control, the state has found a means of diffusing its locus of control without surrendering its power over schools, and by virtue, school leaders. As the previously cited example of St Margaret's strategic plan highlights, although the physical planning goes on at the school level, the decisions regarding what is important and central to schooling are made elsewhere. The delivery disposition that Gunter and Forrester (2010) refer to, is consequently enacted at all levels of education, student, teacher and leader, and therefore serves a (re)productive function for future leaders.

However, as previously cited, should schools not be delivering the state agenda? Therefore, a more productive space to engage with is the intellectual autonomy of school leaders. It is of course difficult to separate the intellectual from the temporal as Amy remarks:

You are more answerable to your political masters. . . . There's more and more being imposed upon the school but you know in a lot of respects what we did in schools used to be behind closed doors. As school leaders we have to be looking after the bottom line while at the same time making sure you have got the things that parents want so when they walk into the school they don't say oh well you do not have this or that therefore why would I put my child in your school?

The delivery disposition of schooling is a constant challenge for the intellectual autonomy of school leaders, but as Bourdieu (2004[2001]) warns, it is a flawed logic to ignore the relative autonomy of a *field* in preference to the constraints exerted upon it. Both the external pressures and the internal tensions within a *field* are all relative. As with Dinham's principals in the *ÆSOP* project, I contend that St Margaret's, and by virtue Amy, are recognised as leaders because they display a degree of freedom in their actions. That is, they explicitly have a vision for quality education and then pursue that vision working within (or maybe just beyond) the constraints of the system. In this sense, what we have is not playing the game better but rather playing a completely new game. This intellectual freedom is not synonymous with liberation and/or autonomy. The problem is not 'Let's liberate our school leaders' as is somewhat of the catch cry of the current empowering local schools initiative sweeping Australia, but rather engaging with the practice of freedom by which one could define what is education, educating and the pedagogical relationship. At the centre of this configuration is the emancipation of thought from other ways of being.

At St Margaret's this intellectual emancipation means working within the system but not solely allowing the system to define what you do. As with all other Australian schools, St

Margaret's has a mandated curriculum to teach and its ongoing funding is contingent upon its participation in national testing regimes. However, there is considerable freedom in the interpretation of curriculum, and policy in general, and a degree of localisation in the work of the school. Two specific examples of St Margaret's disrupting the status quo are the adoption of MAC (Apple) computers rather than the systemic platform of PCs, and the teaching of Indonesian. Daniel, the assistant principal, has a background in Indonesian (his wife is Indonesian) and has developed a program for teaching Indonesian to senior students. Through this initiative, the school has been able to acquire additional funding through the regional Catholic Schools Office (linked to the government initiative 'Engaging Asia'—which incidentally lost funding towards the end of the fieldwork period). Three important aspects of this disruption are: i) the teaching of Indonesian is not currently offered at the local high school; ii) other schools in the Diocese are now picking up the program; and iii) in addition to getting other teachers at St Margaret's to join, Daniel has established links with other schools in the Diocese offering similar programs in Asian languages to form a collective or network of like-minded educators. Most significantly, rather than accepting that Indonesian is not an option for students at the local high school (and in the context of decreasing numbers undertaking Indonesian at the higher school certificate level), Daniel articulates the purpose of engaging with others beyond St Margaret's as a means of getting other schools to take up the teaching of Asian languages and give the local high school (and arguably the Diocese) no choice but to engage in the space. In this example, Daniel has explicitly initiated, and sustained (at least for the time being) a campaign that speaks back to systemic norms and builds ground up action. He, and his collaborators, have not directly acted outside of the system, but demonstrated a freedom to act that is not as frequent in education as may be liked. This freedom is recognised by others and engaged with, further expanding the spread of the initiative. The intellectual freedom to act has opened educational opportunities for students.

With the MAC initiative, key players at St Margaret's have travelled to other schools and established networks, building a coalition of MAC users and becoming a 'pedagogic action' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977[1970]). The use of MAC is contrary to the systemic authority which uses—and supports—PCs and counter to what was the government roll out of laptops to secondary school students (although many have since moved on to bring your own device models). During the observation period, Amy and Daniel had to meet with regional officers to explain their use and pursuit of MAC over PCs. In doing so, they, and other St Margaret staff, were able to draw upon evidence (student work) from a recent month long trial of technologies borrowed from Apple in senior classes to support their case. Taking this further, St Margaret's held a technology showcase as part of Catholic Schools Week, where special invited guests included the regional director and the local high school principal. Students aged between 9 and 11 demonstrated how they used software to make movies, audio files, web pages, blogs, wikis, among others. As a direct result of this event, St Margaret's later hosted a joint meeting of all Diocese principals to showcase the technology programs at the school and related professional development offered by the school. Furthermore, student work from a variety of MAC products are displayed in the school foyer (changing weekly), used at orientation and on open days, and also at liturgies and special events. The use of MAC is embedded and embodied at St Margaret's. During a discussion with Amy and Daniel regarding the MAC initiative, they note that the push for MAC (over PC) is gaining momentum, but continues to 'keep running into brick walls'. But both are adamant that they are

‘very good at going around or underneath brick walls’. In addition, despite the publicly available data and by virtue the criteria from which schools are judged, St Margaret’s continues to set the markers of its achievement, as Amy argues:

We are a really good school. We are effective. We say that we will educate the kids in a holistic manner, and that is what we do. Although we are answerable to our political masters, at the same time you have to be true to yourself and enact what we see as a good education.

St Margaret’s experiences all of the usual pressures of the contemporary school in the performative regime of the managerialist project. Its funding is reliant upon compliance with government mandates and the vital contribution of school fees makes it dependent on market forces. The role of these relations is central in what constitutes the school. However, what sets St Margaret’s apart from many of its peers is its rejection (although not complete) of using external measures of success as its sole criteria.

## **Re-thinking Leadership with Bourdieu**

At the outset of this article I described my intention to mobilise social theory to productively engage with, not merely critique, contemporary school leadership. In doing so I raised three questions: i) What does Bourdieusian theory allow us to ask of our contemporary context? ii) What use is a social theory which is concerned not primarily with leadership or change but predominantly with the reproduction of existing power relations for coming to terms with the leadership, management and administration of educational institutions? and iii) Of what use is a social theory which accepts the domination of neo-liberalism in the context of social reproduction to an analysis of leadership, that which by its very nature implies a degree of agency? In what follows, and working with the illustrative examples above, I argue for productive means through which some of the ways Bourdieu challenges our conceptions of leadership and propose how he offers a productive alternative—although far from final—for re-thinking leadership.

The first question simply asks what Bourdieu brings as a theoretical resource. At first glance, there is the novelty factor. This is frequently seen when theoretical resources are imported into a new, or a new-ish, space. We see this in educational leadership in the importation, often uncritical, of ideas from business (see: Peck & Reitzug, 2012), but also social theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu. However, I argue that Bourdieu provides not a theory to be tested out in the educational leadership space, but rather a way of thinking about leadership. This is consistent with Bourdieu himself, as he encouraged researchers to work *with* his concepts, suggesting that his work provides a set of thinking tools which are continually shaped and reshaped by empirical work (Wacquant, 1989). There is however the explicit argument in Bourdieu’s work, and other social theorists, that complex ideas (which I believe leadership to be) need complex explanations. This explains why much of Bourdieu’s work is captured in full length books rather than journal articles. The brevity of a journal article limits the depth of treatment of ideas, however, I contend that the most significant aspect that Bourdieu brings as a theoretical resource is his relational thinking. Consistent throughout Bourdieu’s body of work is that the complexity of the social world requires us to think of this complexity not as a set of objects (both individuals and things) and rationality,

or at least the pursuit of rationality (and predictability) but as a set of relations. To think of leadership relationally is to think of it as understandable in terms of social spaces, positions and relationships. Working with the St Margaret's case, the MAC example highlights the centrality of relations. At its most literal, there is the difference of having MAC rather than PC. The distinction comes in how the presence of MAC enables the staff and students to do things differently. Therefore, what is of interest, at least theoretically, is that it is not the difference that is important, but rather how the difference is used to create a distinction and how that happened in the first place.

The shift to relational thinking that Bourdieu enables speaks to the second question. There is a substantive body of literature that argues for the centrality of relationship to leadership. By virtue, this mobilises a relational way of thinking. Most commonly this is demonstrated in the shift from titles (e.g. principal, superintendent) to a more sociological perspective of the distribution of leadership within organisations, or as Ogawa and Bossert (1995) argue, the consideration of leadership as an organisational quality. Therefore, (educational) leadership theory is in fact social theory (Eacott, 2010) and this poses a range of issues in relation to what exactly is 'leadership' (see: Eacott, 2013b). This relational thinking allows us to conceive of school leadership as a practice rather than a domain of study in its own right. It is not a concept in its own right, but a series of events, interactions and social positioning. This enables the study of school leadership to theoretically include alternative forms, such as the contemporarily popular 'teacher leadership', without the need to construct an ever expanding array of adjectival leadership—therefore 'teacher' as an adjective, or any other for that matter, is not needed. The need for an adjective is a result of the lack of work around context—in Bourdieusian theory, the *field*—for the particular example of 'leadership' being described. This is not to suggest that leadership can be broken down or into a limited number of key determinates. The study of school leadership needs to look beyond the roles held by individuals and instead seek to bring to the level of discourse the nature of social spaces, positions, and relationships. In the case of St Margaret's described in this article, I argue that the distinction that is created stems from refusing to be defined by the criteria of others. As noted previously, St Margaret's is not a high achieving school in standardised test regimes yet it is recognised by peers as a leader. Rather than seek to replicate what 'better' performing schools are doing, or trying to compete with St Edward's, St Margaret's refuses to be solely defined by the criteria of others. As a school and particularly the key players are being recognised due to the freedom they exhibit in relation to that experienced, and practiced, by those around them. The disruption of the status quo is based on, and relative to, the relationships that St Margaret's, and the likes of Amy, have with other schools, school leaders and the system. To think with the notion of *capital*, what is both desirable—assuming that leadership is desirable—and relatively rare is the freedom to act and define one's own markers of achievement. This is not to suggest that one can step outside of the game (*field*), but rather to argue that there is more than one way to play the game, and it is through these alternate ways of viewing the game that productive alternatives emerge. Thinking of how to play the managerialist game solely with managerialist thinking is bound to lead to reproduction. However, playing the game by different rules does not necessarily take you out of the game, or even prevent you succeeding in the game. Therefore, what is limiting in the managerialist game is arguably approaching the game with a managerialist mindset.

Writing in a different time and space, Bourdieu argued that neo-liberalism was the orthodoxy of contemporary times. It is possible to make the argument that in the contemporary context it is managerialism, rather than neo-liberalism that is orthodoxy. So how does a Bourdieusian lens enable us to move past this orthodoxy? Moving beyond the reproduction of society, it is actually Bourdieu's minimal attention to disruption that is most productive. That is, action which seeks to disrupt the status quo is arguably of greatest value in seeking to understand and describe leadership. Therefore, that which to some extent sits outside of Bourdieu's theoretical work on social reproduction, but can still be theorised using Bourdieu, is central to understanding leadership. The history of educational leadership (including its previous labels 'educational administration' and 'educational management') can be characterised as a set of negotiations between rival claims of administrative (regulatory) control and individual agency, mostly played out through policy. The leadership of schools, and school systems, depends on its bureaucratic past, operationalised through policy, for legitimate authority while constantly seeking to reform and renew itself. Attention to the relationship between individual agency (at both the individual and organisational levels) and structural determinism, that which is central to much of Bourdieu's work, provides a space to conceptualise leadership, and particularly why schools (and school leaders) which are not necessarily identified as successful through managerialist regimes (e.g. standardised test results and value added data) are recognised as leaders by their peers. In the case of St Margaret's and especially that of Amy, I argue that it is through the act of freedom, that tangible enactment of agency that others see as both desirable and rare. This agency, which incidentally does not require autonomy or liberation from a systemic authority as contemporary debates in Australia would suggest, provides Amy with a degree of *capital* that proliferates itself. As the examples used by Dinham suggest, principals who acquire a degree of *capital* are able to mobilise that *capital* for greater flexibility in future actions. Therefore, in stepping beyond the status quo and conventional ways of operating, such individuals and organisations are recalibrating practice. This disruption however is more than just 'change'. It is context, in both the sense of time and space, specific. As a result, there are different degrees of leadership, but each is relative to the unique historical context of the organisation and individuals involved (both directly and indirectly) and the particular social space in which they take place. St Margaret's was able to move beyond the systemic inertia of using PCs and this was made possible by the unique configuration of individuals and organisational arrangements at the school. These actions are arguably not as high profile or politically significant as 'turnaround' narratives, but theoretically they tell us just as much. What this article is arguing is that the act of freedom is what peers recognise as leadership as much as, if not more so, value added data and high test results and this has implications for the study of school leadership and equally leadership preparation and development. Most significantly, it moves us beyond mainstream 'school effectiveness and school improvement' discourses (I do note that some within these discourses are now referring to 'successful schooling') to a more sociologically informed description of organisational, and individual, behaviour. A particular line of inquiry it opens up, and following the work of Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), is what exactly is it we recognise, or even mean, when we use the label 'leadership'? There is a potentially rich array of problems to explore in seeking to bring to the level of discourse what it is we recognise or think of when discussing leadership, leading,

and leaders. Such inquiry would be methodologically challenging, and arguably time consuming and labour intensive, but I would argue, well worth the effort.

## Conclusion

Grenfell and James (1998) argue that research drawing on Bourdieusian theory offers ‘insights and understanding not really visible in other approaches’ (p. 2). In this article I have mobilised Bourdieusian social theory to raise questions around the very notion of leadership. Asking these questions has given rise to further lines of inquiry that I argue would enrich our understanding of what it means to lead an organisation. In an era where managerialism is proliferating through almost all practices in schools, it is easy to become disenchanted and for scholarship to focus on how numerous apparatus seek to control schools and school leaders. Throughout this article I have deliberately sought to provide an alternate and more productive means of advancing our understanding and future scholarship on school leadership using a social theory that is frequently used to highlight the social reproduction of asymmetrical power relations in society. Any claims to the successful nature of my argument would be premature, however, if but one person is to engage with the general thesis of this article, than arguably it has, at least briefly, opened the possibility of an alternate way of thinking.

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