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Erna Nairz-Wirth and Klaus Feldmann

Teacher Professionalism: The Double Field of Tradition and New Professionalism¹

Abstract

This paper presents the main findings of an empirical study which aimed to reconstruct different forms of teacher-professionalism in schools. For this purpose, narrative-problem centred interviews with teachers and headteachers were conducted and analysed, drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Two main ideal forms of teaching habitus could be reconstructed: the habitus of traditional teaching and the habitus of professional teaching. Our research shows that, in many cases, the habitus of new teachers is faced with a double field structure. These findings are illustrated in this article using the example of an interview with teachers and a headteacher. It can be demonstrated that teachers and headteachers face a constant challenge in assigning resources to struggles between the traditional and the professional fields. We argue that further initiatives will be needed from the field of education policy and communities of practice in schools to stabilise the field of professional teaching.

Keywords: professionalism, habitus, field, teacher, school, teaching habitus

1. Introduction

Our aim with this article is to demonstrate how Pierre Bourdieu's approach delivers valuable insights for the profession debate and for studying the future development of the teaching profession.

In recent years, the professionalisation of teaching has been recognised by an ever-increasing number of political and economic organisations as an

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important factor for the development of society (Schleicher, 2012; Gewirtz et al., 2009). This has strengthened the efforts for reform in the education sector and raised the pressure that is being placed on teachers as a whole. The reasons for this lie in part in the growth in global competition, increasing diversity among pupils and students, rising migration, the pluralisation of lifestyles and advances in technology (Conway et al., 2009).

We begin by outlining the key aspects of research into the teaching profession. We then describe the Bourdieusian tools which are applicable to our argumentation and apply these tools to a form of professionalism which we call “the democratic professionalism model”. To illustrate our ideas, we use interviews with a headteacher and teachers conducted during one of our recent research projects to demonstrate how the application of Bourdieu’s theory permits new interpretations of professionalism in the educational field. In doing so, we demonstrate that, contrary to popular opinion, Bourdieu’s theory and empirical work is neither deterministic nor pessimistic but instead offers opportunities to develop insightful changes to existing structures in the education system.

2. The Profession Debate

In the primarily sociological debate of recent decades, there has been a transition from static to dynamic and relational theories of the profession and a turning away from trait theories (Etzioni, 1969) and functionalist approaches (Goode, 1957) toward power theories (Coburn & Willis, 2000). The latter are very compatible with the approach applied in this article, namely Bourdieu’s relational theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992a), which also focuses on the power struggles for more capital and better positioning.

Current debates on the profession differentiate between two forms of professionalism, namely managerial professionalism and “new” professionalism (Bourke et al., 2013), both of which ultimately seek to replace traditional professionalism.

Traditional professionalism is characterised by low collaboration and has maintained its force particularly in those regions where tradition plays a major role. However, transition models have now been tested for some time in many highly developed countries, the most dominant of which is the *managerial professionalism* model, which emphasises accountability, performativity, efficiency and effectiveness (Sachs, 2001; Evetts, 2011). The term *new professionalism* is described in several different ways, namely as transformative, activist or democratic (Sachs, 2003). We follow this argumentation and take a look at *democratic professionalism*, a term we use to refer to teachers who assume the role of change agents and work with parents, pupils, academic, political and other organisations and groups to achieve democratic educational goals in the long term (Sachs, 2003; Whitty, 2008).

As already indicated above, the teaching profession is in a permanent – and as yet unresolvable – state of conflict with the education policy field. The professional frameworks established by education policy in England, Australia and other countries are accused of being individualistic, short-term and decontextualized (Day & Sachs, 2004; Hardy, 2010). Several authors contend that a culture of trust in teachers and teacher training has been replaced or destroyed in some countries by measures which focus primarily on control (Ball, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Hökkä & Etelälperlo, 2013).

Studies examining and demonstrating this problem in the Swedish context, where the school system was decentralised and opened to the market (Englund et al., 2012), show that teacher autonomy in Sweden was curtailed by the introduction of externally defined goals and indicators. Yet teachers were nonetheless left to their own devices – frequently not receiving sufficient support or assistance – when it came to achieving these goals, thus strengthening autonomy in a negative sense and leading to more stress and heavier workloads (Wermke, 2013). In other words, the autonomous autonomy enjoyed and valued by many teachers was prohibited and was replaced by a heteronomous autonomy. The preliminary results of the evaluation of the politically induced reforms in Austria by which general secondary schools

were transformed into new middle schools can be interpreted in a similar vein: insufficient support for teachers and headteachers and ambivalence regarding the standards of autonomy in heterogeneous contexts.

Various studies in the English-speaking world indicate that many teachers are resisting the calls to modernise the education system and to adapt the curriculum and their teaching methods in line with student-centred demands. Many teachers distrust the proposals for reform put forward by experts and accuse them of having inadequate knowledge of classroom situations (Rubinson, 2002; Spratt et al., 2006). They are sceptical of a critical, scientific assessment of their own professional behaviour, attitudes and practices (Farrell et al., 2009; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Thornberg, 2014). Bathmaker (2006) reports on the findings of her own empirical studies, which demonstrate that some teachers show little interest in discussions on professionalism and the corresponding influence of new bureaucratic rules and instead promote their own form of “personal professionalism” (Bathmaker & Avis, 2013).

In addition to these empirical findings, which point to cracks or inconsistencies in the professionalism process, other recent qualitative studies suggest that taking a closer look at the micro and meso levels can also offer some interesting insights into professionalism “from the bottom up”. This relativises macro considerations, which transfer in generalising terms the conflict between managerialism and professionalism to professional practice.

3. Theoretical Background

Bourdieu follows the critical tradition which points to the education system’s contribution to the reproduction of social inequality. Despite many efforts at reform, this system still retains its double role to this day, namely imparting equal chances of participation as well as maintaining privileges. This ambivalence is also evident time and again in efforts to professionalise the teaching profession (Streckeisen et al., 2007).

The professional habitus is acquired and incorporated in the course of socialisation and education and can be thought of as an additional layer to the primary habitus or habitus of origin. The habitus can thus be understood as a dynamic unit of a system of dispositions, which, in a modern society, are subject to constant change for an increasing share of the population. The habitus changes in the institutions through which it traverses (kindergarten, school, university, organisations). The school habitus acquired by a student is the most important secondary habitus in childhood and adolescence, while the professional habitus can be seen as the most important secondary habitus of working adults.

In Bourdieu's view, the social space is occupied by competing and cooperating fields in which struggles for positions and capital create the momentum. "To think in terms of fields is to think relationally" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992a). The concept of field should not be confused with the notions of organisation, institution or group, since a field can only be explored in the social space through empirical habitus-field studies. It is, thus, not surprising that various terms have so far been used to refer to educational fields in Bourdieu-based literature, with the formulations and definitions used extending from field of education, field of teaching, field of school teaching, field of the teaching profession to field of professional development, field of school leadership, field of peer relations, global education policy field, etc. (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013). We use the "professions are fields" definition proposed by Bourdieu himself (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992b), i.e. we conceptualise professions as fields in their own right (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011). In doing so, we follow an empirical approach that has hitherto rarely been applied.

One other relational term – *doxa* – also assumes a central status in our studies. Each field has its own *doxa*, i.e. its own self-evident and unquestioned view of the world. The *doxa* is the product of historical processes, i.e. it is linked to tradition and custom (Bourdieu, 1984).

4. The Designs and Methods Used in Our Research

Before we move on to our case study, we would like to outline the theoretical and empirical framework of the projects in which it is embedded. The concept of professionalism described above was developed in a series of projects, which initially focused on school disengagement and dropout. The ultimate goal of these projects was to study and reconstruct profession approaches aimed at overcoming these phenomena. Since the projects began back in 2009, 60 interviews with teachers, five interviews with headteachers and 120 interviews with school dropouts have been conducted. These have also been supplemented by four focus group discussions with dropouts, teachers and headteachers. This empirical approach has given us the opportunity to obtain insights into experiences with early school leaving from different perspectives. The interviewees and participating schools were selected in accordance with the qualitative methodology applied in constructivist-grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008). The interviews varied in length from 60 to 90 minutes and were narrative in style. They were digitally recorded and transcribed, and the data entered into a qualitative data analysis software program (atlas.ti).

5. Findings

One interesting observation pertaining to our many interviews with teachers and headteachers was that they rarely actively raised the topic of improving the quality of teacher training and education – despite the fact that it has been vehemently discussed in international subject literature for decades (Bouchamma & Michaud, 2011; MacBeath, 2012; Schleicher, 2012; Bucy, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 2015). Instead, the accounts given and statements made by these teachers were characterised by a kind of traditional doxa and clichéd heterodoxies, as the following passage from an interview with one teacher demonstrates:

Our teachers all have good qualifications, but the pupils still don't seem to keep up well. I presume that's because of our catchment area. Because

many, many nationalities come together that have many, many other problems or wishes as well. (teacher, new middle school)

At the same time, recent education policy reforms in the so-called new middle schools have opened up new possibilities for teachers, e.g. team teaching or doing away with ability grouping (Eder et al., 2015). These reforms offer innovative teachers in particular the chance to try out new teaching practices. Accordingly, new field rules (e.g. more communication with other teachers to discuss teaching practices) have also managed to establish themselves even in schools with a more traditional approach. The new momentum induced by the reforms has also led to a reassessment of capital, e.g. with knowledge and use of innovative teaching methods now accorded higher symbolic capital than previously.

Another core finding was the discovery of the existence of an intra-school double field structure in one and the same school – the field of traditional teaching (FT) and the field of professional teaching (FP) along with two corresponding typical habitus types, namely the habitus of traditional teaching (HT) and the habitus of professional teaching (HP).

The FP is denoted by a professional (teaching) habitus (HP), whose ideal characteristics include a process, scientific and research oriented approach, working in professional communities, innovation, inclusion, acceptance of heterogeneity and diversity, and the development of cross-field conceptions.

The FT is communicated via the field of educational bureaucracy, is controlled directly from the field of power and is defined by the traditional school habitus (HT). FT and HT can be ascribed the following characteristics: acceptance of the traditional curriculum and ability grouping, relatively rigid, defensive attitude to science, research and professional communities.

The interview passages were assigned to an HP and an FP on the basis of these characteristics. The development of an HP was accompanied by a changed logic of practice, i.e. a changed doxa.

One teacher described, for instance, his long-term efforts to develop and introduce a new “system of differentiated teaching”, the use of tutoring and a change in culture at his school as well as the struggle with tradition(s).

Then, of course, we have some colleagues who are in the school development group and do more and push for more. Which naturally prompts the comment ‘Them again!’ But ok, you just have to live with that (laughs). (teacher, new middle school)

Both this statement and other comments by teachers indicated that the FP in their respective schools had still only attained a latent and labile status. This teacher – and other innovative teachers as well – do not however work exclusively in the FP. They also work concurrently in the FT in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts. This can be seen in the fact that teachers reason their teaching practice in the context of the traditional doxa, yet, at the same time repeatedly make heterodoxical interjections:

What do you think? What could be done to make parents show more interest here in the school? How could parents be more actively involved in the school? What would be a starting point here? (interviewer)

No, I think; well, I do believe in mixing the classes. I believe that we mustn’t let it become ghettoised. Yes, for example, that all the Turks stay together. [...] And I constantly say to myself, primary schools are also comprehensive. So why does it work there, but not later? (teacher, new middle school)

The traditional doxa does not foresee a strong involvement of parents in the classroom. Accordingly, the teacher in this example avoids giving a direct answer, but then expresses her heterodoxy by calling for comprehensive schooling at lower secondary level to accommodate the heterogeneity she requires and avoid ghettoisation.

One secondary school teacher describes how she and other innovative teachers make use of team teaching and teach in heterogeneous ability groups, while another group (of teachers) is hostile to such innovations. She also describes her involvement in a project in which one teacher worked with

university lecturers and students to give her pupils the opportunity to work in a research-oriented capacity. Yet when this enthusiastic and dedicated teacher left the school, that part of the FP collapsed.

The double field structure is thus, by necessity, linked with a double habitus structure. Or as Bourdieu puts it, each field pursues a particular objective or vision, demanding total commitment from all concerned and essentially favouring only those who have the necessary dispositions for that field (Bourdieu, 2000).

The specific field logic is embodied through the habitus of those engaged in the field, “or, more precisely, a sense of the game, ordinarily described as a ‘spirit’ or ‘sense’” (ibid.). The people engaged in the field take part in the *illusio*,

“taking seriously (sometimes to the point of making them questions of life and death) stakes which, arising from the logic of the game itself, establish its ‘seriousness’, even if they may escape or appear ‘disinterested’ or ‘gratuitous’ to those who are sometimes called ‘lay people’ or those who are engaged in other fields (since the independence of the different fields entails a form of noncommunicability between them)” (ibid)

The following statement by one teacher illustrates the relationships between *doxa*, *illusio* and habitus, which simultaneously form the conditions of existence of a field. The teacher is referring here to the pending replacement of the school’s headteacher as a critical event in the reform process, since the continuation of the FP depends on the support of the headteacher:

“I hope the new principal will be on our side. Because I think many of us who have got used to it would have a big problem being dictated to and being told that we now have to do things in a certain way. I believe quite a few [members of the group] would leave. I would describe us as a ‘small but very keen group.’” (teacher, new middle school)

However, only a minority of teachers has a dominant HP. Some have a hardened HT and reject innovations – and thus also an FP. Most common

is, however, a mixed habitus, which is characterised by a dominant HT with clear indication of dispositions towards an HP.

The fact that traditional school fields continue to play a dominant role in the Austrian education system is also confirmed by our findings regarding the commitment to the traditional doxa expressed by most of the teachers we interviewed.

This commitment was also still evident among teachers and headteachers who had partially succeeded in developing an HP in an FP borne by their practices. One conclusion that can be drawn from our findings is that the traditional doxa poses a threat to the sustainable development of a democratic professional field. The cultivation of an independent professional doxa depends on a stabilisation of the FP.

To illustrate this point, we will now take a look at an interview with the headteacher of a new middle school in Vienna. This interview clearly demonstrates the interplay of habitus, field, doxa and misrecognition.

There's no such thing as the school, there are just schools with, let's say, innovatively-minded teachers. But they are the minority. That's not the standard situation. (headteacher, new middle school)

The assertion that there is “no such thing as the school” can be interpreted in the context of the heterodoxy that is in the meantime permitted in the doxa as follows: schools in which innovative teachers have conquered a large part of the field do exist, but they are the minority among all schools in this system. A cleft field diagnosis is not permitted within the doxa; it would be a heresy, i.e. a heterodoxy which would need to be sanctioned. The prevailing doxa causes the headteacher to misrecognise struggles between different fields in the school as struggles between persons or groups. The attachment of innovative competence to a person corresponds to the ideology of power. Even if they might have the professional competence to do so, a person or group of persons is not permitted to autonomously establish a field in the state organisation context.

The headteacher refers to a small core group of engaged teachers, a quasi-professional community in his school, which works on and supports the innovations required primarily by education policy. This group also works beyond these requirements to creatively shape the professional field.

I'm lucky that at least eight of my 26 teachers – five of whom also think about the content and strategy – get the others to participate. (headteacher, new middle school)

These teachers also try to make the curriculum innovative, and include aspects that are not required by education policy, e.g. interdisciplinary work which “combines” compulsory and musical subjects.

The headteacher basically has a positive attitude with regard to the professional development of his school. He mentions a “wait-and-see group” (ibid.) of teachers, who only “jump on the bandwagon” (ibid.) when others have been successful, and when this success has been recognised, i.e. when a corresponding amount of symbolic capital has been accumulated by the innovative professional community:

The others are the interested observers, but not active change agents. They just say “Let's wait and see.” [...] And they then watch what happens and then follow. (headteacher, new middle school)

Although, as indicated above, teachers with a pronounced HP always refer to a group of teachers who follow tradition and reject innovation (HT) in their schools, this headteacher does not mention having any teachers on his staff whose tendency might be to reject such developments. Accordingly, he recognises professional differences between the teachers but misrecognises the double field structure (FT and FP).

The explanation for this phenomenon could lie in the limited power accorded to headteachers in Austria. A headteacher in Austria has limited possibilities to dismiss a teacher who clings to the traditional teaching methods and is essentially hostile to new or innovative teaching methods. This might be one reason why the double field structure is still dominant in the Austrian school

system. Ambivalences in the doxa have the function of concealing this structural problem.

The statements of this headteacher indicate that it is the traditional doxa which typically defines his ideology of the unitary field of the school (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11).

From the 60 interviews we have already conducted with teachers, we were able to reconstruct the following scenario: teachers who reject innovations cleave to the field of traditional teaching.

The statements made by the headteacher above confirm our assumption that this traditional field has become latent in his school and at least does not hinder the development of the professional field within the school. According to him, “new” democratic professionalism is on the right path in the school field, even though the internal and external network structure remains inadequate. He emphasises the strong importance of cooperation between schools and academia for professional and school development, yet remains cleaved to the school doxa: while he mentions the deficiencies in education policy and the distanced attitude of researchers to direct engagement in schools, he also edits the strong resistance put up by many teachers out of his argumentation.

The fact that education policy makes contradictory demands and initiates contradictory measures is also implied by the headteacher: while it prescribes and indeed supports innovations like team teaching, bureaucratic barriers prevent further professionalism, e.g. through the escalating demand for reports, an aspect that was rejected by teachers, and through the increasing standardisations which do not correspond to and accommodate the complexity and heterogeneity of reality in schools.

The interview illustrates the tacit recognition on the headteacher’s part that the different manifestations of professionalism develop in interaction with the field of the school and are not solely a product of teacher training. Bourdieu’s hypothesis that a field (and in this case also the profession) is

characterised by struggles for power and position is, thus, also fundamentally confirmed by this headteacher's statements.

Through the recognition received through education policy and the fertile cooperation with the headteacher, the innovative core group of teachers in this school is well positioned. Yet constant battles still surround the value of the cultural and symbolic capital attached to innovative forms of teaching and learning. As a result, the medium- and long-term configuration of the professional habitus-field constellation remains insecure, i.e. the professional field – and with it the professional habitus – are permanently endangered by the double field structure in the school.

6. Does a Bourdieu-based Analysis of the Situation in Schools Offer Practical Suggestions for Professionalism and School Development?

In our Bourdieu-based approach, professions are located in separate fields in the social space. A professional habitus is a secondary habitus that manifests itself in these professional fields in specific forms. In the course of our empirical study two forms of teaching habitus could be reconstructed, namely the traditional and the professional teaching habitus. Since these are ideal manifestations, the habitus typology should be differentiated in further analyses to take account of other phenomenon like cleft or hybrid habitus (Bourdieu, 2004). The “new democratic professionalism” model is compatible with the concepts of professional learning communities and progressive teacher training programmes (Bransford & Darling-Hammond, 2005, Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012), which accord teachers more responsibility, i.e. extend their responsibilities beyond teaching and the classroom and empower them to contribute to the professional field, to the education system, to pupils in other classes and schools, and to their collective duties as teachers (Whitty & Wisby, 2006).

Our research shows that, in the majority of cases, the professional habitus of new teachers is faced with a double field structure. Teachers, headteachers and the school authorities constantly have to assign resources to struggles

between the traditional and the professional fields and to maintain a unified doxa. Even the illusio, i.e. the belief in the sense of the investment in the respective professional field, is influenced by this field situation and by the prevailing traditional school doxa, leading ultimately to uncertainty as to whether the effort and commitment to the professional field is actually “worthwhile”. Accordingly, we might conclude that further initiatives will be needed from the field of education policy and communities of practice in schools to stabilise the field of democratic professional teaching.

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