

## Bourdieu and teacher education

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## Bourdieu and Teacher Education

### Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu's theory regarding education is closely connected to class inequalities in educational attainment and to issues of class reproduction in capitalist society. For Bourdieu however, social position is not only affected by economic forms of capital:

It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognised by economic theory (Bourdieu, 1986: 241).

Thus, Bourdieu introduces the argument that social position is determined also by other forms of capital, such as *social* and *cultural* capital. Taking each different form of capital, identified by Bourdieu in relation to capital assets an individual may hold, these might be understood as:

*Economic capital*: the control of economic resources, such as money, assets and property

*Social Capital*: the actual and potential resources linked to a person's network of relationships, mutual acquaintances and their personal recognition by others

*Cultural capital*: A person's accumulated education, knowledge, skills and symbolic goods that provide advantages in achieving a higher social-status and power in stratified society.

Whilst economic capital may arrive to an individual through inheritance, family wealth or economic activity for financial gain, social capital develops through social networks, family and community connections. Examples of cultural capital could involve familiarity with academic language, policy, or understandings of dominant cultures in society. These are likely to vary, according to a person's social class. Therefore, unlike property, cultural capital is not transmissible, because it is acquired through privilege, and over time. Cultural capital itself can be further broken down into:

*Embodied cultural capital*: comprises the knowledge that is acquired over time through socialisation into culture and tradition. It contributes to a person's character and way of thinking which, in turn, becomes more receptive to similar cultural influences and advantage.

*Linguistic cultural capital*: comprises a person's mastery of language and its relations, their communication and self-presentation, acquired through embodied forms of cultural capital.

*Objectified cultural capital*: comprises a person's property, such as forms of art, books, scientific instruments, or attire. These objects for economic profit also symbolically convey possession of cultural capital, via ownership and understanding of their cultural meaning.

*Institutionalised cultural capital*: refers to the way in which an institution, e.g. educational, governmental or business, formally recognises a person's cultural capital, in terms of their academic credentials or professional qualifications. Institutionalised cultural capital can be transferred into the labour market, measured and compared against the cultural capital of others, which facilitates its conversion into economic capital.

In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1990), Pierre Bourdieu, together with Jean-Claude Passeron, discusses cultural capital to help to explain the differences amongst the levels of performance and academic achievement of children within educational systems. The term *symbolic violence* is used to describe a type of non-physical violence that might be observed in the power differentials between social groups as cultural capital plays out in practice. A form of unconscious agreement between parties takes place, whereby there is an

imposition of the norms of the group possessing greater social power on those of the subordinate group. Symbolic violence manifests too across nationalities, genders, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. Therefore, such power differentials manifest too, in education.

A key problem identified by Bourdieu, which has relevance for teacher education, is that educational systems and institutions assume all students possess similar cultural capital.

By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. (Bourdieu, 1977:494)

Assumptions in educational policy and practice that everyone is alike in their possession of cultural capital makes it hard for students from a lower class to succeed. Therefore, for Bourdieu, the educational system will socially reproduce the dominant culture and maintain class inequalities.

However, the education of teachers requires them to work to reduce educational attainment gaps, which places a lot of expectation on teachers, when educational disadvantage is also linked to larger systemic problems in society. Indeed, many social issues are 'educationalised' and are portrayed in educational policy as problems to be solved by schools and universities (Peters, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018), and therefore by those who teach:

Those of us working in the areas of widening participation know what a struggle it is to foster inclusivity, in a society where many other factors prevent social mobility (Peters, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018: 248)

In this entry, some key concepts introduced by Bourdieu are examined in relation to teacher education. These include social and cultural capital, but also habitus and field. These theories are considered together firstly, with regard to the extent to which they hold relevance for teachers who are seeking to understand young people's relations within the educational system. Secondly, expectations that are placed upon teachers in their own training, are discussed in relation to the concepts from Bourdieu and an educationalisation of social issues, including the notion that improving teaching quality alone, will directly raise student attainment. Finally, given the problem raised by Bourdieu, whereby educational systems socially reproduce the dominant culture to maintain class inequalities, a need for teacher education to raise critical awareness of the role of educational policy discourse in maintaining inequality, is raised. Understandings of cultural capital, educationalisation and presuppositions in educational policy helps teachers to better appreciate both the limits and the possibilities that surround their established teaching dispositions, institutional context and their educational classroom practices.

### **Bourdieu and educational inequalities**

Bourdieu's broad theories of social and cultural capital, habitus and field offer insights for teachers to conceptualise social differences amongst those that they teach, and related power relations that arise, in the teaching environment. However, for teachers to contribute to meaningful social change, they also need to confront the fundamental presuppositions that underpin how education is organised. This means recognising where links with the capitalist economy rationally structure educational priorities that maintain inequalities and policy narratives that are then communicated to help to achieve and support these (Hayes, 2019).

### **Different forms of capital and fundamental presuppositions**

A capitalist economy depends on human capital, skills, competition and flexible labour. The education system consisting of schools, further and higher education, has come to be positioned as a means to deliver the skilled labour needed by a global economy (Peters, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018). An emphasis in educational policy on teaching excellence connected to student achievement requires teaching staff to address social disadvantage and inequity through better teaching. However, this can also mean that other ways of thinking about social inequality may not be explored.

Bourdieu argued that education is strongly organised around “fundamental presuppositions” (Bourdieu 1990: 68). As such, educational institutions can act as sites for distribution of cultural capital, whereby those entering with enough cultural capital, that aligns well with the system they are entering, will be best positioned to increase their cultural capital further. Cultural capital then becomes an important means to determine what an individual might achieve. It enables the privileged to acquire the education they need to stay privileged and education itself then acts as a mechanism through which this wealth and power is socially reproduced. For the less privileged, fundamental presuppositions, such as an assumption in educational policy discourse that “the student experience” will be the same for everyone (Hayes, 2019), can hamper attempts to reduce attainment gaps through teaching quality alone.

Furthermore, not all cultural capital is acquired in schools or universities. Cultural capital may be transmitted through any of three modes of “pedagogic action”. These are: *diffuse education*, which occurs informally through social interactions, *family education*, which is viewed as the greatest source of any individual's cultural capital and *institutionalised education*, e.g. school (Bourdieu, 1986). However cultural capital is transmitted, people then behave in accordance with this positioning. Their personal background, or habitus, will mean they acquire certain embodied, or acquired dispositions, prior to entering education, which may be reinforced or disrupted through institutionalised education.

### **Habitus**

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is concerned with how a person's cultural and family background feeds into their acquired characteristics and the way in which they view the world. Bourdieu defines habitus as: “a set of acquired characteristics which are the product of social conditioning...totally or partially common to people of similar social conditioning” (Bourdieu, 2005: 45). This could mean, for example, that in a family where there is a tradition of leaving school after secondary education, individuals may have a disposition that predisposes them to leave school rather than progress onto higher education. Or it may concern different characteristics that people are defined by, such as their accent, appearance, ethnicity, status or possessions.

Habitus is an ambiguous term which has been widely adopted by educational researchers because it can help to illuminate the way in which different types of capital intersect, to shape the pathways and experiences, of students and teachers. In teacher education, choices need to be made as to whether a pedagogical approach is adopted that seeks to compensate for where there may be elements lacking in an individual's habitus. Or alternatively, a teacher might avoid such a deficit model, and instead challenge the “fundamental presuppositions” (Bourdieu 1990: 68) that determine what constitutes success in education, thus seeking a more emancipatory approach.

### **Field**

In Bourdieu's theory, field refers to the relations between people that are mediated by different forms of capital, to develop their identity, aspirations and skills. For example, their exposure

to social capital, in the form of family connections to support a year abroad, the influence of a multicultural upbringing where communication takes place in more than one language, or their access to an independent means of transport to their place of study. This means that such capital becomes recognised in a field, or what Bourdieu describes as: “the transfiguration of a power relation into a sense relation” (Bourdieu 1986, 242).

Therefore, field is a concept that might determine how much students can feel a sense of belonging or autonomy in an educational environment, in relation to what they experience around them. Alternatively, they may feel marginalised in a field due to their personal position, preferences or lack of independent means. Moving in a field to which a student is not accustomed may also lead to difficulties in interpreting the forms of capital being presented.

Field is a means to look at the *conversion* of different forms of capital too. Even if students accrue cultural capital through education, they may still struggle to convert cultural capital into other forms of capital. As such, if two people study at the same institution they may still recover different “rates of profit” from their “scholastic investment” (Bourdieu, 1986: 243).

### **Critiques of Bourdieu’s educational theory**

In broad terms, the theory of Bourdieu has been critiqued as ambitious and empirically unhelpful, due to ambiguities around concepts like habitus. Cultural capital though, despite also being ill-defined and for some contradictory, has also been influential amongst many educational researchers, generating a great deal of theoretical and empirical literature.

Bourdieu has provided some valuable insights into indiscriminate practices in education, but he does not distinguish clearly between exactly which conditions are likely to prejudice lower-class students and where lower-class students may be lacking the resources to meet particular educational conditions in a given field. More generally, if cultural capital, as defined in the different ways Bourdieu suggests, has some impact on educational attainment, it still does not explain all of the social class effects that are attributable to many different factors in capitalist systems. For the success of students in the labour market education is an important mechanism, but the many dimensions of social class cannot be underestimated. Therefore, this leaves the question of the extent to which education actually leads to social mobility, or simply reinforces the differentials discussed, through social reproduction.

### **Expectations on teacher education to address social issues**

Bourdieu's theory must be seen in the context of debates about class inequalities, educational attainment and other broader questions of social reproduction of class inequality in advanced capitalist societies. The theory of cultural reproduction refers to links between original class membership and the class membership that individuals attain, mediated by the education system. For Bourdieu, the education systems within capitalist societies function to legitimate class inequalities. Success in the education system is then facilitated (or not) by a person’s possession (or lack) of cultural capital and habitus that aligns well with that system. Therefore, for Bourdieu, education can be said to reproduce and legitimate social inequalities, because higher-class individuals appear to merit their privileged place in the social structure.

The issues of class inequalities in relation to educational attainment identified through Bourdieu’s theories apply to teachers’ lives as well as to the lives of their students. The habitus of a teacher reflects their background, values and ability to develop their identity and to capitalise on their study at university to educate and encourage others. In a policy discourse where teaching quality alone is expected to raise student attainment, teachers may be depicted as agents of change. Yet due to regulatory institutional contexts and exclusive policy discourse, they may hold little actual autonomy. Teachers are required through policy to develop and

adopt “best practices” (Hayes, 2019) to address any number of social factors that have been “educationalised” into the teaching environment (Peters, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018).

This discourse supports the notion that improving teaching quality alone, will directly raise student achievement and social mobility. Yet the expectations on teachers communicated through educational policy can also leave teachers responsible for many factors that they cannot easily control, such as a student’s mental health and wellbeing, their travel into their place of study, or their caring responsibilities at home. Furthermore, when educational policy documents frequently fail to attribute teaching staff or students with their own “academic labour” (Hayes, 2019) then this contributes to a lack of recognition and also an erosion of academic autonomy.

### **The limits and possibilities of teacher education to effect change**

Bourdieu’s theory of practice provides one way of understanding the limits and the possibilities for teachers to adapt from their established teaching dispositions and educational and classroom practices. A teacher’s habitus is a “system of [educational] dispositions” (Bourdieu, 2005: 43) which structures how teachers routinely enact their teaching practices. A teacher’s habitus is formed over time in response to their cultural capital and to the contexts of the educational fields they have inhabited.

Whilst a teacher’s habitus comes from their own educational history and predisposes them to respond to educational systems in certain ways, Bourdieu argues that one’s habitus can also:

be changed by history, that is by new experiences, education or training... Dispositions are long-lasting: they tend to perpetuate, to reproduce themselves, but they are not eternal. They may be changed by historical action orientated by intention and consciousness and using pedagogic devices. (Bourdieu, 2005: 45)

Thus, teacher education could disrupt and transform the long-lasting disposition of a teacher and prompt them to develop new pedagogic devices.

Bourdieu also notes that when one’s habitus encounters fields that are different to those in which they were constructed:

there is a dialectical confrontation between habitus, as structured structure, and objective structures. In this confrontation, habitus operates as a structuring structure able to selectively perceive and to transform the objective structure according to its own structure while, at the same time, being re-structured, transformed in its makeup by the pressure of the objective structure. (Bourdieu, 2005:46)

This would suggest that, despite an educationalisation of social issues and the objective structure of educational policy discourse, a dialectical confrontation between these factors and a teacher’s habitus might take place. This gives rise to hope that habitus can be restructured through a “process of awareness and of pedagogic effort” (Bourdieu, 2005: 47).

Such awareness would interrogate the educational structures, including policy and cultural capital, that shape a teacher’s pedagogical habitus through their educational discourses, beliefs, and assumptions. This could lead to more emancipatory ways of thinking about their practice and teacher identity, given that identity is closely linked to habitus, as both individual and social (Bourdieu, 1977). Here the importance of professional contexts where new, provocative and different ways of thinking can be accommodated have their part to play. However, if teacher beliefs remain unchallenged, then they may continue to inform an underlying logic of personal teaching practices that is taken for granted, because of a belief

that this is the *only way*, rather than *one possible way*. Teachers can then contemplate what other possibilities could support socially fair, democratic and emancipatory teaching practices.

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